

# Femmes FATALES

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## Do You Woo-Woo? I Do.

by Julie Wray Herman

Stories with a hint of the supernatural are big hits these days. I like to think of my early fascination with spooky stories as being ahead of my time.

When I walked to school each morning during grade school, I'd cut through an old unpaved alleyway that had all but disappeared under a canopy of large oaks and horse apple trees. There were a quartet of shotgun houses leaning against one another for support along the north side of the alley. Every single morning an old wizened woman in a gingham apron stood on the front porch of the first house I passed. She leaned on an old twig broom, never moving a muscle except to turn her head to watch me pick my way along the dirt path. I studiously avoided looking directly at her. To this day, I remain convinced



that if I had approached her, she would have disappeared into thin air.

My dad would have accused me of giving in to an overactive imagination. I must admit that I haven't outgrown this tendency. I left a room high in a

Scottish castle rather suddenly just a few years ago. The atmosphere drove me down that winding staircase in record time. While it probably was all in my mind, the feeling that something terrifying happened in that room was overwhelming.

May your imagination know no limitations. Off you go into the Land of Wonder—Happy Reading from the Femmes Fatales.

*Julie lives on a small organic farm outside Houston, Texas. She indulges in writing; costume design; and volunteering for public schools, conservation groups, and the United States Pony Club. When she has time, she can be found relieving stress by yanking weeds from her flower beds. ff*

## Charlaine Harris

*In the spring, a parent's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of softball, to paraphrase Tennyson. Charlaine spends the warmer months watching her daughter play for various teams. She has been frozen, sunburned, wind-blown, rain-drenched, and hailed upon in her support of her daughter's softball career. In between games, she writes a little. She's working on the next Sookie Stackhouse at the moment.*

Thinking about Julie's introductory story about the frightening old lady, I'm reminded of a bit of commonly held wisdom that says children and animals can see ghosts much more readily than adults can. I'm certainly willing to credit that belief. I'm a writer and reader of woo-woo, and I see books with supernatural elements as our attempt to recapture the feeling of wonder we had as children when we read (or were read) fairy tales.

After years of writing conventional mysteries, I made the leap to writing woo-woo because I wanted to feel again

that scalp-tingling sensation that tells you you're facing something inexplicable by ordinary means, that goose-bumpy thrill that warns you the world is not what you think it is.

But instead of writing a Stephen King-like horror novel, a streak of perversity turned me toward the humorous, and instead of being really frightening, at least half my paranormal books are supposed to be funny.

The Sookie Stackhouse books have their grim and tense moments, but they also contain a big dollop of amusement. Harper Connelly, my lightning-struck corpse finder, has a much more serious life—and she doesn't let you forget that. But both women are believers in the supernatural.

What do I believe? I'm on the fence. But if I saw Julie's frightening old lady, I wouldn't at all be surprised if she vanished in a puff of smoke. ff



## Toni L.P. Kelner

*Toni tends to be skeptical of the supernatural, but never questioned her grandmother's prophetic dreams. She says, "Grandmama would dream of seeing a family member's body in a casket. That person would die soon thereafter. One time she didn't see a person, just kind of a blur. A week later, my sister miscarried. It would have been disrespectful to attack those experiences logically."*

One of the traditions at my daughter Valerie's school is to set leprechaun traps on St. Patrick's Day. While the traps never quite succeed, the leprechaun usually loses a chocolate coin or two in each trap. This year, Valerie built a tempting landscape with gold coins sparkling in a bed of Easter grass, and a cottage booby-trapped with tape. Unfortunately, she was sick on St. Patrick's Day, and never got to take in her trap. Amazingly, a leprechaun came to our house and though he managed to get out of the tape, he left a tiny note and two gold dollar coins.

I don't know if Valerie really believes in leprechauns or not. But she **wants** to believe. She wants there to be magic in this world. She just needs a little help, and if writing a note with green ink helps her believe, it's time well spent.

That's how I see urban fantasy (the current marketing label for woo-woo). I don't seriously believe that there are vampires living among us, but it's fun to pretend, if only for a few moments, that there's something else out there.

