

# Femmes FATALES

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## Mystery in the Details?

by Marlys Millhiser

Do my sister Femmes find the details and accuracy in scientific forensics and suspect profiling critical to their stories? I have textbooks on crime scene investigations that are outdated and inaccurate. I've watched reruns of TV crime-scene shows that spout facts or investigative methods that have been highly questioned since. The internet is also rife with nonsense that must be sifted for nuggets of useful fact.

I find this topic of interest since I've lived in Boulder, Colorado for over forty years and thought the profiling of the Ramseys and subsequent misuse or dismissal of crime scene evidence in the Jon Benet murder a shocking misjudgment. I said so while touring out of state with some other Femmes a few months after the murder, for a Charlie Greene book set in Boulder, and was met with open hostility by people who came to hear us. I had two writer



friends who were also social workers in different states tell me that if the parents were in the house when the child was murdered, one of them did it. That's the way it always is. Well, no it isn't.

Can we as writers trust the glut of often dated information constantly rerun on "fact" TV or on the web? My books border on the silly, but I hate to think I'm contributing to an already misinformed world that profiles infinitely complex people and circumstance with simple and arbitrary rules. That may make things easier, but doesn't make them right. How do the famous Femmes handle this?ff

*Marlys Millhiser has finally finished the eighth in the Charlie Greene series, Voices in the Armoire, and is taking time off to deal with rotator cuff surgery. Now, finally out of the sling, she is considering sharing this wonderful experience with Charlie because Marlys knows all about it and won't have to fake it, and because this would be another great challenge for her reluctant sleuth's never-ending quest to avoid dead bodies.*

### Donna Andrews

*In her fifth Meg Langslow book, We'll Always Have Parrots, Donna Andrews takes Meg to a fan convention for the tacky TV show in which her boyfriend Michael has a role. In keeping with this issue's theme, Donna assures us that she diligently researched the setting with years of faithful attendance at numerous science fiction and television conventions. Talk about devotion to work!*

She's a sneaky one, that Marlys. She's actually asking us to justify our existence—given today's technological marvels, can anyone still write amateur sleuth mysteries?

I think so, if you either learn enough to use technology or find clever ways to sidestep it. I do both—whatever works at the time.

In my Meg Langslow series, I sidestep by having a short timespan and giving my

heroine a reason to solve the murder ASAP. In *Crouching Buzzard, Leaping Loon*, she's rescuing a key employee of her brother's company—someone they urgently need on the job, not in jail. In *We'll Always Have Parrots*, Meg fears that the publicity of a long investigation will damage her boyfriend's chances for tenure at his stodgy university.

In my Turing Hopper series, technology plays a key role, and I have to do the research. Fortunately, I can call on my tech-savvy friends Dave and Paul—my tech review board. After reading the first draft of *You've Got Murder*, they remarked, "You didn't make nearly as many mistakes as most books and movies—and we can fix those." Though even with their help it's tough devising a mystery that will interest both technophobes and technophiles.

So yes—you can still write about amateur sleuths; it's just a lot tougher

these days. But maybe that's what makes it so much fun. ff

### Elaine Viets

*Elaine has a new addition to her family—a one-year-old chartreux. These cats are known for their smoky gray fur, sweet natures and copper eyes. Her husband Don was fascinated by their science-fiction eyes. He found a young show cat who was too shy for the stage. When Elaine heard the cat's name, she knew this was meant to be. The cat is called...Mystery.*

"Can you kill someone with a wine bottle?" I asked my friend Katie. "Full or empty?" she said. Every mystery writer needs a friend like Katie. She's a pathologist, and helps keep my new Dead-End Job series dead-on accurate.

My novels are funny, but my forensic research is serious. Books and articles date

quickly. For the latest forensic information, I get by with a little help from my friends. I consult homicide detectives, pathologists, and federal agents. Of course, I need to know what they're saying. That's why I took the death investigators course at St. Louis University. My goal was not to barf when I looked at autopsy photos for a week.

