

Femmes FATALES

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Mining the Past for Plots

by Mignon F. Ballard

I'm so glad my family never throws anything away! Years ago, while sorting through correspondence that predated The War of Late Great Unpleasantness, I discovered a scrap of paper with the words: "The Mystic Nine."

This evolved into a mysterious society of women, "The Mystic Six," in my mystery, *Shadow of an Angel*. To uncover the society's dark secret, Augusta Goodnight and her charge found it necessary to delve into the past—and therefore, so did I.

I like to write about old mysteries: some unsolved, some not yet discovered. When I plot the sequence of the story, I usually begin years before the novel actually starts with events that lead up to the present dilemma. This sometimes involves creating a genealogical chart, sketching a map, or designing the layout of a house.



All good mystery writers know there must be a reason for murder, and I'm sure our accomplished Femmes Fatales—Kris Neri, Julie Wray Herman, Marlys Millhiser, Donna Andrews, Charlene Harris, Toni L.P. Kelner, and Meg Chittenden—have done their share of groundwork before the body ever makes its debut. Just how do they go about that bit of pre-writing "archaeology" that sets up the story?ff

Mignon F. Ballard's first mystery was the romantic suspense puzzler Raven Rock, recently reprinted in the Silver Dagger Mysteries imprint from The Overmountain Press. Currently she is writing the thoroughly delightful Augusta Goodnight series, in which a guardian angel turns amateur sleuth. The latest of these is Shadow of an Angel (St. Martin's Press, 2002).

Kris Neri

Kris, a lifelong mystery lover, told me she once bought a Triumph Spitfire convertible as a tribute to Nancy Drew's roadster. The mystery connection proved to be a strong one when she experienced a slew of murderous thoughts each time the contraption had to be towed. Having now severed her mystery-transportation link, Kris is busy flexing some new crime-writing muscles with a suspense standalone and a light mystery-fantasy novel.

I've always believed three distinct, though related, storylines go into the writing of a mystery novel: the story presented to the reader in the finished book; the crime as it actually occurred, which the bad guy hides from the detective; and, the most fascinating of the three to me, the events in the past that brought the crime about.

I always wonder why some dreadful situations never escalate to the next level while the pressure builds on others until they combust into crime.

Before I began my second Tracy Eaton mystery, *Dem Bones' Revenge*, I knew I wanted it to feature Tracy's mom, zany movie star Martha Collins, but not much more than that. One day it occurred to me that back in the real life Hollywood heyday, there seemed to be such a dichotomy between how the stars lived and the sanitized way their actions were presented to the public.

As eccentric as I knew Tracy's mom to be, I figured she'd have some old scandal rattling in her closet from which the story could sprout. But I had to explore Martha's weaknesses fully before I understood the form the scandal would take, as well as the lengths she'd go to hide it.

The most satisfying part of delving into my characters' pasts is that I get to decide which of their secrets will continue to slumber in peace, and which will be brought to light and find justice. ff

Julie Wray Herman

Planting beautiful flowers and having them thrive has always been one of Julie's dreams. To further that goal, Julie recently became a Certified Master Gardener, Texas style. Julie doesn't think that honor has as much to do with her plants newfound health as the new drip watering system. The garden is blooming. Pretty good for someone who used to have a brown thumb.

With my second book, *Three Dirty Women and the Bitter Brew*, I began by building on a chance encounter with a novel sort of murder weapon: a tea

harvester. Armed with that weapon, and the resulting title, I began to write. The results were not pretty. You know how hanging baskets usually have three chains to suspend them evenly? Well, hanging my story on that one idea was like trying to hang a basket that has only one working chain. Everything was off-balance. I took some time to step back, do a bit of research before starting over. When I pulled *Bitter Brew* out again, I discovered that the setting, the murder weapon and the meaning of the title had changed—and all for the better. Had I done this before I started writing, I would have saved months of frustration.

Now, working on the third in the series, *Three Dirty Women and the Shady Acres*, I'm remembering that lesson. I've talked with people at the Asheville Arboretum, local nursing homes, and friends who have cared for their parents as they age. I gathered all this information before I wrote a word. I feel a little bit like King Of The Hill as I stand on my mound of information, which is composting happily away in my brain, waiting for an opportunity to emerge within the story. I can't wait to see what happens!ff

Marlys Millhiser

It's lucky for Marlys that she is not superstitious. She has, within the last year, sold her thirteenth novel (and her ninth short story). Neighbors have reported certain strange behaviors but Marlys assures them it's not unusual for mystery writers to throw salt over their shoulders and avoid exposure to full moons, ladders, black cats, telemarketers, and the latest prescription drugs.

Femmes FATALES

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Mignon could not have asked that question at a better time. I am in the midst of three projects—revisions on one book and the work-up on two more. I have three documents open on my computer at the same time so, while noodling the possibilities of one an idea occurs for another, I can instantly switch documents and key it in. (I know I could do this on a piece of paper but I'd be unable to read my handwriting two days later or probably even find the paper, and would have to key it in anyway.)

