

Femmes FATALES

Volume 8, Number 2

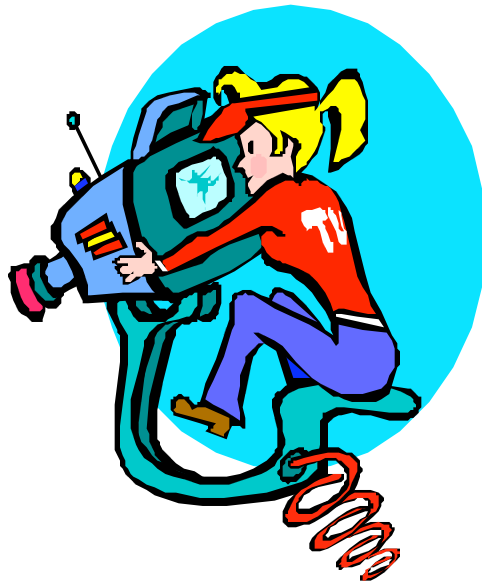
Spring 2003

Setting the Scene for Mystery

by Mary Saums

One of the things I enjoy most about reading mysteries is that feeling of being transported to another place. Traveling by book is not only more economical than traditional means, it's so much safer. I'd rather Virginia Lanier tell me about the Okefenokee swamp than go there myself and fight off scratchy bushes, slithering reptiles or monster bugs with big Georgia appetites. Dana Stabenow can take me places in Alaska that I could never find if I tried, not to mention all that messy snow business. Tony Hillerman is doing just fine telling me all about the desert, well enough that I don't have to go there and dodge bullets and evil spirits myself.

Such exotic locales aren't necessary for me to enjoy a mystery. It could be something as simple as a small town, one found anywhere, where the characters can interact with their own special surroundings and come to life.



Among the Femmes Fatales—Meg Chittenden, Toni L.P. Kelner, Donna Andrews, Julie Wray Herman, Kris Neri, Marlys Millhiser, Charlene Harris, and Elaine Viets—there's an incredible variety of places I love to visit through their books. How do they come up with just the right setting for the particular story they want to tell? How much reality goes into the story's setting—is the location completely fictional or based on a real place? Which comes first—character, plot or place?ff

Mary Saums's *Midnight Hour* is set in Nashville, Tennessee and introduces Willi Taft, a singer and fledgling private investigator. Willi travels to North Alabama in *The Valley of Jewels* where dealings with a Civil War professor and a retired opera star lead to murder. Mary also has a humorous essay in the Winter 2002/2003 Mystery Readers Journal comparing British and Southern mysteries.

Meg Chittenden

When Meg Chittenden isn't jetting around to speak at mystery conventions, she practically lives in her office, which she and husband Jim built over their garage. This large room contains two desktop computers and a laptop, a scanner, copier, fax machine and two printers, not to mention five large bookcases mostly filled with reference books. Around the corner from the Pacific Ocean, the office looks out on a freshwater canal, complete with ducks.

Setting has often been the first element to determine my next book. For example, I've always loved San Francisco. While I was casting around for ideas for my Charlie Plato mystery series, there was an earthquake in the San Francisco area. I heard of someone who had a trench open up in their front yard and I imagined a

skeleton of a foot sticking out of that trench. I visited the area and my daughter took me to The Saddle Rack, a country-western tavern, where I learned how to line-dance. I immediately decided that the series would be set on the San Francisco Peninsula, the main characters would own a country-western tavern, and the skeleton of the foot would show up in the tavern's flower bed.

I set my books in real places, but I often give them fictional names. I put my tavern in Menlo Park, California, but I called it Bellamy Park so I could change the geography slightly to suit my plot, and if I said the bank manager did it, I didn't have to worry about the bank manager suing me.

Unfortunately, Charlie Plato is in hiatus. My next book, *More Than You Know*, is set mostly in the Pacific

Northwest. With one exception, a small town, I use the real names of the places—such as Seattle, Tacoma, Portland and Eugene. ff

Toni L.P. Kelner

Occasionally Toni toys with the idea of setting a book somewhere more exotic than Byerly, North Carolina, the locale her readers know so well. It's just that she's at home in that setting, and her family is always ready to help vet manuscripts. Still, someday she wants to grow as a writer, perhaps by setting a book in South Carolina.

