

# Femmes FATALES

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## Burying the Bodies

by Julie Wray Herman

It gets much easier to hide bodies once you've had a bit of practice. And I must confess that once you've started, it's hard to stop. I can scarcely enter a room before my attention is riveted on the window seat, the large laundry basket, the small door under the eaves. Any of these could surely lead to a snug little spot in which to deposit another victim.

"Mystery writers," you're thinking. "They're a little odd."

That may well be true. But all this practice hiding bodies makes us better storytellers. We don't only bury unwitting victims, we also bury clues amongst the snippets of our characters'



lives. It's those characters that keep the readers coming back for book after book from Dana Cameron, Marlys Millhiser, Donna Andrews, Elaine Viets, Charlaire Harris, Kris Neri, Toni L.P. Kelner, Mary Saums, and myself.

*When not burying bodies on her farm, Julie Wray Herman writes the Three Dirty Women landscaping mystery series. In addition, she is introducing another series into her working schedule. If the cats would just stay off the keyboard and quit crashing her machine when she spell-checks their contributions, Julie could actually finish her current project. ff*

### Dana Cameron

*Dana sometimes worries about how she's come to look at the world. On the trip to Maine that inspired this essay, Dana's fellow diners were put off by her shouting at the kickboxing match on television, and later downright unnerved by her announcing, "Good news, sweetie! The forensics guy got back to me. He said I should cut off the head as well."*

Even more than a butcher shop or pig farm, an archaeological site is a great place to stash a body. Your fictional victim digs the hole (offer him overtime), then WHACK! with the shovel. You back fill and don't draw that unit on the map. But <yawn> that's dull. So, instead, I'll take my inspiration from Shakespeare.

"To bait fish" is how Shylock suggested he'd use Antonio's flesh in *The Merchant of Venice*, and a fishing expedition would do the trick nicely. Think fresh air and exercise. Going out onto the ocean every day gets you privacy, blood isn't uncommon on a fishing boat, and people approve if they happen to see you cleaning and polishing. Water washes away a lot of clues, as Lady Macbeth knew, and sea creatures are a curious, hungry lot.

Considering the issues with floating, I'd stick with lobster traps. If you're going to chuck your victim out for good, you might need to use a couple of traps to fit, er, everything. Don't forget weights and don't set your buoys on them. Or, if you have a little more time, and you want to get the most for your effort, chop him into chum. You might as well be thrifty, and there's no reason you shouldn't get a nice dinner out of it.

No wonder my husband is talking about ski trips next year. ff

### Marlys Millhiser

*Recovering from shoulder surgery in strength-training classes, Marlys is envious of her reluctant sleuth's recuperative skills. Charlie Greene has narrowly missed death, rarely without injury, in every book and is still able to be beautiful, agile, and strong by the next one. She even wears a titanium plate in her skull. Marlys is now able to carry in the grocery bags without help.*

In the new Charlie adventure, the deceased zoom off cliffs in cars, float in swimming pools and Jacuzzi tubs, and bloat in therapeutic pools at a spa for rich addicts. The Casa del Sol doubles as a day spa for those who can afford pampering and perches high above the Pacific near Solana Beach. Bodies sprawl on cliffs and fall from the sky in parachutes.

How odd that Julie should bring up that issue for this issue of the newsletter. I've always suspected she was prescient.

Problem is, poor Charlie isn't. She can handle, barely, two alpha males, actor-producer Mitch Hilsten and investigative reporter Kenneth Cooper, who want to help her but not if they have to cooperate. Her troubled friend, Maggie, is accused of serial murders and her teenaged daughter, Libby, decides to step in and help deal with the CIA, FBI, local sheriff's department, and the IRS. It's possible to be helped to death—Charlie nearly is. It's not about terrorists but prescription drugs and BIG money, about the voices that sell them, that speak to Maggie from the TV behind the closed door of the armoire.