Much of this rumination-on-disk is background that will never make it into the book. It will, however, set the stage for the beginning. I'll be glad for the ballast of that groundwork because, once my notes begin to experiment with the opening paragraphs, I am lost and off we go, not sure where. This pre-writing is my favorite time in writing a book. I go to that quiet, seductive place inside my head and begin to see pictures, search for words to make those pictures sensory. It's an addictive, free-floating feeling.

A character will walk into my notes with a notation like, "Is this the first dead body? Why?" Answers come in the process of writing. My stories build from a beginning grounded in place and time and an issue that's bugging me. I raised my children to be independent I don't seem able to tether my stories either.ff

Donna Andrews

With the publication of her fourth book, You've Got Murder, Donna started both a second series and invented a new sub-genre: the "technocozy." Since she's also continuing to write her Meg Langslow series, it's no surprise that Donna dumped her day job last year for a full-time writing life. And her newfound freedom has also given her time to pursue other interests—like becoming a registered (though unemployed) private investigator.

For my Meg Langslow books, I start with a situation that produces both humor and homicidal impulses, like the weddings in *Murder with Peacocks*. In *Revenge of the Wrought Iron*

Flamingos, Meg must not only attend a craft fair in colonial costume—her demanding potential mother-in-law makes her responsible for keeping the fair anachronism-free. And I confess, while I approve of research, my favorite kind is talking with people who know about the subject. Actual anecdotes from crafters and reenactors inspired much of the book's humor—although real reenactments are too well organized to give murderers a chance to ply their trade, so I had to make the one in *Flamingos* atypically disorganized.

With *You've Got Murder*, the first in my series featuring Turing Hopper, an artificial intelligence personality, groundwork is different—and harder. Turing's like Nero Wolfe—he won't leave his brownstone, she can't leave her computer network—so my research involves figuring out what Turing can do, and how her human allies, Maude and Tim, can do the rest. For the sequel, I spent a lot of time thinking about how aspects of our lives cross over between the real world and cyberspace—our friendships, family relationships, hobbies, and even our jobs. I came up with a crime where the clues and red herrings all had tendrils leading into both worlds, real and electronic. And then (some things don't change) I started talking to my tech-savvy friends about to make it all happen.ff

Charlaine Harris

In the bad old days, keeping in touch with other writers wasn't geographically feasible for my fellow Mississippian Charlaine, whose current southern Arkansas home is remote. Now, internet contacts keep her abreast of happenings in the mystery field. As well as maintaining a presence on DorothyL (a mystery fans' digest) Charlaine spends "way too much time," she confesses, cyber-chatting with friends and readers.

No character leaps full-grown from a writer's head, though at times I thought Lily Bard had. But with Lily, as with all memorable characters, her past has built her present. Comparing the past of the character, and the setting the character inhabits, with studying archaeology is really a great idea. I tend to think of it as developing the character. I had gotten only as far as thinking of it as architecture, in which the stability of the building as a

Congratulations to...

- Charlaine Harris, for her two award nominations. Charlaine's book *Dead Until Dark* was nominated for an Anthony Award for Best Paperback Original, and Charlaine was nominated for a Career Achievement Award for Female Sleuths by *RT BOOKclub*.
- Toni L.P. Kelner, who was nominated for a Career Achievement Award for Mystery Series by *RT BOOKclub*.

whole depends on the soundness of the foundation.

No crime, except the random manic killing, springs from nowhere. Even a random killing has its seeds in the mind of the murderer. Most often—at least in crime fiction—the victim and the murderer share a past, and in that past lies the initial push toward an act of violence. Planting that push, and the dreadful inevitable steps in a believable yet unobtrusive progression, is the true test of art in the writer.

But the reader doesn't need to know everything the writer knows. The writer should know the characters so thoroughly that there's more to say than could ever be needed in a book. The look of the town in which the character lives, the library books on the shelves, the dust bunnies under the bed...these may never be important to the reader, but the writer should have all this in her mind's eye.*ff*

Toni L.P. Kelner

Toni, the mother of two active daughters, revealed that delving into character histories comes naturally to her. She spends an inordinate amount of time each day tracing the history of her daughters' lost toys. As in, "You had Little Bear in the car last night. Did you bring him inside? Did you take him to bed? Is he still in your bed?" Fortunately, her character's backstories are usually more interesting.

Creating a compelling backstory gets easier the longer I write my Laura Fleming series because I've got eight books' and several stories' worth of history to play with.

In my first book, *Down Home Murder*, I gave Laura cousin Ilene, and described her as being too pretty for her own good. Though that line was cut, leaving Ilene

with no description, when I wrote *Trouble Looking for a Place to Happen*, I had Ilene available to date the wrong man and be accused of his murder.

In "Marley's Ghost," I introduced Tim Topper, who didn't know who his father was. Poor Tim never did find out in that story, so I put him into *Mad as the Dickens* so he could keep looking.

