

Femmes FATALES

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Dead-End Jobs

by Donna Andrews



We've all had 'em—right?

"I haven't," I said, when my fellow Femmes proposed this topic. In retribution, they assigned me to write this introduction. Five minutes later, I remembered the week I worked for Frank.

Frank was my department head. Whenever his executive secretary vacationed, instead of hiring a temp, they reassigned a junior secretary—I assumed because his work was too important, too confidential, too demanding to leave to a mere temp.

Day one, he had me type an important three-page memo. I sweated over it, proofread a dozen times, and finally paperclipped the pages together and laid them in his inbox. Half an hour later,

he emerged, looking anxious. My stomach lurched. "This looks great," he said. "Just one thing—when you distribute it, instead of paperclipping it together, could you put a staple here in the upper left hand corner?"

I waited for the punch line. There wasn't one. He was serious.

"This is the original," I said carefully. "I'd have to remove a staple to copy it, and that would leave little dots in the page corners. I'll staple the copies." "Oh, I see!" he said, beaming. "Perfect! Good thinking!"

Rest of the week was like that. Longest week of my life. So, fellow Femmes Fatales—can you top that?

The Penguin Who Knew Too Much, *eighth in the Meg Langslow series, came out this summer, and features camels, hyenas, lemurs, sloths, and (of course) penguins, along with an equally strange collection of Meg's relatives. Donna was thrilled to learn that it was #1 on the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association Bestseller List for August.* ff

Dana Cameron

Dana's had plenty of jobs that weren't fun, but luckily most of them tied into her chosen professions. But even the ones that weren't related were...instructive, like the job at the ice cream joint (which put her off the stuff for months), the gig at the library (apparently reading in the stacks doesn't count), and the telephone solicitation ('nuff said).

I'll tell you a secret: much of what happens behind the scenes in archaeology—washing, cross-mending, labeling, cataloguing—is an ass-aching bore. It takes a special kind of compulsive disorder to enjoy the redundancy, minutiae, and exactitude.

I miss it like crazy.

Anyway, boredom is one thing, but there are situations that would give the guy on *Dirty Jobs* pause. These make the best stories, but only after you've had a couple of years to process the trauma. My personal favorites include:

- Digging at a waste treatment plant (Not everything was...contained.)

- Digging outside a big-city jail (Citizens on both sides of the fence expressed biologically improbable interest in our presence.)
- Digging a site so festooned with ropes of poison ivy, you couldn't see the tree trunks (After three days, I was the only crew-member who hadn't been to the hospital and who didn't have doctor's orders *never* to visit that site again. Lucky me.)

That was the summer we learned the shopkeeper who sold our (all-female) crew soda was asking who the "rough-looking new hookers" were. It was the summer I learned I could catch office mice with just a bit of sandwich and a cardboard box.

You do contract work for the variety of experience. It's also great work for a fledgling archaeologist. It's just that sometimes the experiences ain't exactly academic. ff



Kris Neri

While excelling in a wide assortment of dead-end jobs for decades, today, with her busy life as a writer, writing instructor and bookseller, Kris finds she no longer has time for the dead-end route that once seemed like her life's calling.

For years, if a job paid little and carried no dignity, I was their girl. But it was through one dead-end job that I found my life's path.

As an unemployed actress (talk about dead-ends!), I passed out cookies made with some frou-frou liqueur in liquor stores. After scoring dazzling sales in affluent areas, they sent me to Skid Row, where seemingly everyone bought enough beer daily to stock a cruise ship, and they didn't want no stinkin' schnapps.

What a culture shock. Never had I seen so many men with prison tattoos, nor a liquor store the police patrolled hourly. Scared? No way. This was a hard-boiled mystery come to life.

Then primo Tough Guy pushed past me, ignoring my spiel. But when the cops

approached, he dove behind the largest beer display this side of Bavaria. Obviously super-focused on his possible arrest, he apparently never heard me creep up behind him.