Which comes first: character, plot, or setting? It's not plot—that's usually the last thing I work on. But with the other two, it's not so easy to say because I use characters to create the setting.

My Laura Fleming series is set in Byerly, a fictional North Carolina mill town, but I spent relatively little space describing that town. There are passages describing Laura's home place, and some of the other buildings in town, and a section describing how the town tends to revolve around the mill. I refer to the weather, whether it's a steamy summer or mild winter. And that's about it for specific facts about setting.

Instead I use the characters to illuminate the Southern small-town milieu: their accents and figures of speech; the way they know who's related to whom; what it's like working at the mill; going to the local flea market and beauty salon; the weddings and family reunions and funerals. Even the food they eat is important—what would Byerly be without barbecue, chicken and dumplings, and deviled eggs?

When I think of the South, I don't just think of the pine trees and red clay and flowering crepe myrtle, though those are all there. It's the people that make the South what it is, and it's those people who color in the settings of my books.*ff*

Kris Neri

While busy starting a second series, in addition to writing her Tracy Eaton mysteries, Kris Neri still makes time to write a few of the short stories that she enjoys so much. Even Kris concedes it's good that she has this outlet, since it wasn't healthy hearing all those voices in her head.

Character is at the root of everything in my books, especially setting since the place that shapes my characters ultimately

Femmes FATALES

Editor: Mary Saums
Layout: Toni L.P. Kelner
Webmaster: Donna Andrews
Printing: Gavin Faulkner at Rowan Mountain

©2003 Femmes Fatales

determines how they will deal with the dilemmas that crop up before them.

While my protagonist, Tracy Eaton, is a native Southern Californian, as the offspring of major Hollywood stars, she is more the quintessential show biz brat than a typical Angeleno. It's that reality-challenged world, where the impossible can be accomplished by just filming another take, that has skewed Tracy's approach to life and solving crimes.

I set *Revenge of the Gypsy Queen* in New York because I wanted Tracy to seem more out-of-synch with the locals than she might at home. I'm thrilled when New Yorkers tell me I've captured the look and feel of the city, even if it's viewed through Tracy's eccentric filter. If N.Y.C. is a place where fearless California girls can break into the homes of Mafia dons and beat off Central Park muggers so successfully that Good Samaritans save the muggers, then I have totally nailed that setting.

Dem Bones' Revenge, on the other hand, is a truly L.A. story. When Tracy's mother, actress Martha Collins, is suspected of murdering an aging screenwriter, and the cop about to arrest her agrees to release her if Martha will read his screenplay, you know you're in La-La Land!*ff*

Charlaine Harris

Not long ago, Charlaine Harris told me if she put in as much time on her treadmill as she does her keyboard, she'd be ready for the Olympics. This year, she's writing a book, a novella, and a short story, attending four conferences, and wearing her "Mom" hat for her kids. But she maintains that she's the happiest person she knows—as long as she gets a couple of hours alone each day.

I start by assuming my books will be set in the South, but where in the South is the subject of much intense inner debate. There are several factors that contribute to the final decision, some of them as peculiar as the local liquor laws.

My main character also contributes to determining the locale and coloring in

the details. Those details are the fine strokes on painting in the environment.

I begin with understanding my protagonist. The person and her locale have a complex relationship. Aurora Teagarden was raised in a town that's rapidly being swallowed by Atlanta. Affluent newcomers mix with her lifelong friends, sometimes uneasily. Suburban Roe is by far the most sophisticated of my three protagonists—which may not be saying much! She could cope on her own in any city.

Lily Bard saw tiny Shakespeare, Arkansas as a defensible fort—a place where she can control, and be familiar with, every bit of her environment.

Sookie Stackhouse would have a very hard time outside Bon Temps, Louisiana. (The Cajun influence, though weaker in northern Louisiana than around the coastal area, is fun to work with.) Sookie is a blue-collar Southerner, living close to the bone. The fun of this series lies in the juxtaposition of the prosaic details of her everyday environment with the acceptance of vampires as part of the Southern landscape.*ff*

Marlys Millhiser

A longtime resident of Boulder, CO, Marlys was raised in Iowa, where she learned the meaning and uses of guilt and is now trying to justify the pleasures and expenses of a recent whale watching trip in Baja California. (The psyche of a mystery writer is extremely complicated.) Must Charlie Greene go on a similar expedition? Must Marlys return to get the facts straight? Oh dear.

