

Femmes FATALES

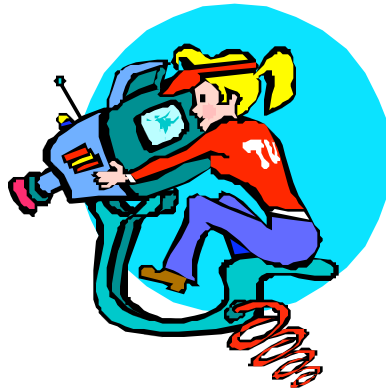
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Hooray for Hollywood!

by Toni L.P. Kelner

Each time I survive a season of Golden Globes and Oscars, it's hard not to dream of being part of the excitement of Hollywood. Since I'm not likely to suddenly develop acting or directing chops, I generally limit my daydreams to having a book or story adapted to the screen, which leads to a favorite game for writers and readers alike: imagining the perfect cast. Since we've seen choices range from the ridiculous (Whoopi Goldberg as Lawrence Block's gentleman thief Bernie Rhodenbarr in *Burglar*) to the sublime (Keira Knightley as Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride & Prejudice*), casting can be a risky proposition.



For one of the Femmes, this question has gone from being a late-night, sitting-at-the-bar discussion to a real prospect. Charlaine Harris's *Sookie Stackhouse* series is currently being

adapted for an HBO series pilot by Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under* and *American Beauty*). Can a Meg Langslow miniseries or Charlie Green movie be far behind?

So I put this question to the Femmes Fatales. If they had their druthers, who would they cast as their beloved characters?

Toni L.P. Kelner used her Hollywood dreams to create a new series featuring Tilda Harper, a freelance entertainment reporter who specializes in "Where are they now?" stories. Without Mercy, Tilda's first outing, will be released by Five Star in late 2007.ff

Charlaine Harris

It's summer in Arkansas. The grass is growing, bees are humming, and Charlaine Harris is writing like a demented woman. With a schedule including activities of her three children as well as her multiple writing commitments—plus a book tour and other travel dates—Charlaine's head is spinning like that girl's in The Exorcist. Wish her luck!

It's true. Alan Ball came knocking on my door (figuratively, of course) to ask for an option on the *Sookie Stackhouse* series. The books had been optioned before, by filmmaker Donald Zuckerman. When I imagined *Sookie* as a movie character, Reese Witherspoon seemed an ideal choice to me. Somehow, that project never gelled—and that's the way it usually ends. However, when Zuckerman's option expired, I found not only his renewal offer on the table, but two others—a true embarrassment of riches.

Since I am a big fan of Alan Ball's, his was the offer I accepted. Now I am a lady in waiting. The filming, which might have begun as early as this summer, has

now been postponed until late winter. I am mildly disappointed, but I know that the timing is not up to me.

In fact, most often the writer has no decision making in the filming process. I am extremely fortunate that Alan e-mails me from time to time to keep me abreast of his current schedule. He even sent me the pilot script; believe me, it's wonderful.

Unless this whole deal falls through for reasons I can't even anticipate, I'll get the chance to actually let you know how it feels to see a walking, breathing portrayal of *Sookie Stackhouse*. We'll see. I'm not going to hold my breath...much.*ff*

Kris Neri

Sedentary, middle-aged Kris Neri drew on a distant memory of being younger, in shape, and racing like the wind to create Zoey Morgan, the edgy, driven protagonist of her standalone thriller, Never Say Die. Kris continues to limit her current exertions to pounding on

the keyboard and insisting daily that she'll start getting into shape "tomorrow."

"I'd like to thank..." Wait! First I need to cast my books...not to mention selling the movie rights.

I'd have no trouble casting my Tracy Eaton mysteries, which feature glamorous movie star Martha Collins, and her amateur sleuth daughter. In my mind, those movies should star Carole Lombard and...well, me. Or Lana Turner and me. We're seeing a trend here. Sure, they're dead, and I'm neither young enough nor blonde enough to play Tracy, but that's how fantasies work, right?

Zoey Morgan, the enigmatic triathlete star of my new novel, *Never Say Die*, presents more of a challenge. Cameron Diaz might be able to capture Zoey's slight build and athletic prowess. Only she's too tall and—well, you know...not me.

Good casting is certainly an art, and the authors of adapted novels are inevitably hard to please. Will any actress grasp the paradoxes and internal conflicts that are part of Zoey's mercurial makeup? The way she runs less to win races than to leave the

demons of the past in her dust? Her exceptional strength versus the fears that hobble her? The way she hungers for closeness, yet sabotages it?

Does every writer secretly believe that nobody *else* can capture the result of the alchemy that occurs within us when we breathe life into a collection of traits, and a unique and unforgettable character is formed?

Hmmm...this is going to take more thought. That'll give me time to get my head shots done...while I get ready for my close-up.*ff*

Mary Saums

What's more fun than moving? Anything, according to Mary. Her recent move to a new house meant hauling about 150 boxes of books, weighing approximately two tons each, that she'd been collecting for the past thirty years. It was enough to make her wish she collected movies instead. "They'd have been lighter," she said, "plus I'd know more actors to consider for this Femmes question."