Meanwhile, Charlie's trying to teach reality at a screenwriters convention in nearby San Diego, another profitable scam, whose organizers don't wish reality to interfere with "art," and where there's a body in the Jacuzzi.*ff*

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## Donna Andrews

*Having explored credit card fraud in Access Denied and yard sales in Owl's Well That Ends Well, Donna tackles spam and phishing in Delete All Suspects (November 2005). What's next? Extreme croquet. Which really exists, and thanks to the hospitable members of the Connecticut eXtreme Croquet Society (www.extremecroquet.org), Donna has played it. The things writers will do for their research!*

Julie's right. Mystery writers spend too much time hiding bodies. I gained new respect for the suburban murderer the first time I dug a large hole in Northern Virginia's dense clay soil—to plant a magnolia, not a stiff, I hasten to add.

And we're always auditioning killers and victims. The jerk so busy on his cell phone that he almost rear-ended you? Don't flip him off—bump him off in your next novel. Nothing's more satisfying than turning your cruel boss or annoying neighbor into a cold-blooded killer and serving up the just deserts they'll never reap in real life.

Even e-mail holds inspiration if you're homicidally inclined. One day, while dealing with an unusually large influx of spam, I exclaimed, "Death to all spammers!" And then smiled and murmured, "Yeah—I can do that."

Well, not all of them. But in *Delete All Suspects*, the fourth book starring cybersleuth Turing Hopper, I kill one spammer. It was profoundly satisfying,

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and I look forward to doing it more often in the future. I'd say more, but I must drop off my cans and newspapers at the neighborhood recycling center. They have these huge dumpsters, you see, and I've been wondering just how large an object you could squeeze through the slots in the side...*ff*

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## Elaine Viets

*Elaine has a second Signet paperback series out this October, featuring mystery shopper Josie Marcus. Dying in Style is set in her hometown of St. Louis. It's a creative stretch for Elaine, since Josie is a single mom. Elaine borrowed a friend's daughter to learn about nine-year-olds. Her friend offered the kid on permanent loan, but Elaine thought that was carrying her research too far.*

When I sent my first mystery to my agent, he said, "The story needs more red herrings."

I wanted to buy a pound of red herrings at the deli and sprinkle them throughout the story. Too bad it wasn't that easy. I had to rewrite the entire book.

But my agent gave me valuable advice. I've followed it for eight mysteries, including my latest Dead-End Job, *Just Murdered*.

The trick to mystery writing is not to bury your clues, but to serve up so many potential clues readers are overwhelmed by your generosity. Give them a feast of red herrings—all half-baked—and they won't notice the delicious little clues also on the table.

I play fair. I don't hide information. My readers know everything that my amateur detectives do, Helen Hawthorne in the Dead-End Job series, and Josie Marcus in my new series. No strangers from the past will suddenly pop up and confess. All the puzzle pieces are there, if you can look past the fishy parts.

What are the best clues in my series? If I told you, I'd have to kill you, and I'm trying to build readership.

But trust me, the clues are there. As Mother said about love, you'll know when you see it. I just hope you won't notice until the end of the book.*ff*

## Charlaine Harris

*With two of her children out of the coop, Charlaine imagined she'd have much more time to write this fall. But her remaining teenager is the one without a driver's license, so Charlaine still has her chauffeur's cap hanging by the door. With three signing trips scheduled, she'll have to scramble to meet her Christmas deadline for the second Harper Connelly novel.*

Like Julie, I look for good places to hide bodies all the time. And I like places where there are plenty of legitimate burials, too; I'm quite partial to cemeteries. In fact, that's the first spot I go to in New Orleans. Forget Bourbon Street, take me to St. Louis Number One, New Orleans's oldest City of the Dead.

My heroine, Sookie Stackhouse, (bless her heart) knows where ALL the bodies are buried, both literally and morally, since she can read minds. And Harper Connelly is into burial in a whole different sense. The lightning-struck Harper has a unique connection with the dead. She makes her living by finding out where the bodies are so they can have their burial. The two women are working at opposite ends of the burial business, in a way.

