

Femmes FATALES

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Conjuring Mysterious Characters

by Charlaine Harris

I know that writers spend hours and hours developing the personalities of their protagonists. A good writer will know what music her main character enjoys, what books she reads, and what kind of toothpaste she uses. But what about all the other people in the book? I'm always convinced other writers have better ways of doing things than I do.

And how do I do it? First, I think you can't waste a lot of time describing someone who makes one brief appearance. You have to paint a quick, vivid picture. Otherwise, the main factor in designing subsidiary characters is one of usage: what function does the character serve? If Aurora Teagarden needs to question an old classmate working at a 7-11 type store, what should that worker be like? Is this job the best she can do? Or has she been unfortunate? I went with "the best she can do" because the character must be



glad to see Roe again and willing to answer her questions.

I confess: I enjoy creating these small characters almost as much as the main ones. It's like decorating a Christmas tree. I asked my sister Femmes—Julie Wray Herman, Marlys Millhiser, Elaine Viets, Kris Neri, Toni L.P. Kelner, Meg Chittenden, and Donna Andrews—how do they fill in their books with subsidiary characters?ff

As a change from fiction, Charlaine Harris really enjoyed writing an entry for Seven Seasons of Buffy, a collection of critical essays on the television series. With all three Sookie Stackhouse books still selling briskly, the spring release Dead to the World will be in hardback. The short story she's writing for Dana Stabenow's anthology of supernatural mysteries will also feature the telepathic Sookie.

Julie Wray Herman

Following the natural order of things, Julie's teenaged children have begun to consider their parents as secondary characters. Since secondary characters are so often overlooked, they can glean bits of important information—and impart them—often without being noticed. Julie's understanding of the unique place supporting cast members have in her books gives her a much-needed advantage at home.

With life spinning quickly by, I appreciate every opportunity to Be In Charge. I once thought that was the only way to write. I interviewed even my secondary characters, outlining down to the brand of socks they wear with their sneakers. Little did I know there were some very peculiar people lurking in my subconscious mind, waiting for the chance to strut across the page.

I love to sit in the mall and do character sketches based on fellow shoppers. This woman's jerky, short steps; that man's longing glances. Do they ever become part of my work? Not whole cloth, no, but parts emerge in surprising ways. Over fifteen years ago, I had a brief encounter with a homeless man in Lexington Market in Baltimore. I'd forgotten all about him until his expressive eyes stared accusingly out at me from the pages of *Three Dirty Women and the Shady Acres*—he lent his vibrant anger to Korine's brother-in-law, Cal. Often, it's that unintentional spark that brings secondary characters to life. It may make writing a scary, wild ride, but I'm grateful for those moments. I'll trade fear for realism any day, even if it means not being completely in charge. I can always try to satisfy my need for control in other ways.

"Kids! Time to clean your rooms!"ff

Marlys Millhiser

Life's a disconnect. Marlys sits on one of two patios or the front porch in summer with her cat. A hummingbird racing between feeders nearly parts her hair, a buck with huge fuzzy antlers sips at the birdbath daring her to make a move, a colorful butterfly settles on the edge of the open laptop's lid. And here's Marlys writing about murder!

To my mind, especially in a series, there are four types of characters: protagonists, their immediate entourage, acquaintances, and walk-ons. One hopes murderers and victims will come from the latter two so the first two will be available for future books. But characters can be willful and/or stupid and have to die. (Unless they're cats.)

As with real people, the more you get to know characters, the more you realize how you misjudged them initially. So, in my

congenitally disorganized fashion, I sit and wait for some character to give herself away as murderer, victim, accomplice. I'm constantly astonished at how they flesh themselves out with preferences, idiosyncrasies, strengths, weaknesses, and eventually motive. Don't tell my agent or editor (Marlys sneaks a quick squint over each shoulder) but I don't map out these things beforehand. Characters grow with the story and change it. I don't like flat people in real life either.

I learned not to judge my characters too early when I once had the character I thought to be the murderer turn up murdered by the murderer. I was halfway through the book and on deadline. I had to scramble to reevaluate the other characters. Fictional people are every bit as complicated as real people and they don't know they are disposable characters. They are the protagonists in their own lives, just like cats.*ff*

Elaine Viets

Elaine sends thanks to everyone who suggested more Dead-End Jobs for Helen Hawthorne. "You've come up with some doozies: chicken plucker, pooper-scooper, Chuck E. Cheese weenie. Of course, you realize I work the same awful jobs as my character. Don't look so happy. Helen and I are still debating our choice. Meanwhile, I'm working on book three, where she has the worst job yet—telemarketer."

It's a big responsibility creating a character. What if I say this new person likes screwdrivers, chocolate, and unfiltered cigarettes? How do I know my character is happy with these choices?