Each Dead-End Job novel brings a new forensic problem. For *Shop till You Drop*, I solved a murder using feline DNA. I learned how to get a DNA sample from a six-toed cat with an extra complement of claws. You need a Q-Tip and a peacock feather, but you have to read the book to see how it's done. For *Murder Between the Covers*, Katie gave me the gory details about bleeding after death. For *Dying to Call You*, due out in October, I researched the lethal side of household products. Now I'm too scared to clean house. (OK, it's a good excuse.)ff

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## Kris Neri

*While Kris Neri toiled for ages in the movie biz, researching the lunacy that she uses to write her Tracy Eaton mysteries, never once did she experience a "wardrobe malfunction." Far more common were the highly vocal demands she received that she keep her clothes on.*

Facts? Scientific facts? We don't need no stinkin' facts!

Well, I wouldn't go that far. Actually, forensic elements have sometimes played vital roles in my writings. But rather than sift through all the truths, near-truths and nowhere-near-truths out there on the web, I go straight to reliable sources. When I needed accurate information on a sniper shooting for *Revenge of the Gypsy Queen*, a friend's police officer husband came through for me.

## Femmes FATALES

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Sometimes, though, the source comes to me and ends up shaping my plot. Once I heard a criminalist speak, and while I found her talk interesting, little related to my writing. Until she made an off-the-cuff remark about killers only cleaning up the obvious places and leaving loads of evidence where they didn't happen to look. That became an important clue in *Dem Bones' Revenge*.

But while the scientific elements sometimes function as more critical turning points in my urban cozies than readers might believe, profiling will never have a place. My goal is to make every character—from the leads, to the suspects, to the walk-ons—unique and unrepeatably. The characters populating my writings are lively creatures who defy every attempt to categorize them, and who simply refuse to fit any pattern or further any stereotype. They surprise everyone, including me.

Profiles? We don't need no stinkin' profiles!ff

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## Meg Chittenden

*Meg often sets books in places she's always wanted to visit, so she can use the important-sounding excuse of needing to do research. Searching for stories has taken her to major capitals of the world, including Tokyo, Paris, London, Edinburgh, New York, Boston, San Francisco, and places such as old Quebec City, Cape Cod, the Cornish coast, Stratford-on-Avon, and Monterey/Carmel.*

I spend hours, days, weeks, tracking down information in books, magazines, newspapers. I also talk to librarians, police officers, judges, medical examiners, crime lab specialists. I've taken a citizens' police academy course, gone on ride-alongs with cops, and I've learned to shoot. A friendly forensic anthropologist advised me on what happens to dead bodies. I travel to the places I write about, photographing, checking out the scenery, the flora and fauna, the restaurants—buying postcards and maps, figuring out mileage. When my Charlie Plato series focused on a country western tavern, I took line dancing lessons and wore a cowboy hat. For my Pacific Northwest mysteries, I had help from an FBI agent and my

local police department, and I walked the Seattle setting for *More Than You Know*. Same for the Port Townsend setting that my fictional Port Findlay is based on in *Snap Shot*.

I e-mail my doctor with medical questions. I've called up the local vet. I even took a self-defense course so I could write about one. I broke five ribs finding out what it was like to ski. I travel the internet looking for information I can't find elsewhere, but then I check it out with any expert I can find. I probably still make mistakes, but I don't worry about them!ff

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## Toni L.P. Kelner

*As the mother of two little girls, and a frequent hostess to their friends, Toni has had to learn the difference between fibs, exaggerations, mistakes, forgetfulness, and out-and-out lies. Knowing these distinctions comes in awfully handy in her writing, which she describes as being a "professional liar."*

I'm a professional liar. That's what a fiction writer is, somebody who tells stories that didn't happen. But don't think I get off easy. Lying is hard work. You can't just tell any crazy tale, not if you want people to believe you. You want something that could have happened, and the best way to make sure nobody calls you out on pesky facts and physical laws is to keep your lies simple. So that's how I write my mysteries.

When I wrote about killing somebody with a blunt instrument in *Down Home Murder*, I didn't describe the depth of the wound or how much blood there was or what part of the skull was impacted. I just said he was hit on the head. And when I have somebody shot dead in *Wed and Buried*, I don't say exactly where the bullet hit or what the caliber of the weapon was or detail the angle of the wound. When the details don't matter to my stories, I emulate all good liars and leave them out.