But just as Valerie needs gold coins to boost her belief, readers need a touch of reality to make the supernatural easier to accept. For example, in "How Stella Got Her Grave Back," I tackled the legend of vampires being able to enthrall humans with their gaze. My newbie vampire Mark can't enthrall a fly, let alone a person, because it made sense that even a vampire would have to practice something like that. And if older folks tend to drive more slowly, just think how methodically and carefully a vampire would drive?

Those details are just like coins in a leprechaun trap, helping readers believe.*ff*

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## Kris Neri

*Living and writing in the vortex of Sedona, Arizona, the Vatican City of the New Age, Kris Neri is no stranger to things that go bump in the night. Fortunately, it's usually just her cat knocking books off shelves.*

I explore the paranormal through the unlikely pairing of Samantha Brennan—fake medium, scam psychic, and bogus spiritual advisor to the stars in Los Angeles—and Annabelle Haggerty—straight-laced FBI agent and Celtic goddess. Though they clash like plaids and prints, the universe has fated Samantha and Annabelle to work together. That means I get to explore Annabelle's mysterious world through Samantha's awestruck eyes.

## Femmes FATALES

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All writing is fun, but nothing has been as enjoyable for me as creating Annabelle's realm. Though Samantha insists she "wouldn't know the difference between a supernatural vision and an enema," together we've learned that Annabelle's band of school yard irregulars aren't kids, but leprechauns; that it's banshees, not cops, who patrol L.A.'s parks; and that some of the cloying lounge singers who entertain us aren't merely lousy performers, but bad-behaving gods. Through Annabelle, I get to scheme with dolphins, instead of just wistfully watching them from the shore. I even get to talk to the dead, some of whom, I've learned, become remarkably chatty after they pass over.

Because mysteries must test characters, though, I've also discovered that things can't be easy for supernatural beings. The bad guys they face must challenge even their powers, and there's always a price for using magic.

Hmmm... Despite its advantages, their world sounds as tough as ours. Makes you wonder why I so wish it were real.*ff*

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## Donna Andrews

*You'd think woo-woo would come naturally to Donna Andrews—she read widely in fantasy as a child, and her first (as yet unpublished) novel featured a narrator who, thanks to a wayward curse, had been enchanted into the form of a large, brown venomous snake. But alas! Her first attempt to combine her two favorite genres—fantasy and mystery—hit an unexpected snag.*

Do I woo-woo? Yeah, but I'm not sure Meg Langslow does.

Meg's only close encounter of the supernatural kind was in the story "Night Shades" (in *Chesapeake Crimes I*), where she solves an aunt's murder at the request of the aunt's ghost. I planned it as homage to Helen Chappell's wonderful series in which reporter Hollis Ball solves mysteries with help from her ex-husband's ghost. But several early readers insisted Meg was too sensible and down-to-earth to see ghosts.

Maybe they were right. But I loved the story idea. What to do? I poured three strong margaritas into Meg at the beginning of the story, and suddenly no one doubted that she could see ghosts.

But I still have this yen to play with things that go bump in the night. So a character who was supposed to be a walk-on in *The Penguin Who Knew Too Much* is returning for an encore in *Six Geese a-Slaying*: Dr. Smoot, probably doomed to remain Caerphilly County's acting medical examiner indefinitely, since there is "no way the chief or the town council would offer a permanent appointment to a medical examiner who, in addition to determining the manner and means of death, would occasionally venture an opinion on the likelihood of the deceased's return as a ghost, vampire, or zombie."

I'm having fun with Smoot.*ff*

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## Elaine Viets

*Murder with Reservations, Elaine sixth Dead-End Job mystery featuring Helen Hawthorne, will be published in paperback from Obsidian in May. For this book, Helen and Elaine worked as hotel maids. Elaine is grateful to her readers, her sister Femmes Fatales and the many members of the mystery community who helped when she was sick last April. Thank you all.*

My Southern grandmother said she was psychic. But for Grandma, this was no gift. She thought it was a curse to know the future. Grandma could tell when someone was going to die because they appeared in her dreams surrounded by a dark ring. She swore me to secrecy because she was afraid her gift meant she was crazy. Grandma was relieved that I had no psychic ability.