Place sparks the story, while characters and author reacting to it shape the plot. This was never more evident to me than in *The Rampant Reaper* which begins in the graveyard of a tiny town in Iowa where I took my father's ashes to be buried a few years ago and where I will return with my mother's. My husband and I, both only children, will soon begin our second decade of eldercare and nursing home duty, and of experiencing five "health care centers."

How does an author address the hard fact that lingering is not necessarily living, especially in a humorous, if satirical,

mystery series? I changed the name of and added a nursing home to this decaying town and brought in Charlie Greene to discover who is murdering the poor souls at Gentle Oaks, one of few viable businesses left. Another business, the pool hall, I renamed Viagra's. I discovered controversy and conundrum, and found this issue goes beyond polite discourse except for the designated daughter/sister/whoever living nearest the problem.

Approaching a subject of gigantic proportions few want to admit exists, with even a wry grin, is a forbidding task. Grounding it in a believable setting is essential, and perhaps humor the only bearable approach for this story, one which began in that graveyard in the town where I was born.*ff*

Julie Wray Herman

Combining gardening and writing, two of Julie Wray Herman's favorite things, resulted in the Three Dirty Women Landscaping mystery series. While it is a terrible hardship to make a weekly pilgrimage to the nursery, Julie swears that these trips are vital in order to create verisimilitude in her fictional town of Pine Grove.

It is my firm belief that setting and characters are intertwined. I live outside a city with a hot, humid climate, lots of noisy people, smelly traffic, and nearly every language on the planet spoken on its streets. I am a different kind of person for having lived here than I would have been had I stayed in my hometown of Louisville.

So, living where I do, why would I choose to write about a small-town setting in the Southeast? The short answer was that my publisher asked me to. The longer, perhaps more truthful answer, was that these characters demanded their own town and held me hostage until I complied with their wishes.

Initially, the series was to have featured three suburban Houston women, all in their forties, who got tired of being taken for granted and decided to start a landscaping company so people would take them seriously.

Then I wrote the book. And a funny thing happened on the way to The End. The

setting changed—and so did the characters. They grew. The town shrank. Mountains began to form. The small-town atmosphere allowed the characters to become closer friends as well as business partners. I was halfway to the Appalachians before my publisher ever uttered a word.

And the book became a better story.*ff*

Donna Andrews

Has Donna Andrews gone to the birds again? Yep. Crouching Buzzard, Leaping Loon, fourth in her Meg Langslow series, introduces the eccentric programmers of Mutant Wizards, the computer game company founded by Meg's brother Rob, and the wayward therapists sharing the Wizard's subleased quarters. When the office practical joker is strangled with a mouse cord, the police suspect Rob, and Meg turns sleuth to protect him.

My Meg books start with a vision; plot, characters and location flow out of that. For *Murder With Peacocks*, I saw Meg as the one sane point in the middle of chaos—I decided afterward to set the book in Yorktown, where I grew up. *Murder With Puffins* began when I was almost marooned overnight on Monhegan Island with several hundred avid birdwatchers. *Revenge of the Wrought Iron Flamingos* had to happen on the Revolutionary battlefields where I played as a child. *Crouching Buzzard, Leaping Loon* grew out of the day my employer installed self-propelled electric mail carts—and I knew at first sight that I had to kill someone on or with one of those carts.

I heard Turing Hopper's voice long before I knew what story she'd tell. And I set the original draft of *You've Got Murder* in an unspecified Eastern city. Then my agent wisely said, "Set it in a real place, dammit." So I stole a scrap of Crystal City for the Universal Library headquarters, and rewrote all the scenes to happen on real streets in real Washington area neighborhoods. I was astonished at how much life this added to the book.

No matter what comes first, plot, character and location have to work in

harmony before I'm satisfied that the latest draft is the best book it can be.*ff*

Elaine Viets

Like her character, Helen Hawthorne, Elaine Viets actually works those awful jobs in her new Dead-End Job series from Signet. She has been a dress shop clerk, a bookseller and telemarketer who called you at dinner time. At one minimum wage job, she got a twenty-five-cent raise for being "a team player."

When I first moved to South Florida, I saw an ad for a swingers' club in the paper. Being a Midwesterner, I was pleasantly shocked. Then I read the ad. "Try our salad bar!" it said.

Only South Florida would have a salad bar at an orgy.

