

# Femmes FATALES

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## Killing Time

by Donna Andrews



Her living room is spotless. Her closets would pass a white glove inspection. She's caught up on e-mail, thank you cards, and ironing. She's weeded her garden, alphabetized her spices, and finished Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. In the original French. Is she Superwoman? Channeling Martha Stewart? No, just a writer on deadline.

We all write mysteries voluntarily, and we all know how precious writing time is. So why do we spend so much of it cleaning our desks and trying for a new personal best in Solitaire?

Beats me. Even though I know better, I practice all the usual procrastinations. E-mail. Cleaning. Surfing the web and pretending it's research. And computer games. Though I have a rule: no games

till my quota's done. When you've finally finished a tough chapter, there's nothing like conquering the world in Civilization III.

But my favorite procrastination is gardening. If you have a yard, you're never at a loss for something to do. And better yet, none of it's life or death—what doesn't get done this year you can always try again the next.

So now I've come clean. Fellow Femmes Fatales, it's your turn. For once, instead of smiling and telling other writers how easily we overcome procrastination, it's confession time. What do you do when you should be writing?ff

*Donna Andrews enjoys the fringe benefits of writing. Like researching Owl's Well That Ends Well (St. Martin's, April 2005), in which her heroine organizes a two-acre, multifamily yard sale—you can't write about one without attending a few dozen, can you? And she's still basking in the afterglow of knocking off a spammer (only fictionally, alas) in Delete All Suspects (Berkley, Fall 2005).*

## Toni L.P. Kelner

*Toni insists that she waited until the very last moment to write and turn in her piece to make a point about procrastination. I think we all appreciate her devotion to scientific experimentation.*

Everyone knows procrastination is bad. We're warned to never put off until tomorrow what you can do today. The problem is, I can't always tell when I'm procrastinating.

When I play a computer game before starting to write, am I stalling? Or am I clearing my brain of distractions? If I read my e-mail, am I avoiding work or investigating new markets? If I decide to clean my desk first, isn't that a better work environment? (Okay, the last one was definitely procrastinating.)

Much of a writer's work is internal, and doesn't have to be done at the keyboard. I've noodled over plots while washing dishes, worked out a fight scene while driving, and composed dialog while mating socks. If I'd been sitting at the computer, pounding the keys before I was

ready, I don't think the inspiration would have been there.

The late Elizabeth Daniels Squire said that when she was stuck on a book, she'd take a nap. While she slept, her subconscious went to work. When she woke up, she had the answer and the energy to implement it.

In the case of this article, I decided what I wanted to say while I was in the shower two days ago. Of course, the fact that I only sat down to write it at 10:00 the night of the deadline probably means I was procrastinating a little. ff

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## Kris Neri

*Kris and her husband have just opened their new, general interest bookstore, The Well Red Coyote: Books on the Rocks, in the breathtaking red rock country of Sedona, Arizona. When she's not shelving copies of her friends' books, she awaits the fall release of her new suspense novel, Never Say Die, featuring triathlete Zoey Morgan.*

*Readers can follow her varied exploits on both [www.wellredcoyote.com](http://www.wellredcoyote.com) and [www.krisneri.com](http://www.krisneri.com).*

It has been said that writers often prefer having written, to writing. True? We do sometimes bring more creativity to avoidance than to the writing itself. Why will we do anything to escape the unblinking glare of that blank screen? Let's look at my writing today, as I address the description of Samantha Brennan, the protagonist of a new series.

But first, there's something I have to do. Not avoiding, you understand. Just clearing a task away. "Where is that Scotch tape?" I wonder as I grab a flattened piece of cardboard from a tall stack and build a box. What am I doing? I need to write now. Let's see...

Samantha. Here's how she describes herself when she notices her reflection: "What a sight I was! Long blonde hair curling wildly in every direction, crowned by a wreath of battered silk flowers held together with Christmas garland. Makeup by Crayola. And my dress? Half Renaissance ball gown in screaming blue

satin, half soothsayer garb with organdy layers, half jester suit. Too many halves, I know, but it was quite a dress.”