Funny, I've never given any thought to who might play Willi Taft, the singer-turned-private-eye in my series. She's in her forties. She's Southern. Any actress could fake those two things with makeup and a good ear, so long as she didn't use Demi Moore's accent in *The Butcher's Wife* as a guideline. The big determining factor would be how well an actress could deliver wisecracks. Since Willi has ups and downs in her private and professional lives, the right person must balance comedy with Willi's more depressed moments. Another consideration is her fight scenes. So, I'm looking for a funny, cynical, middle-aged but youthful woman with enough strength of character to make her, at times, a believable badass. I can

only think of two possibilities: Janeane Garofalo and Sandra Bullock. I don't remember seeing either in tough fight scenes, but they look strong enough to bust a lowlife to the floor should the opportunity arise.

The new series I'm working on is easier. For secondary characters, Levon Helm as a cantankerous hermit and Tommy Lee Jones as a part-Cherokee police detective are perfect. My leading ladies require more thought. They're in their sixties, one intelligent Brit and one screwy redheaded Southerner. Could Dame Judy Dench and Bette Midler have their people call my people?*ff*

Elaine Viets

Murder Unleashed, Elaine's fifth Dead-End Job mystery, debuted in hardcover in May. This time, Helen works at a posh dog boutique in Fort Lauderdale. Helen meets people who spend \$200 on dog birthday parties and pets who have bigger wardrobes than she does. Publishers Weekly says Murder Unleashed is "full of wry social commentary." Elaine now has what every humorist wants—to be taken seriously.

Age is the major casting problem for my Dead-End Job series. My characters are mature but sexy. (Unlike their creator, who is immature but sexy.)

Consider Phil, Helen's undercover man in more ways than one. David Soul is too old. Peter Krause (Nate Fisher in *Six Feet Under*) is too young. Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise are too conventional. James Denton (Mike the plumber in *Desperate Housewives*) may be closest.

Margery Flax, Helen's purple-loving landlady, is seventy-six, but she's no old lady. Margery loves sexy shoes, and survived a recent, disastrous love affair. Margery got her name from mystery fan Margery Flax, who is twenty years younger than my character, and wants Kathy Bates for the role. "She's a bit young," the real Margery said, "but she has the right attitude." Bates is chunkier than my Margery, but I'm sure she can act thin. Frances Conroy (Ruth Fisher

in *Six Feet Under*) is closer to my idea of Margery, but she, too, is a little young.

I've always seen Geena Davis as Helen Hawthorne, the woman who works those Dead-End Jobs. Geena seems oh-so-sane, but she has a wild streak below the surface, like Helen. There is someone closer to home who could play my main character. Helen looks like me. She's tall and dark-haired. We work the same jobs.

There's one problem: I'm too old to play myself.*ff*

Marlys Millhiser

Marlys is preparing to make room for a full-time man in the house, as her favorite husband is about to retire. He has agreed to help with the grocery shopping, but not with proofing manuscripts. She has agreed to help with planting and weeding, but not mowing. They both agreed to keep the cat and the cleaning lady. Other adjustments are in the works.

I never did get as far as Charlaire and Sookie but Hollywood optioned three of my early books. (An option is paying an author and agent to take film rights off the table while the story is shopped to studios and investors.) Most optioned stories never make it to big or small screen but it is nice and unexpected cash and one of mine was renewed twice. Two had been out of print for years. I'll have to admit Robert Redford looked a lot like my early male leads but as time wore on, and so did I, and so did he...

My favorite actors now are Jon Stewart and Johnny Depp, probably more suited to Charlaire's wonderful stories than mine. Neither would fit my leading man requirements but Stewart's loaded deadpan and Depp's outrageous mannerisms are unforgettable. My female leads resemble friends and family members so would be difficult for me to cast.

My favorite daydream is that historical mysteries with female leads and Colorado settings will find favor with someone in Hollywood or New York. After all, the trade paper version of my fourth book, *The Mirror*, set at the turn of and midway into the last century, still sells well many years after hardcover, book club, and mass paperback have gone out of print. And it never was optioned for film.*ff*

Femmes FATALES

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Dana Cameron

Some people have fantasy baseball teams, Dana has fantasy casts for her favorite Shakespeare plays. Picking out a dream cast for her books is harder, but it gives her an excuse to go spelunking through the Internet Movie Database (www.IMDb.com). In the movie of her life, Dana would be played by either Emma Thompson or an animé character.

Faces from movies, the street, even historic portraits suggest characters to me, but it's never a one-to-one correlation, and not so much a pretty face that inspires as a personality or emotion. One actor's attitude, another's nose, someone's sexy slouch, a friend's catch-phrase—they all go into shaping a character. "It's not that I want all these pictures of hot actors on my desk," I tell my husband. "It's for work."

In my imagination, I've got nearly everything picked out for *Emma Fielding*, *Queen of Spades*, the first of the many movies to be based on my books. James Cameron (no relation, alas), circa *The Abyss* and *Aliens*, would direct. The Who's "Slip Kid" plays over the opening credits, and Moby would score the action scenes. I would do the screenplay and archaeological consulting for a modest fee (and a cameo).