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One came right out and told me. In *Shop Till You Drop*, Helen Hawthorne's outspoken landlady is Margery Flax. In real life, Margery Flax is a Manhattan mystery lover. Margery bid at a charity auction to be a character in my Dead-End Job series. She had three choices: a bimbo; a homicide detective; and a 76-year-old woman who loved cigarettes, booze and chocolate. I knew she'd take the detective.

Wrong. Margery wanted to be the landlady, even though the character is 30 years older than she is. "She's what I want to be when I grow up," the real Margery said. "But she has to wear purple."

A deal. Margery always wears purple, from her chenille bathrobe to her shorts and kitten-heeled sandals. Margery has worn lavender, orchid, and "violent violet." She's been in three books and a short story, and I've looked for purple synonyms until I'm blue in the face.

The real Margery likes her namesake except for one detail. "Can't I have a sportier car? I hate that big white thing." Sorry, Margery. It's Florida law. Anyone over 70 has to drive a big white car.*ff*

Kris Neri

Kris credits her years as a failed actress—during which she was often heard to mutter while enduring long waits on movie sets, "I'm the sanest person here!"—as the inspiration for her Tracy Eaton mysteries, Revenge of the Gypsy Queen and Dem Bones' Revenge, which feature the unconventional adult daughter of eccentric Hollywood stars.

I believe that people—both real ones and the imaginary kind—will attract others of a certain polarity. It's why when I attend a function, if there's one soul there not rowing with every oar, he will always find me. Not to say I'm nuts, you understand, just that they like my company. Similarly, Tracy always draws those who skip to the beat of an unpredictable drummer. So I don't create subsidiary characters as much as wait for them to appear.

While writing *Revenge of the Gypsy Queen*, when Tracy hailed a cab, I wasn't surprised that she wound up with Nuri al-Barazi as her driver, a man shaped by a different culture but who shared such a kindred sense of adventure, he cheerfully allowed himself to be roped into her madcap antics. And why, in *Dem Bones' Revenge*, when she hired a contractor, it had to be ex-surfer Randy Barlow, whom regular wipe-outs had left a little light on the stuffing between his ears. It was only fitting that Randy not only proceeded to destroy Tracy's home, but brought along his nutty mom who took it upon herself to change the décor. Such are the characters who inhabit Tracy's eccentric world.

Now Tracy's pets weren't unconscious inspirations. I've drawn them from my real life pets. But they're wacky, too. I know—I live with them!*ff*

Toni L.P. Kelner

Being a writer gives Toni an acceptable excuse for people-watching, but it was always one of her favorite indoor sports. The only difference is that now she can say she's doing research when she stares avidly at passersby, rather than just being nosy. (Of course, we know the truth!)

I love people-watching, and I'm always checking out folks: how they fix their hair, the way they talk with their children, the stores they shop at. Of course I can't take in everything in a chance encounter, not without staring anyway. I just notice a detail or two: the man with a tattoo peeking out from under his button-down shirt, a woman's elaborate nail paint, the little girl wearing a Cinderella costume at the park. And from those details, I happily imagine what these people are really like. That's how I create background characters.

I don't need to know everything about them—they're only there to keep the story moving—but I want my characters to move through a world with as much depth as possible. So I can't just plug in "a plumber," "a clerk at the police station," or "a child." Instead I give background characters striking details, like a tattoo or fancy nails. I made one character a Jane Austen fan, and gave another a secret desire to write comic books.

I don't want so many details that the background overwhelms the story, just enough to add color and flavor. And in the same way as I imagine what the people I meet are like, my readers can fill in as much of the lives of the background characters as they like.*ff*

Meg Chittenden

Wherever Meg goes—which is mostly to meetings, dances, conventions, book stores, or shopping—she loves watching people. She's especially interested if the body language of the person doesn't match what the person is saying. Lately, Meg's been staying home, working on her next book for Berkley, No Place to Hide, and making promotional items for More Than You Know, due out on September 2.

When I began writing, I attended a writers conference and heard some speakers say, "You must always begin with character." Others said, just as firmly, "You must always begin with plot."

I turned to books on writing. William Faulkner said, "It begins with character, and once he stands up on his own feet and begins to move, all I have to do is trot along behind him." On the other hand, C.S. Forrester said, "I rather fancy most authors think of a character and then think of what he would do, while I think of something to be done and then think of the most interesting character to do it."

I've solved the dilemma for myself by refusing to separate these two elements. I work on plot and characters at the same time. In this way, the characters are shaped by their environment, and they in turn shape their environment. Which is surely the way life is.

My main characters and secondary characters develop bit by bit as I work on the synopsis of the plot. As they take their places, it becomes obvious that some need to be more fully developed and appear more often than others. By the time I've finished rewriting and rewriting and rewriting, I think they are all pretty clear to the reader. At least that's what I aim for.*ff*

Donna Andrews

Donna recently moved to a house with a large yard after twenty years of living in a high rise apartment building. She expects this will bring a whole new sense of realism to her work. "You'll never see one of my villains burying the body," she reports. "Not unless he does it with a back hoe. Digging is way too much hard work!"