Aside from burying literal bodies, I believe that most traditional mystery writers—I guess I can still call myself that despite the vampires and werewolves in my books—bury clues in their books that can be unearthed by the amateur sleuth because of her own character. The clue is suited to the detective who finds it; I can't imagine Sookie or Harper solving the mystery in any of the other Femmes' books. That might be interesting to watch, though...*ff*

## Kris Neri

*In addition to being a mystery and suspense novelist, a short story writer, and an online writing instructor for the Writers' Program of the UCLA Extension School, with the opening of her Sedona, Arizona bookstore, The Well Red Coyote: Books on the Rocks, Kris has now added bookseller to her list of book-related occupations. It's a good thing she likes wearing hats.*

As a child, I was a whiz at hide-and-seek. I always found the other kids fast, and by what must have seemed to them like flashes of inspiration, and I hid so well, I often had to reveal my hiding place, rather than risk growing old and gray before they found me. Obviously good training for a mystery writer. Hide-and-seek is still my favorite game, only now I do it on the pages of my novels and stories. Hiding clues is more fun than playing in a pile of puppies. I sometimes snicker aloud over the little nuggets I nestle away in ways I hope you'll never imagine. But my greatest satisfaction comes, not from what I hide, but what I find. It's the discoveries I make about my characters that I consider so satisfying. The hidden pockets within them, filled with fascinating paradoxes that help me to see them in new ways, which add rich, colorful texture to the scenes I've yet to write. Suddenly characters I thought I understood operate in new ways, based on those gems I unearth. Stories twist off in surprising directions, and conflicts end in ways I would not have anticipated. Characters develop vocabularies they sure didn't get from me. And all because I know you should never stop playing hide-and-seek. It rules.*ff*

## Toni L.P. Kelner

*Toni seems a bit confused these days. Recently she published stories in Riptide, an anthology for New England crime writers, and in Tar Heel Dead, an anthology for North Carolina writers. If any other regional anthologies are looking for stories, please let her know.*

Burying bodies in mystery novels is a lot like hiding Easter eggs.

I have to buy eggs and Paas sets, boil the eggs, lay paper all over the kitchen table, pour vinegar into cups, add color tablets, and let loose my daughters for coloring. On Easter morning, I spend more time hiding them. Then comes the grand egg hunt. Which lasts maybe fifteen minutes.

All that trouble to hide something that I want to be found! Just like I want the body to be found in my mysteries. If the sleuth or some other character doesn't find—or at least suspect—a body, there's no mystery. Clues and red herrings are the same way. I decorate them as best I can, but I really want them to be found. Just like I want my girls to find those pretty eggs.

Of course, there's one other similarity. Have you ever smelled an Easter egg that didn't get found until a few months after Easter? Well, if you don't find a hidden body...*f*

Like, would that be a good place for a body? Sorry, romance writers. Love is grand, but it takes a back seat (a more comfortable spot for love's assorted activities, anyway) to doing in and disposing of victims.

The most innocuous sight can give us a bad case of What Would Happen If. What would happen if someone tampered with the hot tub's thermostat? And the temperature shot up 100 degrees? And what of the poor lovebirds in the tub? Poached, I'd venture. What would happen if a villain switched an opera fan's hearing aid with one that emitted a fatal brain-splitting tone when the diva onstage screeched a high note? Ouch. Death By Valkyrie. No one notices the victim's scream. The diva's screech makes the audience cover their ears and holler and wish they'd gone bowling instead.

We're not twisted. We simply have suspicious minds. When we see a secluded romantic hideaway, we don't think of roses and candlelight. We think, "Yeah, but what would happen if..."*ff*

## Sites for Sore Eyes



Not only do the Femmes have a group web site, but several of us have our individual sites as well. Surf on by for the latest news.*ff*

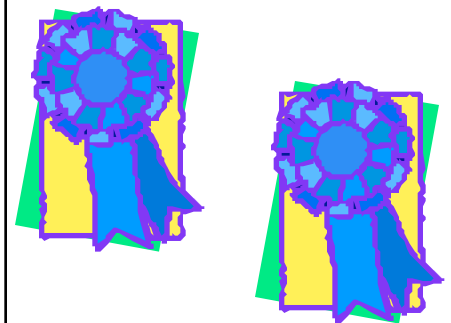
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## Mary Saums

*"I am not odd," Mary assured me, "no matter what Julie says. Maybe a bit eccentric, but only in spells and just barely then." I nodded politely, not mentioning the "spells" I knew about. After all, aren't writers all freethinkers? "Like that time the cops drove by and saw me strangling my husband. Odd? No. Research." Sure, Mary...*

Hot tubs and champagne. Box seats at the opera. Private alcoves with candlelit tables for two. A midnight boat ride in summer. Ah, scenes for being with your special love, you might think. If you're normal. We Femmes have other things in mind..