I whispered, "What do they want you for?" TG spun around, clutching his chest. The possible danger sunk in—he could have held a gun.

But what fun! I longed to experience the drama of another real-seeming mystery world—only next time from the safety of a desk chair.*ff*

Toni L.P. Kelner

Toni was ready and raring to go on this topic. She's had far too many dead-end jobs: telephone surveys, retail cashier, McDonald's, and Wendy's. The only question was which one to write about.

Before I decided which of my dead-end jobs to write about, I had to decide what really makes a job a dead end. I came up with a few requirements: unpleasant working conditions, lousy and/or inconsistent pay, no career path, and no way to use the experience to get another job. That's when I realized that writing is the ultimate dead-end job.

The conditions are atrocious. My office is a total mess, I have to answer the phone myself, and I have to pay for my own office supplies. Is that even legal?

The pay? Not to whine, but we all know that very few writers make as much as I did at McDonald's. And at McDonald's I got lunch!

Then there's the career path. When I started, I was writing novels and short stories. Over ten years later, I'm still writing novels and short stories. Ten years from now? Probably novels and short stories. Not a promotion in sight!

But the real reason this is a dead-end job is that after all these years of work, I've got no qualifications for anything useful.

Femmes FATALES

Editor: Toni L.P. Kelner
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So I'm stuck here. Which is exactly how I like it.*ff*

Charlaine Harris

The crack of bat against ball...the screams of parents...the cloud of dust as a player slides into home...summer in Charlaine's world. From January to August, that world is fast-pitch softball. Though Charlaine missed several tournaments due to a looming deadline, she did make the World Series in Panama City Beach. She acquired her daughter's home-run ball and a sunburn. Now it's volleyball season!

Until I became a full-time writer, I had a series of dead-end jobs. I was not very good at any of them, but since I had graduated from college with a lovely and useless English and Communication Arts degree, my choices were limited. I'd married right after I graduated from college and my then-husband went back to school himself, so working was essential.

For about two weeks I was a teacher's aide, but after the fifth time the kids told me they were going to kill me on the last day of school, I decided almost anything was better. Simply because no one else wanted the job, I was hired to work in an offset press darkroom at a very small newspaper. This minimum wage job (\$1.60 an hour) entailed standing in the dark (on a concrete floor) swishing negatives around in strong chemicals, for eight hours a day. I remember being thrilled to get a nickel an hour raise.

The huge offset camera I used to photograph the entire newspaper page had a rickety electrical connection...and that's the nicest way to put it. Every now and then, I'd get shocked when I locked the camera shut. I remember timidly drawing this to the manager's attention. He stalked into the darkroom one day, snorting in indignation, all ready to poo-poo my complaint. I noticed he was wearing a watch with a metal band. It was hard not to laugh when he got zapped.*ff*

Mary Saums

Mary's dead-end jobs could have been worse. Wrapping gifts during the holidays was pretty easy. There were definite perks when she worked in a

bakery, not to mention a few extra pounds. And then there was the stint in lingerie sales. Can you imagine how many bras you have to sell to pay your rent?

Personally, I think most jobs are ultimately dead ends. Why? Because there are only two worthwhile goals in life, and work doesn't help you achieve either one. Whether you have an important dream career, like taxidermy, or you take various minimum-wage jobs, work takes you away from the two pursuits necessary for spiritual fulfillment.

Worthwhile Job #1: Acquiring as many books as your budget will allow and your house will hold. This practice is the first step toward enlightenment. Notice I said 'practice.' Enlightenment won't come if you simply buy random books and throw them into the bed of a pickup truck just to fill every wall, corner, cabinet, closet, bathtub, over doors, under beds, plus the oven and dishwasher. No, no. You must choose books that touch you in some way. Getting rid of books is also part of the cycle. This provides room for new books that interest you. Before long, your library is an extension of your mind. The Books are You.