This is paradise if you're a mystery writer. I love writing my new Dead-End Job series, because the place gives me absolute freedom. Readers will accept outrageous behavior in a South Florida novel, because they've just read something weirder in the newspaper—and it was true.

In *Shop Till You Drop*, my characters engage in elegant blackmail, drug dealing, and murder at an exclusive dress shop called Juliana's. Already, people have told me they've shopped at Juliana's—even though I made the place up out of whole cloth.

New Floridians have no past. My amateur detective, Helen Hawthorne, is typical. She's on the run from the courts and her ex-husband.

Other series show old Florida, Cuban Florida, and ultra-rich Florida. I show Florida's working world, where people get by on minimum-wage jobs. I've worked those dead-end jobs and met those people. They are tough and funny.

In a South Florida novel, the characters grow out of the place. Peggy the parrot lady and Phil the invisible pothead would be possible only in South Florida.

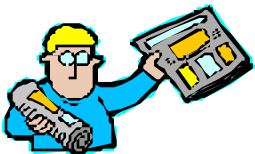
Anywhere else, they'd be on Prozac or in jail.*ff*

Femmes FATALES

P.O. Box 1248
Cypress, TX 77410-1248
TheFatales@aol.com
FemmesFatalesAuthors.com

PRSR STD
US POSTAGE
PAID
BLACKSBURG, VA
PERMIT NO. 158

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



News from the Femmes Fatales

Meg Chittenden has two short stories coming out in anthologies, “Three Blondes Living On Geary,” and “The Spirit Of Washington,” plus a suspense novel due in September 2003 from Berkley. *More Than You Know* features an FBI agent and a woman whose husband suddenly goes missing, leaving behind traces of a very disturbing secret life. This year, Meg will attend Sleuthfest, Malice Domestic and Bouchercon.



Toni L.P. Kelner's eighth Laura Fleming mystery, *Wed and Buried*, was released by Kensington in February, and she has short stories in the anthologies *A Hot and Sultry Night for Crime* and *Criminal Appetites*. She'll be attending Malice Domestic and Bouchercon this year, and perhaps other conventions as well. She can always be found online at www.tonilpkelner.com.



Kris Neri's Tracy Eaton mystery series was recently named a Left Coast Crime 2003 Book Club choice, an honor that went to only four of the hundreds of authors in attendance. The paperback edition of her Agatha, Anthony and Macavity Award-nominated first novel, *Revenge of the Gypsy Queen*, was just published by Worldwide Mystery.



Charlaine Harris's *Living Dead in Dallas* has been nominated for the Pearl, the Sapphire, and two Romantic Times awards. Following on the heels of *Dead Until Dark's* Anthony win, it's obvious her Sookie Stackhouse series has cross-genre appeal. For those who find vampires a little on the fangy side, Charlaine's Aurora Teagarden will appear in August's *Poppo Done to Death*.



Marlys Millhiser is hard at work making Charlie Greene's life difficult yet again, this time with a murderous dose of prescription drugs, health spas, and screenwriter “institutes” in San Diego County. *Voices in the Armoire* has breached the halfway hump and then some. Marlys will attend Malice Domestic this spring, Western Writers'

Femmes Fatales is distributed for free, and can be copied as long as copyright information is included.

If you prefer paper copies, send us your address at *Femmes Fatales*, P.O. Box 1248, Cypress, TX 77410-1248.

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*

Convention in Helena in June, and Bouchercon in Las Vegas this fall.



Julie Wray Herman's third book, *Three Dirty Women and the Shady Acres*, will be available in a special edition at Malice Domestic in limited quantities. Between now and its official release in October 2003, Julie will be trying to convince her husband that they need to put in a rose garden on the side of the house, as well as working hard on her next book.



Donna Andrews recently learned that *You've Got Murder*, first in her series featuring artificial intelligence personality Turing Hopper, has been nominated for the Agatha Award for best mystery of 2003. Turing's adventures continue in *Click Here for Murder*, available in late April. For more news, reviews, and signing dates, check donnaandrews.com.



Elaine Viets's new Dead-End Job series debuts in May. The first book is *Shop Till You Drop* from Signet. Tim Dorsey calls this South Florida series, “Janet Evanovich meets *The Fugitive*.” In June, Elaine has a short story, “Red Meat,” in the Lawrence Block anthology *Blood on Their Hands*. She wrote that story after her husband hired a twenty-three-year-old blonde trainer named Heather.