That’s Samantha. But how’s the expression? Good or awful? Maybe that’s the problem—we never know. It all feels so much alike. Pressure builds. I have to fill that box. Tape it shut. Move on to the next. Oh, wait! I’m not procrastinating, I’m moving.*ff*

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## Elaine Viets

*Elaine survived four hurricanes this fall. Now the Floridian is ready for a whirlwind tour. Her new novella, “Killer Blonde” is in the Signet anthology Drop-Dead Blonde. Set in the ‘70s, it features a young Margery Flax. In May, Elaine’s fourth Dead-End Job mystery hits the stores. In Just Murdered, Elaine kills the mother of the bride, something nearly everyone wants to do.*

If life is high school, a procrastinator is trapped in a perpetual night before the term paper is due. It’s always midnight. I live on nerves, tea and chocolate, typing against the clock. I hate it. I love it. I can’t break the cycle because I’ve procrastinated on so many other projects, I’m too far behind to start fresh.

The world seems so interesting—especially when I have a deadline—that I have to stop and explore. I’m not wasting time. I can always use it in a book.

Procrastination is not about being slow. It’s about the rush. I’m addicted. I love the secret thrill of racing a deadline down to the last minute. E-mail is my enabler. Before the Internet, I cleaned house to avoid work. E-mail is better. It won’t give me dishpan hands. I can check it every five minutes. This not only makes me feel I’m doing something useful, it

leads to further procrastination—other procrastinators send me weird web sites.

I was fighting to finish an outline when an author wrapping up her novel told me about [www.subservientchicken.com](http://www.subservientchicken.com), a site featuring a guy in a chicken suit who follows your commands. I spent hours telling that chicken to hop, skip and jump. It never hesitated. It seemed symbolic, somehow. Only chickens do it right away. Waiting takes guts.*ff*

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## Marlys Millhiser

*Marlys lost an elderly, ornery, obese, beloved chum last fall. But she’s found a new pal. A miserable, forlorn waif until she stepped into the house, Buffy had the Millhisers trained in under a week. She came litter savvy and able to destroy a morning’s work with a dash or two across the computer keyboard. What more could a lonesome writer ask for?*

Three weeks ago, I jotted down a few ideas in response to Donna’s question, but was called away by the doorbell and the cat. I opened the door and the cat got out. I raced after her, yelling at the man with the clipboard at my door and the world at large that the fleeing feline was newly adopted from the shelter, a stray who’d apparently run off before. Soon, I had half the neighborhood calling “kitty, kitty” and, you know, I had no idea there were that many cats in a three-block area.

Then I remembered the guy with the clipboard. What if he slipped in and grabbed manuscripts and my laptop? So I ran back, leaving my neighbors shin high in squirmy adoring cat fur. My new cat sat in front of the door eyeing me with misgiving, as have my neighbors ever since.

I started looking for the notes I’d made before the cat ruckus when I thought, what if the clipboard guy had stolen my laptop and learned all about my finances, and interests, and half-started manuscripts, and letters of excuse because a book or story would be late. Sounded like a story about blackmail. Unfortunately I never did find the notes for Donna’s question and the deadline is up, so...*ff*

## Dana Cameron

*Dana’s preferred method of procrastination involves hiding out in library stacks and reading 18th-century diaries. This ingenious combination delayed many academic papers, but also lead her to write A Fugitive Truth, her fourth Emma Fielding mystery. (Emma seldom procrastinates.) As a New Englander, Dana would feel pretty smug about handing in this essay early, but she put off something else to do it.*

The very idea that writers procrastinate makes my blood boil; in fact, it took me forever to wrap my head around the notion. We don’t have the luxury of wasting time, I told John as he made my “No-Fun Mocha” (the folks at Atomic Café actually named it for me, knowing I don’t even have time to deal with caffeine). Writing one book, editing another, and promoting a third leaves zero time, so procrastination is just a sign of weak character. That’s what I e-mailed to my friend Beth, anyway.

You hear about writers finding endless ways to put off work, but why bother? Eventually, you’re going to have to make those hard choices, go to the scary emotional places, or realize that what you’re so reluctant to write doesn’t work in your story anyway. You might as well suck it up and get down to it. It’s all about discipline. For me, a quick twenty or thirty games of solitaire invokes a Zen-like calm and gets the creative juices flowing.