## And the double winner is...



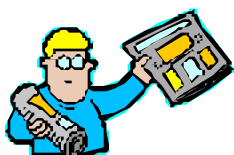
Elaine Viets won both the Agatha Award and the Anthony Award for her short story "Wedding Knife" in *Chesapeake Crimes* (Quiet Storm), edited by fellow Femme Donna Andrews. The Agatha is selected by the attendees of Malice Domestic, and the Anthony is selected by the attendees of Bouchercon, the World Mystery Convention.*ff*

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## News from the Femmes Fatales

**Julie Wray Herman's** first book, *Three Dirty Women and the Garden of Death*, was rereleased in August as a mass market paperback from Worldwide. It can be found, with a little digging, at [charlequin.com](http://charlequin.com). Julie looks forward to attending Malice Domestic in May.



*Grave Consequences*, **Dana Cameron's** second book, is being reprinted, and her first book, *Site Unseen*, was reprinted for the second time. Dana will co-chair the 2005 New England Crime Bake in November, where the Guest of Honor is Tess Gerritsen ([www.crimebake.org](http://www.crimebake.org)). Before then, she hopes to have named the sixth Emma Fielding archaeology mystery something besides *Emma Catches Some Very Naughty People*.



**Marlys Millhiser's** eighth Charlie Greene book, *Voices in the Wardrobe*, was released in hardcover in August by Severn House, a British publisher that markets to U.S. distributors and libraries. After researching *Voices*, Marlys has entered a program to get off Bufferin and Nasonex. She plans to visit the Galapagos in the fall to test her newfound strength against zodiacs and turtles.



If you liked our previous issue on procrastination, **Donna Andrews** also recommends blogging as a way of avoiding...make that warming up for writing while keeping readers informed.

Though she's beginning to worry—readers have started ordering her back to the keyboard when the blog sounds as if she's having too much fun. Access the blog through her web site or at [donnaandrews.typepad.com/](http://donnaandrews.typepad.com/)



**Elaine Viets** is thrilled that Signet is taking her series hardcover with *Murder Unleashed* in May 2006. For this Dead-End Job, Helen works at a fancy dog boutique where customers spend \$200 on doggie birthday parties. There is such a place, honest. Elaine worked there. She also met a dachshund that had a bigger wardrobe than she did.



*Grave Sight*, the first Harper Connelly novel, is enjoying healthy pre-sales, **Charlaine Harris** reports. She's cautiously optimistic about the debut of the new series,

which is written in a darker vein than her popular Sookie Stackhouse vampire novels. The next Sookie, *Definitely Dead*, is in production for a spring release. And look for Charlaine's short story in P.N. Elrod's anthology *My Big Fat Supernatural Wedding*.



**Kris Neri** eagerly anticipates the any-day-now publication of her Zoey Morgan novel, *Never Say Die*, from Hilliard & Harris, while her next Tracy Eaton mystery, *Revenge for Old Times' Sake*, waits just ahead on the horizon from Quiet Storm Publishing. For short fiction lovers, Kris has posted a number of her stories at [Fictionwise.com](http://Fictionwise.com).



**Toni L.P. Kelner** recently signed a contract with Five Star Mysteries to publish *Without Mercy*, the first in her new "Where Are They Now?" series. Amateur sleuth Tilda Harper is a freelance magazine writer specializing in tracking down the formerly famous. The tentative publication date is sometime in the last part of 2007.



**Mary Saums** is off the road and busy writing at home. She is looking forward to a research trip to England and Wales in the spring, in conjunction with Left Coast Crime in Bristol, England. Convention information is online at [www.interbridge.com/leftcoastcrime2006.ff](http://www.interbridge.com/leftcoastcrime2006.ff)

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