Worthwhile Job #2: Reading all the books you own before you croak. For this, you need serious time. Don't waste it kissing up to the Man or Woman. Read without ceasing. Become one with the books. Read until there are no more barriers and You are the Books. Ommmmmm.....*ff*

Julie Wray Herman

Julie lives outside Houston, where she holds the local record for most volunteer jobs held in one year. That year is now past, and Julie is forging full steam ahead with her work. To keep herself from going into severe withdrawal from distractions, Julie has taken on a new hobby: costume design.

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Awards Galore!

The Femmes continue to be honored at award banquets and presentations all over the country. In fact, three Femmes are up for the same award—a win-win-win situation.

Dana Cameron has been nominated for two Anthony awards: Best Short Story for “The Lords of Misrule” (published in the anthology *Sugarplums and Scandals*) and Best Paperback Original for *Ashes and Bones*.

Charlaine Harris’s second Harper Connelly novel, *Grave Surprise*,



received the *Romantic Times* Reviewer’s Choice award, and she will be accepting *Crimespree Magazine’s* Reacher Award at Bouchercon.

Toni L.P. Kelner won the Agatha award for Best Short Story for her story “Sleeping With the Plush” (published in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*). That story is nominated for an Anthony, as well.

Elaine Viets is also vying for the Best Short Story Anthony with her story “After the Fall” (published in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*).ff

I’ve held a wide variety of jobs in my lifetime: horse stall mucker, Christmas card imprinter, babysitter, housecleaner, dishwasher, nurse’s aide, McDonald’s, and papergirl. Most of these were cash jobs, so by Helen Fielding’s standards, they would fit the bill as dead-end jobs.

The paper-throwing job was one of my favorites. One morning I got to know a customer a little better than I liked. It was nearly sunrise and I was in my own little world, as usual. (It was 5 AM. Most papergirls and boys do their job sleepwalking.) A jogger ran up to me and asked me the time. I looked up at him, and then quickly looked back down at the ground. The only thing he was wearing was running shoes. I mumbled something about not having my watch, which had the virtue of being true, and hurried on to the next house. A half-hour later I got to one of the last houses on my route and discovered who my jogger was. I dropped the paper on the doorstep and turned away from the now all-too-familiar Adidas and socks abandoned on the porch.

Dead-end jobs may not pay well, but they come with the invaluable asset of people watching, which can lead to some pretty interesting stories.ff

Marlys Milhiser

Marlys is the only person we know trying to gain weight. It’s embarrassing. At the gym she can’t keep her shorts up. She loves raw fruits and vegetables but forces fat, sugar, starch. Writers tend toward the weird but this defies logic. Working at home, she eats all day, and hides snacks from a physically active husband. Think of the bestseller if she figured out why.

My first thought of a dead-end job was an employer chasing me around his desk with groping hands when I worked illegally at a movie theater. (I was underage.) But I went on to other part-time jobs through high school and college, and once graduated had a working spouse to keep us from the poor house. Spouse even suggested the job with the deadiest end for me. Housekeeping. The minute I made some money we had a cleaning lady. Once a week when the kids were home and twice a month thereafter. I don’t like cooking either. I’m not dedicated enough to take a cleaning lady job even to get a mystery novel out of it.

So here’s to our lady with the guts to get out and research these jobs first hand, whose heroine can make a success of staying out of jail while she’s solving murders just to stay alive. Elaine puts her Helen in such dire straights before the story even begins that the humor, so out of place yet so right, can’t slow the momentum.

With murderers and the law after her, Helen retains a sense of humor. I wonder if it helped her author’s recovery from what appeared recently to be disaster.

So there’s no excuse for the rest of us to bitch again, hear? Of course, we probably will.ff



Elaine Viets

Elaine thanks everyone who sent prayers, cards and get-well wishes after her April stroke. Your kind thoughts really made a difference. She’s also grateful to the Femmes for their support.