Creating side characters is dangerous business. Especially the red herrings. Takes lot of work, making them not only plausible suspects, but engaging enough to steal attention from the real

killer who is lurking in plain sight yet unsuspected.

And it's fun, seeing side characters come alive. Hearing readers say how much they like them. But then I hear those fateful words: "Is so-and-so coming back in the next book?"

Well, probably not. So-and-so was a suspect, remember? What if I bring so-and-so back and someone reads the books out of order?

It's not as if I didn't have enough characters readers can rightfully expect to return. Especially in the Meg series. Apart from Meg and Michael, at least a dozen characters have appeared in more than one book—including Duck, Meg's nephew's pet fowl. Duck, to my surprise, has fans. Fans who complained when Duck didn't appear in *Murder with Puffins*. Who knew?

Makes me appreciate the smaller ongoing cast for the Turing Hopper series. Turing, Maude, Tim, and KingFischer. Though a few side characters are already lobbying for continuing character status.

Apparently, I don't create protagonists. I found fictional repertory companies. And get complaints if I don't write parts for all the players in each book.

But I can't complain. Creating characters readers want to see again isn't a bad problem to have.*ff*

And the award goes to...

Once again, the Femmes have been winning awards and being recognized with award nominations. Since our last issue:

Donna Andrews won the Agatha Award for Best Novel for *You've Got Murder*.

Charlaine Harris was nominated for a *Romantic Times BOOKclub* Career Achievement Award for Female Sleuth, and her book *Living Dead in Dallas* was nominated for a *Romantic Times BOOKclub* Reviewers Choice Award for Best Amateur Sleuth. These awards will be announced just before the Book Lover's Convention in Kansas City in October.

Toni L.P. Kelner's short story "Bible Belt," published in the June 2002 issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, was nominated for an Anthony Award and a Macavity Award. Both awards will be given at Bouchercon in Las Vegas in October. Toni was also nominated for a *Romantic Times BOOKclub* Career Achievement Award for Mystery Series.*ff*

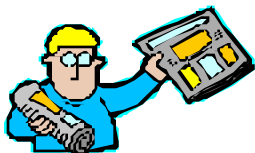


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News from the Femmes Fatales

Julie Wray Herman is delighted to announce that *Three Dirty Women and the Shady Acres* will be available this fall. She'll be doing book signings with the Redheaded League in October/November in the Midwest. A recent trip to Scotland has sparked several interesting story ideas, but Julie will be digging back into the next Dirty Women when she gets back from her signing tour.



Marlys Millhiser is still at work on the eighth Charlie Greene mystery and fourteenth book, set in San Diego's North County, *Voices in the Armoire*. She's made five separate trips since February, some planned and some not, and is determined to stay home and catch up on her writing and the weeds before Bouchercon in October. (Even her cat is snubbing her.)



Shop Till You Drop, the first book in **Elaine Viets'** Dead-End Job series, is a national bestseller and Mystery Guild alternate selection. Book two, *Murder Between the Covers*, will be out December 2. This time, Helen works at Page Turners bookstore. Elaine looks forward to seeing everyone at Bouchercon, where her short story, "Sex and Bingo," debuts in the gambling anthology from Berkley, *High Stakes*.

Worldwide Mystery has just released the paperback edition of **Kris Neri's** *Dem Bones' Revenge*, with a dynamite new cover. Kris has been busy prepping for her first online class through the Writers' Program at the UCLA Extension School, "Committing the Perfect Crime: Writing Your First Mystery," which will be open to students throughout the world, and begins October 1.



Toni L.P. Kelner is having a blockbuster year. Not only has she been nominated for three awards for her writing, but she's also working on a new mystery series. Expect her to be bouncing up and down if you see her at Bouchercon in Las Vegas, especially if her agent finds a publisher for the new book, tentatively titled *Without Mercy*.

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

Meg Chittenden spent the whole spring and summer working on her thirty-sixth book, her second for Berkley. The working title is *No Place to Hide*, but may be changed. *More Than You Know*, her mystery/suspense novel with a little bit of romance in it, came out on September 2. NY best-selling author Linda Fairstein called it, "A riveting thriller."



Donna Andrews reports that the fifth Meg Langslow book, *We'll Always Have Parrots*, will be out this winter from St. Martin's Press. And while she can't make any promises, she's hoping, in response to many reader requests, that her editor will let her kill a few spammers in the next Turing Hopper book. For more news on what Donna is up to, check out www.donnaandrews.com.



Mary Saums has a new book coming out this November. *When the Last Magnolia Weeps*, third in the Willi Taft series, finds Willi at a Celtic Christmas concert. When an old priest is found stabbed to death after the show, one of the musicians comes under suspicion and asks his P.I. friend, Willi, for help. Mary is on the web at www.MarySaums.com.