Grandma has been gone almost forty years, and I still miss her. The night she died, she appeared in my dreams, telling me to take the begonias she kept in the basement. I kept them for some thirty years, until they died of old age.

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## The Femmes Win—So Can You!

**Dana Cameron** won the 2007 Anthony Award for Best Paperback Original at Bouchercon.

Malice Domestic brings several accolades to the Femmes. Not only is **Charlaine Harris** the Guest of Honor, but both **Donna Andrews** and **Elaine Viets** have been nominated for the Agatha for Best Novel. **Donna** is also up for the Agatha for Best Short Story.

**Charlaine** will also be lauded at the Romantic Times Booklovers Convention. She's been nominated for Reviewers' Choice Awards for Best Amateur Sleuth Novel and Best Urban Fantasy Protagonist, and Career Achievement Awards for



Urban Fantasy and Mystery Series.

**Mary Saums** is a finalist in the 2008 SIBA Book Awards, given by the members of the Southeastern Independent Booksellers Association.

For **your** chance to win, be sure to keep up to date with the Femmes Fatales' blog. Some time after Malice Domestic, the Femmes will be announcing a new contest! We're keeping it all under wraps, but one thing we can tell you, there will be a great Grand Prize of books and other fun treats! So keep in touch with the Femmes, and you may be a big winner, too.*ff*

I've only had one other "psychic" dream. My gray cat Montana was my writing partner for many mysteries. Monty was a big fellow, weighing nearly twelve pounds. He followed me around the house like a puppy and sat on my lap while I wrote.

One night, I dreamed that something was wrong with Monty. In the dream, his body was surrounded by a gray cloud. I tried to dismiss it, but I couldn't get rid of the feeling that something was wrong. Finally, I examined Monty carefully and saw that he had a pink tumor the size of quarter on his flank. I took Monty to the vet and the tumor was removed.

He lived several years after that dream.*ff*

### Dana Cameron

*Dana's recently become obsessed with the folklore of vampires in New England. There's actually good scientific and documentary evidence for the belief in them (note: not "the presence") in the 18th and 19th centuries. The story is a sad one, associated with the fear generated by tuberculosis outbreaks, but it makes for fascinating research for folklorists, archaeologists, and physical anthropologists.*

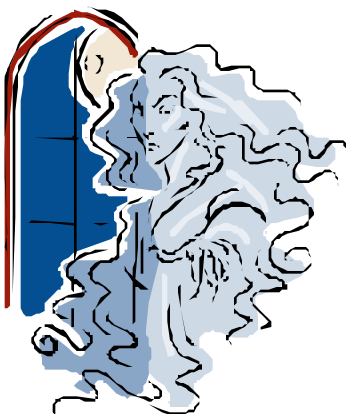
I've spent my share of time in cemeteries. I've handled human remains. I've crawled around in abandoned buildings and I know from secret staircases. I've lived in Salem, Mass.

These are things many people would consider conducive to encountering the supernatural, but I'm not what you'd call susceptible. In my first book, I wrote "being a scientist, I only believe in ghosts

for other people," a sentiment I pretty much share with my series protagonist. Despite tales of spooky and inexplicable things friends have encountered in their work across the four corners of the globe, it never occurred to me to write ghost stories or urban fantasy.

So why, when I was asked to contribute to *Wolfsbane* and *Mistletoe*, did a werewolf story come so easily?

It took me a while to figure out what you probably already know: writing supernatural fiction isn't that different from writing any other kind of story. Werewolves, vampires, and sorcerers are just characters with cultural constraints. They may not be cultures I've grown up with, and the characters may have different physical and psychic abilities, but we're telling human stories with inhuman characters. Those powers and constraints are there to help ask the questions every story—mystery, romance, fantasy, or slice-of-life—has to ask: "What's right? What would you do? What's possible?" There are just a few more options for character change when you're writing lycanthropes.*ff*



### Mary Saums

*Mary regrets she has never had a supernatural experience. Maybe that's why she sprinkles bits of woo-woo into her new Thistle & Twigg books. They're set near an old growth forest where anything can happen. Actually, there are just as many strange goings-on in Tullulah, the little town at the edge of the woods...*

My fondness for ghosts comes from narrowly missing one when I was a kid. I was about six when an ancient great-aunt died. On her last day alive, she lay on a bed at my grandparents' house, set up in the living room so visitors could talk to her, or watch her croak, as was the custom of the day. Mostly the latter, I imagine, since she was mean as a snake.