By procrastinating, you rob yourself of time to experiment or improve your writing, things writers claim to want most. So I’m off to the dojo. Getting beat up isn’t exactly fun, but it clears my head and it’s research, after all. I’ll finish later, when I can face this arrant nonsense about writers putting things off.*ff*

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## Mary Saums

*Mary says she flip-flops between being an extremely productive writer and a world-class procrastinator. She keeps a sign on her computer that says “Do It Now!” on one side, and “Why Do Today What Could Easily and More Sensibly Be Put Off Until Tomorrow?” on the other. A little crazy? “Being of two minds,” she reasons, “gives you someone to talk to.”*

### Femmes FATALES

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Writing is fun. It's such a joy to get lost in a story with characters you like. My people, villains included, are fairly decent folk, right up until the end when there's no doubt the bad guy is actually scum. Otherwise, I'd avoid them and my computer desk when I need to write.

Why, then, do I sometimes avoid that desk? It sits expectantly when I enter the room. I ignore it. I do not make eye contact. Oh, yes, my desk has eyes. I'm not sure where they are, but I feel them on me nonetheless. It knows I'm not meticulously waxing shoelaces because they need it, but because it delays what I dread: starting to write.

It's hard to sit down and push a day's distractions from my mind. To accomplish this, I've found two universal truths which have helped me when other advice failed.

Truth #1: Housework Is Eternal. There's always one more thing to do, then another, so I make writing the first job of the day. Write first, vacuum later.

Truth #2: Chocolate Cures Everything. When the desk intimidates, I throw a handful of Hershey's Miniatures on it as I run by. My need for chocolate soon overcomes my desk phobia. Once seated, everything falls into place. The computer screen glows and I'm no longer avoiding, I'm doing.*ff*

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## Charlaine Harris

*With her crowded schedule, Charlaine Harris has hardly had time to take a breath. This year, she'll publish two books and a short story, attend four conventions, undertake a countrywide tour in May, and (last, but not least) attend her son's high school graduation. Her relaxation? Reading, naturally. Charlaine reads both mysteries and science fiction, with a light dusting of romance.*

How do I waste time? Let me count the ways...

No matter how much fun I have writing, there's a lazy part of me that wants to think of a reason, any reason, not to work. Some of those reasons are even valid. There's always laundry. Everyone needs clean clothes, right? And there's e-mail to answer, even if every message isn't entirely necessary.

Fiddling around on Amazon can take up an amazing amount of time. What if another crossover writer has a new book? Shouldn't I order it quickly? To get that shipping discount, I should probably find another book to order. Maybe I should just make a list of books I want.

I should call my mother, too. After all, I haven't talked to her in two days. That reminds me that I have to make some other phone calls, one to my daughter's basketball coach and another to the dishwasher repairman. Maybe I should make a list of phone calls?

While I'm thinking about it, I'm out of Kleenex, pencils, and fruit juice, so I need to start a grocery list.

There goes the buzzer on the dryer, so I need to start ANOTHER load of laundry...and probably, while I was making lists, I got a few more e-mails. Yippee!*ff*

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## Julie Wray Herman

*When not riding herd on her family and assorted animals, or running the local Pony Club, Julie Wray Herman writes the Three Dirty Women landscaping mystery series. Julie is very grateful to her friends, Sue and Becky, for deciding it would be easier to let Julie write the books using the Three Dirty Women name than to actually form a real landscaping company. If they only knew.*

"You get that article for the Femmes done?" my husband asked me through the shower door at six AM.

"Almost done." I crossed my fingers behind my back. "It's due today."

Two hours later, I sat on the floor of the closet, surrounded by the contents of an old box of photos. "Article. Write the article." I set the pictures from my son's fifth birthday party aside.

By noon, I'd made it as far as the laundry room, where the siren song of unpaired socks had lured me from my task.

Four PM. After coming to my senses in the laundry room, I'd heard the sound

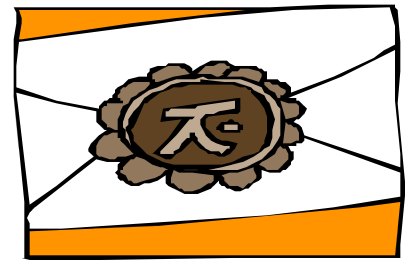
of thundering hooves outside. One of the horses had pulled down the electric fence. All four of them galloped around like mad things. In the mud. My mental vet bill tally rocketed upward as hooves flew.

Seven PM. I'd caught the horses, reset the fence, and showered. I pulled on my favorite T-shirt from the Newseum in Washington, hoping I could type fast enough to get that article in on time.

