One of the welcome innovations in approaches to women’s writing has been the possibility of a more nuanced consideration of authors’ lives in the context of their work. Therefore this book embarks upon its re-evaluation of these novelists by considering the effects of biographical knowledge upon our understanding of their neglected art. This chapter is divided into two parts: brief biographical sketches of the six authors will be followed by an essay, ‘Lives of Crime’, which will look at themes closely connected to subsequent chapters, such as psyche and inspiration, families, artistic and generic arguments, religion and the vexed question of ‘homes’.

Throughout this book I have taken the six writers in the order of the first appearance of their series detective. In this way Ngaio Marsh, senior to Margery Allingham in age, follows her because of her relatively later production of Roderick Alleyn in 1934.¹

Biographical sketches

Agatha Christie, 1890–1976

Born Agatha Miller in Torquay, Christie was the third child of a family living the life of the wealthy upper classes, but whose income was rapidly diminishing. Her autobiography depicts a happy childhood of a peculiarly musical girl who had hoped to become an opera singer.² This work’s insistence upon a life of ‘fun’ is not entirely convincing. As well as recording traumatic nightmares, there are also hints of insecurity in relation to her beautiful older sister, who not only married a rich man but was also an accomplished published writer. First prompted to write stories by her mother,³ Christie never made bold claims for her
She married Archibald Christie, a pilot, during the First World War after a passionate courtship. Archie survived the war a hero, and the couple experienced several impoverished postwar years in London while he sought establishment in the City. During this period Christie’s only child, Rosalind, was born. At the same time, financial pressures stimulated the production of her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which introduced Hercule Poirot.4

Much to Christie’s distress, her marriage did not survive, leading to the media sensation of her 11-day disappearance (discussed later). An unhappy divorce was followed by her second marriage to Max Mallowan, an archaeologist 14 years younger than she was. This new bond established Christie’s working pattern of winters on the ‘dig’ in the Middle East followed by summers in England, and the fitting of her writing around her husband’s commitments. The marriage was happy for many years, but it is likely that after the Second World War Max entered into a long-term relationship which distressed his wife.5 In later life Christie embraced her Christian faith even more deeply, perhaps to enable her to maintain a dignified stoicism. She had a passion for privacy, and the traumas of media scrutiny during her disappearance in 1926 cast long shadows during the next 50 years.

**Dorothy L. Sayers, 1893–1957**

The daughter of an Oxford clergyman, Sayers grew up in a comfortable country rectory in East Anglia. An only child, from an early age she composed poems and plays. From Godolphin School in Salisbury she won a scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford, and attended with enormous enthusiasm from 1912 to 1915. After Oxford she endured several years of financial insecurity including ‘suffering’ spells as a schoolteacher, until she achieved basic financial stability by obtaining a job as an advertising copywriter in 1922. She stayed at S.H. Benson until 1929, when her detective novels had secured popular success and sufficient monetary reward. By then, however, her personal life had been transformed. An unhappy love affair with fellow writer John Cournos was followed by a relationship with a mechanic friend, Bill White. This resulted in an unplanned pregnancy, which Sayers managed to conceal from both family and work colleagues. Her son, John Anthony, was fostered by one of the few privy to her secret during her lifetime, her cousin Ivy Shrimpton.

From this point, Sayers’s life was dominated by the need to do right by her son, especially by providing a secure economic future. She married journalist Atherton Fleming, known as Mac, in 1926, and the