One of my first dead-end jobs was proofreading medical journals and textbooks in St. Louis. I became a world-class hypochondriac while I had the job. I never had a cold. I had a rare (and fatal) South American infection. Since I’d never been much further than Branson, MO, my chances of catching a rare disease were...well, rare.

My health improved when I went to journalism school in Columbia, Mo. I proofread phone books after class, working until midnight reading endless alphabetized lists of names. Print-shop coffee, which I think was made of ink, kept me awake.

Heaven knows if I was any good, but the job paid my college tuition. Somehow, I made it through journalism school. When I graduated, I was a reporter at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. I was horrified that the copy desk used phone books to verify the spelling of names. I knew those books were read by tired 20-year-olds like me.

I also proofread Missouri Supreme Court briefs. I was fascinated by the case of the Pig-Ear Sandwich Man. I kept imagining the victim had hairy, pointed ears, like a hog. Actually, his ears were perfectly fine. The man sold sandwiches made of pigs’ ears.

Years later, I ate one. Pigs’ ears are pretty good. They’re crunchy and taste like pork rinds in barbecue sauce.ff

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P.O. Box 1248
Cypress, TX 77410-1248
www.femmesfatalesauthors.com
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News from the Femmes Fatales

Donna Andrew's short story, "A Rat's Tail," appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* (Sept.-Oct. 2007) and her essay, "Sex, Lies, and MRIs," will appear in BenBella Book's *House Unauthorized* (Nov. 2007). In 2008, she'll have stories in *Powers of Detection 2*, edited by Dana Stabenow, and *Moonlight and Mistletoe*, edited by fellow Femmes Charlaïne and Toni.



After a busy summer of reading, research, and revisions, **Dana Cameron** will be heading to Alaska. She's looking forward to traveling with her husband before attending Bouchercon 2007 in Anchorage, and then visiting the town of Takotna as part of the "Authors in the Schools" program. She's nominated for two Anthony awards, and would like to thank everyone for their support.



Kris Neri's next publication will be her short story collection *A Rose in the Snow*, which contains some new stories and characters, two Derringer award-winners, and some of her personal favorites. Her next overseas publication will be "The Undressed Emperor of the Napa Valley," which will appear in the German-language *Murder in the Wine Cellar* from Gerstenberg.



Many Bloody Returns, the anthology **Toni L.P. Kelner** co-edited with fellow Femme Charlaïne, debuted at #30 on the

New York Times Best Seller List. Next up are pirate mystery "Skull and Cross-examinations" in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and novel *Without Mercy*, the first in a new series.



Charlaïne Harris has an exciting and busy fall in store. The anthology she and Toni co-edited, *Many Bloody Returns*, will be on the shelves, and her third Harper Connelly mystery (*An Ice Cold Grave*) goes on sale in late September. She'll be working on short stories and a novella until Christmas. CopperCon, Bouchercon, and the World Fantasy Convention are on her travel schedule.



Mary Saums wants to thank all the *Thistle & Twigg* fans who have been so kind since the book's release. The paperback edition arrives in Feb. 2008, and the second

in the series, *Mighty Old Bones*, comes out in March. Mary will be at Bouchercon this September, Southern Festival of Books in Nashville in October and Malice in April.



Julie Wray Herman has abandoned the notion of adding chickens to her farm in an effort to become a market farmer—instead acquiring the urge to travel. In between writing assignments, she is touring Spain, Colorado and Maine. Colorado and Maine are pure fun, but Spain is all work and no play—research.



Marlys Millhiser is planning a trip to Switzerland, trying to teach a new computer and software old tricks, has already lost all trace of a partial story draft for a mystery anthology, and has finished the rough draft of a novel she's afraid to allow near the new computer, an earlier novel is under consideration for option. She's not holding her breath. All is normal chaos.



Elaine Viets's first vampire story is in *Many Bloody Returns*, edited by Femmes Charlaïne and Toni. She has another Dead-End Job book, *Clubbed to Death*, due out next spring. And her next Josie Marcus Mystery Shopper novel will be published in Nov. 2007.*ff*

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