The fewer details I put in, the fewer chances there are for me to make mistakes, which makes it that much more likely that people will believe in the story. After all, what's the point of being a professional liar if nobody believes me?ff

## Julie Wray Herman

*Julie Wray Herman, relaxing after the release of the long-awaited Three Dirty Women and the Shady Acres, has spent much of her spring in the garden, researching where to put the body in her next book. She also reports a trip to Scotland last summer inspired some intriguing thoughts for a new series.*

Way back when, in my Senior History class, I was singled out for an unexpected contribution to our discussion of a historical crime. I was not really that knowledgeable, nor did I sit in the library and research the subject for days on end in order to make this marvelous contribution. I just happened to have finished a well-written mystery novel that contained details about the crime.

Fortunately for me, the author had done her research. Had she not, I would have had egg on my face instead of a check-plus on my grade for the day.

Enter Three Dirty Women Landscaping, Inc., an endeavor in which two of my dreams came true. In one book I became a published author and the ‘owner’ of a successful landscaping business, all without even having to pick up a shovel. Perfect!

Except—the publisher wanted the book set in the southeast. I am a Texas Master Gardener. How do you landscape (even pretend-landscape) an area in which you’ve never gardened?

Research of course—which forced me to use a ‘shovel’ after all, turning over information gathered over the telephone, from the library, and pulled off the internet. I have been fortunate indeed to find police officers, forensic experts, medical personnel, as well as gardeners who generously shared their knowledge to help a writer get it right.*ff*

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## Charlaine Harris

*As the mother of three teenagers, Charlaine Harris wonders how she manages to chew gum and walk at the same time, much less write books. “I guess I need to write to save what’s left of my sanity,” she says. “At least the words on the page are under my control.” No Ouija board, Charlaine?*

I have two separate reactions to Marlys’ question.

(1) The overwhelming publicity surrounding high-profile crimes convicts the suspect before the trial is even held. What happened to presumption of innocence? At the same time, it’s statistically true that a victim is most often killed by the person closest to her. (Incidentally, the selectiveness of the media attention makes me ill. For every Laci Peterson, there are probably twenty pregnant women of color who vanish with no fanfare whatsoever. There’s no huge search effort on their behalf, no media coverage. I’m glad poor Laci is so widely mourned; I’m sorry every murdered woman doesn’t get the same attention. Enough of my personal soapbox.)

(2) In my books, I don’t use a lot of forensics, but I do use the modern fascination with forensics. For example, Sookie Stackhouse often thinks of details she’s learned from The Discovery Channel when she is trying to decipher a crime scene. I don’t use profiling at all; but the identity of the murderer has to make sense to me, and I try to plant fair clues through the book about the state of mind of the person who turns out to be the killer. I do believe you have to psychologically justify the crime, and also make sure it’s physically possible for your fictional suspect to have committed the murder.*ff*

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## Mary Saums

*Mary recently researched an exotic and hitherto unknown (to her, at least) field of study: cooking. The result is in A Second Helping of Murder, a collection of concoctions by mystery authors. Research for her work-in-progress is taking her into more unexplored territory—assault weapons and everyday ghost activities.*

I don’t do police procedurals. My stomach gets too fluttery to write autopsies, so coroner books are out. I don’t have a clue about courtrooms, spies, or the latest ways the military can toast somebody. Mine are traditional mysteries, with emphasis on characters and a puzzle’s solution, using a minimum of blood, guts, or Clancy-esque factoid tutorials.

So I shouldn’t have to research anything, right? Nope. Like Willi Taft, my series protagonist, I’m female, Southern, and

worked in the music business, so writing those aspects of her stories are a cinch. It’s that other stuff that causes problems.