My husband walked in and took in my wet hair. "Didn't we have dinner plans?" The sweet man's voice held more resignation than anger. I gave him a hug. He'd seen the answer to his question emblazoned on my T-shirt.

"Not tonight, dear, I have a deadline."*ff*

## And the winners are...



Kris Neri's story, "The Ultimate Race," won the Judge's Choice Award from Ebookson the.net for their 2005 Race Is On contest.

Donna Andrews' *We'll Always Have Parrots* tied for the Lefty for Best Humorous Mystery of 2004 and has been nominated for the Agatha Award for Best Novel.

Elaine Viets has scooped up another Agatha nomination for her story "Wedding Knife" in *Chesapeake Crimes*, edited by fellow Femme Donna Andrews.

Charlaine Harris' *Dead to the World* won an Honorable Mention in the Pearl Awards (Paranormal Excellence Award for Romantic Literature) and has been nominated for a Sapphire, given by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers for excellence in science fiction/romance.*ff*

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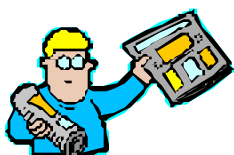
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## News from the Femmes Fatales

**Donna Andrews** will serve as toastmaster for the sixth annual Mayhem in the Midlands convention in Omaha in May. Peter Robinson is the guest of honor this year, and attendance is capped at 200, so fans of Meg Langslow, Turing Hopper, and Inspector Alan Banks should register early! See [www.omaha.lib.ne.us/mayhem](http://www.omaha.lib.ne.us/mayhem) or [www.donnaandrews.com](http://www.donnaandrews.com).



**Toni L.P. Kelner** has hit the big time. At least, big print. *Wed and Buried* was recently released in a large print edition, with *Down Home Murder* to follow later this year. So as not to neglect the smaller things in life, Kelner also recently published a short story in the anthology *Riptide* from Level Best Books. Visit her online at [www.tonilpkelner.com](http://www.tonilpkelner.com).



In addition to being a mystery novelist, short story writer and writing instructor, **Kris Neri** has now added "bookseller" to her list of book-related occupations. It's a good thing she likes wearing hats. Check them all out at [www.krisneri.com](http://www.krisneri.com).



**Elaine Viets** is honored to be nominated for an Agatha for her short story "Wedding Knife." If you've ever had to wear an ugly bridesmaid dress, you'll appreciate this story. The Agathas will be awarded at Malice Domestic in Washington, DC in May, and Elaine hopes to see you there.*ff*

**Marlys Millhiser's** short story, "Had He But Known," is out in Berkley's *Creature Cozies*. An obese cat named Madam keeps the rats and drunks under control at an old-time Boulder saloon from her perch on a back shelf. Madam's so tough she chews match sticks and spits out splinters at patrons and even takes on a bank robber.



**Dana Cameron's** fifth Emma Fielding archaeology mystery, *More Bitter Than Death*, will be out in June 2005. Besides working on book six, Dana will be attending Malice Domestic, Mayhem in the Midlands, Deadly Ink, Bouchercon, and the New England Crimebake; occasionally she wonders why she thought field archaeology was demanding. Learn more about Dana and her many bad habits at [www.danacameron.com](http://www.danacameron.com).

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**Mary Saums** had a great time at Left Coast Crime this February in El Paso. This spring, she'll attend the Southern Kentucky Festival of the Book in Bowling Green and Malice Domestic in Washington, D.C., and she continues to promote her latest book, *When The Last Magnolia Weeps* across the South. Visit her at [www.marysaums.com](http://www.marysaums.com).



Sookie Stackhouse, everyone's favorite telepathic barmaid, is **Charlaine Harris's** main focus during the first half of 2005, as *Dead as a Doornail* comes out. October will see the debut of her series about Harper Connelly, a lightning strike survivor with a strange gift, in *Grave Sight*. P.N. Elrod's anthology *My Big Fat Supernatural Wedding* will feature an original short story by Charlaine. "Dancers in the Dark," Charlaine's first novella, is included in *Night's Edge*, which recently won *Romance Reviews Today's* Best Book of the Year award in the Anthology division.



**Julie Wray Herman's** first book, *Three Dirty Women and the Garden of Death* will be rereleased in December as a mass market paperback from Worldwide. Look for it in bookstores near you. She is hard at work on various projects, including the next Dirty Women book. Last seen at Left Coast Crime in El Paso, Julie will surface again at ConMisterio in Austin in July.*ff*