An army of womenfolk kept harassing me with, "Honey, can I get you some pie?" and the like, so I went outside. I was under a peach tree when the end came.

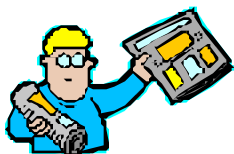
First there was a scream, then loud gasps and exclamations. All the kids outside stopped, looked at each other, and hit the kitchen door with arms and legs flailing and kicking. The womenfolk horde made us sit at the table, but an older cousin who came in from the living room for some fruit tea told us what happened. He said a funny light or cloud came in the window over her bed. Her eyes flew open, she screamed and said, "Get that mule outta my face!" She slumped dead and the cloud went away. Everybody agreed the Devil came to take her home for her meanness. She just mistook him for a mule due to her cataracts. Dang, I miss all the good stuff.*ff*

*Femmes*  
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## News from the Femmes Fatales

While **Julie Wray Herman** is graduating to Femmes Fatales Emerita status after this newsletter, she continues to pursue her overactive life, including writing. Her short story “Monstrosity” will appear in the 2009 American Crime Writer’s League anthology, *Murder Past, Murder Present*.



**Charlaine Harris’s** May tour is on her web site, so if you’d like to meet her and get your books signed, show up at one of the bookstores she’s visiting. Or attend I-Con or Malice Domestic in April. The television series *True Blood*, based on the Sookie books, will air sometime this year. The production’s been delayed by the (now over, thank God) writer’s strike.



**Toni L.P. Kelner’s** new “Where are they now?” mystery series debuted in January with *Without Mercy*. Just as exciting, she recently signed with Berkley Prime Crime to publish the paperback of *Without Mercy* and two more in the series. But before that comes about, *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe*, the Christmas werewolf anthology co-edited with Charlaine, will be released in October.



**Kris Neri’s** latest woo-woo story, “Hocus Pocus on Friday the 13th,” debuted in the anthology *Medium of Murder* from Red

Coyote Press. You’ll find more magic in “Showtime on the Winter Solstice,” as well as her award-winners and other favorites, in Kris’s short story collection, *The Rose in the Snow: Tales of Mischief and Mayhem*, due out in Summer 2008.



**Donna Andrews** has two Meg Langslow books coming out this year. In *Cockatiels at Seven* (July), Meg solves a murder while saddled with a wayward two-year-old. And in *Six Geese a-Slaying* (October), she’s been put in charge of the local Christmas parade. Donna also contributed a story,

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“Haire of the Beast,” to *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe*, Charlaine and Toni’s upcoming anthology.



**Elaine Viets’s** seventh Dead-End Job Mystery, *Clubbed to Death*, will be published in hardcover May 6. This time, Helen and Elaine worked in a country club whose motto should have been “Do you know who I am?” Elaine will tour ten cities for *Clubbed to Death*—from St. Louis to San Diego. Check out the dates and locations at her web site.



**Dana Cameron’s** sixth Emma Fielding mystery, *Ashes and Bones*, won the 2007 Anthony Award for Best Paperback Original at Bouchercon Anchorage. (Her story, “The Lords of Misrule,” was also nominated.) Her first foray into urban fantasy, “The Night Things Changed,” will appear in *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe* in October 2008. If you’re attending Malice Domestic, be sure to say “Hey!”



**Mary Saums** looks forward to seeing old friends and meeting new ones this year at Malice Domestic. She’s thrilled that her 2007 book, *Thistle & Twigg*, is now out in paperback. The second book in the series, *Mighty Old Bones*, comes out in May from St. Martin’s Minotaur. *ff*