In *The Valley of Jewels*, a Civil War professor is murdered, and there’s a back story set during the War, related through fictional diaries. That required extensive library stints. As Willi goes from recording sessions to private eye work, she has to know what PIs can do. Her business partner is a retired policeman, so she relies on him for procedural information. Which means I have to make occasional phone calls to local pros in the field. I do search the Web, mostly for weird details, like do they have Putt-Putt in the UK? Otherwise, police procedure and CSI techniques happen off-stage, with a minimum of discussion. Willi’s investigations move around the murder, a circuit that leads her to the killer without benefit of forensic evidence.*ff*

## We’ve Got Winners!

**Donna Andrews** racked up several award nominations for *Crouching Buzzard, Leaping Loon*: the Dilys, the Agatha, and the Lefty for Best Humorous Novel. Donna won the Toby Bromberg Award for Excellence from *Romantic Times BOOKclub* for the Most Humorous Mystery of 2003.

**Meg Chittenden** won the Otter, presented for the Best Mystery Novel set in the geographical area covered by Left Coast Crime.

**Toni L.P. Kelner** won the *Romantic Times BOOKclub* Career Achievement Award for Mystery Series.

**Elaine Viets** was nominated for the Lefty for *Shop till You Drop*. She’s also been nominated for a jaw-dropping three Agathas this year: Best Novel for *Shop till You Drop*, Best Short Story for “Red Meat” from *Blood On Their Hands*, and Best Short Story for “Sex and Bingo” from *High Stakes*. Both collections are from Berkley Prime Crime.*ff*

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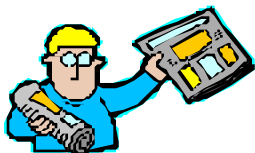
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## News from the Femmes Fatales

In addition to *We'll Always Have Parrots*, **Donna Andrews** has Meg Langslow short stories in two spring anthologies: *Chesapeake Crimes* (Quiet Storm), and *Death Dines In* (Berkley). *Access Denied*, the third Turing Hopper book, is currently scheduled to appear this fall. For more information, see [www.donnaandrews.com](http://www.donnaandrews.com).



**Elaine Viets** hopes to see you in New York City this spring. She's a panelist at the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Symposium, April 28. She'll also be at Malice Domestic April 30 to May 2 in Washington, D.C.



**Kris Neri's** latest publications have been some wacky, fun short stories: "Nothing Good Ever Came of a Bad Hair Day," appears in *Who Died In Here?* (Penury Press), whose stories are all set in bathrooms; "No Star Murder," includes a recipe and is published in *Criminal Appetites* (Silver Dagger); and "Murder, 90201," a Tracy Eaton story in *Blondes In Trouble* (Intrigue Press).



Watch for **Meg Chittenden's** thirty-sixth book, *Snap Shot*, in September. Last year's *More Than You Know* appeared on the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association bestseller list, and was picked

up by the Mystery Guild, Doubleday, and Doubleday Rhapsody book clubs. Meg's favorite review concluded: "Characters so real, you can almost hear them breathing." Meg's working on a new book that just may include a little woo-woo. Visit Meg at [www.megchittenden.com](http://www.megchittenden.com).



While she researches her new series **Toni L.P. Kelner** has been writing shorter pieces. "Lying-in-the-Road Death" was published in *Undertow* (Level Best Books), and "Blame It On The Brownies" is in *Criminal Appetites* (Silver Dagger). She also has a recipe in the mystery cookbook *A Second Helping of Murder*. Next on her docket are stories featuring Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper.

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**Julie Wray Herman** will be signing at libraries and bookstores in northern Illinois this coming June. She will also attend mystery conferences Malice Domestic and Mayhem in the Midlands. In between, she will be speaking to local book groups and garden clubs, and finishing up her next book.



**Charlaine Harris** is busy signing her May book, *Dead to the World*. The popular Sookie Stackhouse books have sold to England, Spain, Greece, and Japan. She's hard at work on Sookie 5, and running out of titles including "Dead." Her fall publications will include a short story in a Dana Stabenow anthology and a novella, "Dancers in the Dark," in Harlequin's Halloween three-in-one.



**Mary Saums'** new book, *When the Last Magnolia Weeps*, came out in March. Willi Taft attends a Celtic Christmas concert, after which a genial old priest is murdered. When a friend in the band becomes a suspect, Willi investigates. Those doggone musicians—nothing but troublemakers and devils. Or will Willi find an angel among them? Mary is on the web at [www.MarySaums.com](http://www.MarySaums.com).