My forthcoming book had an even longer gestation. In *Dead Ringer*, my second book, I gave autocratic Big Bill Walters a grandson he wasn't supposed to know about, and the book ends with Laura promising never to tell anyone. Even though that ending was right for that book, I always felt sorry for Big Bill never meeting that grandson. So in *Wed and Buried*, the grandson comes to Byerly, giving the plot delightful complications. Though you don't need to read *Dead Ringer* to follow the story in *Wed and Buried*, it does enrich the book for those who have.

So I'll keep mining my own history whenever I can. Now if I just had a better way of keeping track of all that stuff...*ff*

Meg Chittenden

Meg, an Englishwoman transplanted to the northwestern coast of the United States, has become a great favorite at mystery conventions, where fans relish the twinkle in her eye and the rapidity of her witty ripostes. You wouldn't think a nice lady like Meg has murder on her mind, but I know she has great fun thinking up news ways to kill.

I write from life. Mine or other people's. Anytime anyone confides something interesting to me, anytime something interesting or exciting happens to anyone I know—I write it

down and file it in a computer directory titled "Ideas." When the time comes to plot a new book, I open up the file and browse through.

As soon as the ideas generate a story line, I go to the place where my story is set. I take notes and photos, buy postcards, interview police officers, newspaper reporters, other useful experts, gather pamphlets, menus, maps, local books. Back in my office, I throw everything into a wine box. When all of the stuff has been in there a couple of weeks, it ferments and helps me create a story. A postcard brushes against an article that is next to a book on local flora and fauna, and all of these things come together with a newspaper article I read while I was in the place, or a few words I overheard on a plane.

Once the storyline "jells" and characters have popped up, I type a twenty-page synopsis. This is my guide, my map, my bible while I write the novel, whether it's *Dying to See You*, the latest in my Charlie Plato Mystery Series, or my current woo-woo romantic suspense, *This Time Forever*.*ff*

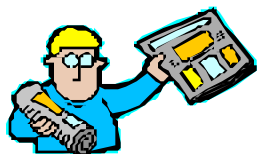


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News from the Femmes Fatales

Kris Neri announces that Worldwide Mysteries has bought the paperback rights to her Tracy Eaton mysteries. Prior to the 2003 release dates of the novels, her stories will appear in two anthologies: *Criminal Appetites* (Silver Dagger) and *And Some of Them Were Dead* (Deadly Alibi). She began teaching "Creating the Perfect Crime: Writing Your First Mystery" at the UCLA Extension School's Writers' Program in June 2002.



Julie Wray Herman is looking forward to next Spring, when Korine and J.J. return for their third outing. In *Three Dirty Women and the Shady Acres* they discover that someone is determined to lower the median age of Pine Grove, and the results are murder. Both *Three Dirty Women and the Garden of Death* (2000) and *Three Dirty Women and the Bitter Brew* (2001) are available in trade paperback. Julie's web site is MysteryGarden.com



Marlys Millhiser's seventh Charlie Greene mystery, and thirteenth published novel, *The Rampant Reaper*, was out in July of 2002 from St. Martin's Minotaur, and the sixth, *Killer Commute*, is available in paperback from Worldwide. Her short story, "Had He But Known," featuring the meanest cat in the West, is available in the anthology, *Creature Cozies*, from Berkley Prime Crime.

Donna Andrews is hitting both mystery and science fiction conventions this year, since *You've Got Murder* (Berkley Prime Crime) has a SF crossover element. *Crouching Buzzard, Leaping Loon*, fourth in the Meg Langslow series, is on St. Martin's winter list, and she's hard at work on the next Turing book, *Click Here for Murder*. More news and signing dates available at <http://donnaandrews.com>.



Charlaine Harris has been signed to write two more Sookie Stackhouse books in addition to the *Living Dead In Dallas* (Ace, 2002). Fall 2002 will see the publication of *Last Scene Alive* (St. Martin's Minotaur), a long-awaited entry in her Aurora Teagarden series. *Last Scene Alive* marks a return to the series' roots.

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If you prefer electronic copies, send your e-mail address to TheFatales@aol.com. Be sure to include the word "subscription" or "Newsletter" in the subject header.*ff*

Toni L.P. Kelner's seventh Laura Fleming book, *Mad as the Dickens*, will be released in paperback in October. *Wed and Buried*, the next in the series, is due out in February of 2003 from Kensington. Toni is currently working on a new book, but in between chapters, will be at Bouchercon in October.



Globetrotting **Meg Chittenden** recently returned from Sicily, which will probably result in a novel. At the Malice Domestic Mystery Convention in Washington D.C., in May 2002, she spoke on a panel about female sleuths and took part in the enactment of a radio play. Her woo-woo romantic suspense novel *This Time Forever* is selling well, and she's working hard on *Double Deception*, due out in 2003 from Berkley.



Dean James is looking forward to a busy 2003, with three books due out next year. First will come *Faked to Death* (Kensington Publishing, April), the second in the Simon Kirby-Jones series. September will bring two releases: *The Dick Francis Companion* (Berkley Prime Crime), cowritten with his longtime collaborator, Jean Swanson, and *Death by Dissertation* (Silver Dagger Mysteries), an academic mystery set in Houston. He's currently working on the third Simon Kirby-Jones mystery, to be published sometime in 2004.