Actors are harder; you can't cast a potpourri of inspirations. At the moment, I'd go with Miranda Otto (Eowyn in *The Two Towers*) as Emma. She can do "thinky," she kicks butt, and she looks great as a redhead. Julia Stiles (*The Bourne Identity*) as a platinum blonde would totally rock as Meg. Lori Petty (as Kit in *A League of Their Own*) has Bucky's attitude. I haven't found my perfect Brian, but Anthony Hopkins would be a great Tony Markham.*ff*

Julie Wray Herman

Julie Wray Herman admits that a movie deal would be very welcome about now. She thought that the worst parenting issue was resolved once she'd gotten the children out of diapers. That was before college visits began. With her two children graduating within the next two years, Julie will really need the

distraction from the echoingly empty house so that she can write.

Casting about for actors to fill the roles of characters is one of those fun-filled games all authors play. I tend to jump the gun a bit and do it while I'm working on the rough draft of a book. Daydreaming is second nature to me.

Korine? Sally Field. Small stature, neat figure, caring, intelligent, dark hair, accent. (Think *Steel Magnolias*.) But then I gave Korine gray hair and had to hope that Sally Fields would agree to having her hair cropped and dyed gray. But this is daydreaming. No problem.

Amilou is somewhat tougher to cast—I didn't really have a real actress in mind when I wrote her. Sharon Stone has the blonde good looks and can portray *Fatal Instinct* morals. Might work.

Janey is definitely Halle Berry. Classy and beautiful; lots of inner strength, but fragile as well. I've always wanted to be able to wear clothes like Ms. Berry does. Having a character who can is the next best thing.

J.J. is tough. I didn't cast him while working on the book because he was a surprise all the way around. He was supposed to be the strong silent partner, but turns out he's very forthcoming with his opinions. Dennis Quaid would do nicely for him, I think. He has the backbone and the pained expressions to do J.J. proud.*ff*

Donna Andrews

Although Donna Andrews doesn't have a movie deal yet for the Meg Langslow series, she's already compiling a list of actors to audition for the role of Michael, Meg's gorgeous boyfriend. But as for Turing Hopper, the artificial intelligence personality who's the sleuth in her other series—not a clue. She'll leave that to the director. Or maybe the special effects crew.

A Meg Langslow miniseries? Series? Movie? Cool! I'd love to see it come true. I'm just not sure I'd want to see it.

Confession time: Books on Tape has done audio versions for some of the

Meg books. I have copies, sometimes on both tape and CD. They live on the brag shelf, where I keep copies of all my books in every version that exists. Hardback. Paperback. Large print. Japanese translation.

I'm intensely curious about what my books sound like in someone else's voice, but so far I haven't been able to listen. I know what they sound like in my voice—I read aloud while revising and editing. But the idea of hearing someone else reading them weirds me out.

And watching someone else's on-screen interpretation of my fictional world...eek!

TV would be easier than movies, because I could tape the show and watch it in small doses. In private. In a movie theater, I'd be the menace in the back row, muttering the whole time. "That's not what Meg should say! Dad would never do that! He doesn't look a bit like Michael!"

So yes, I hope some Hollywood producer falls in love with Meg and her family and brings them to the screen. If it happens, just don't ask what I think. I'll still be working up the nerve to watch.*ff*



Sites for Sore Eyes

Not only do the Femmes have a group web site and blog, but several of us have our own sites as well. Surf on by for the latest news.*ff*

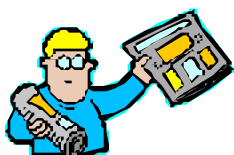
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News from the Femmes Fatales

This year is going to be a great one for **Charlaine Harris**. In May, *Definitely Dead*, the sixth Sookie Stackhouse novel, hit the shelves. In June, a Pat Elrod anthology called *My Big Fat Supernatural Wedding* came out, containing "Tacky," a funny (but gory) short story of Charlaine's. Finally, *Grave Surprise*, the second Harper Connelly, appears in November.



Kris Neri, like Darth Vader, has flirted with the dark side in her latest release, *Never Say Die*, a woman-in-jeopardy thriller featuring professional triathlete Zoey Morgan. Anthony Award-winning author William Kent Krueger wrote, "*Never Say Die* delivers everything a discerning fan of the genre could desire...Kris Neri has penned a winner." And bestselling author Barbara Seranella described it as "...a real page-turner."



Mary Saums attended the 2006 Left Coast Crime convention held in Bristol, England this year. She had a great time doing writing research and visiting a few tourist sites with fellow Femmes Donna Andrews. Best of all, she made many new friends and discovered new authors to read. She'll be at Bouchercon this fall and looks forward to her first trip to Madison, Wisconsin.



Elaine Viets has gone to the dogs, in the nicest way imaginable. She donated \$1 for every copy of *Murder Unleashed* sold before May 20 on bn.com, the Barnes & Noble website, and at selected IMBA independent bookstores. The money went to PAWS and other animal charities. This was Elaine's money, not her publisher's. Her writing partner, Harry, is a rescue cat.



Marlys Millhiser's immediate plans are to do some traveling with her favorite husband while she can still keep up with him and to learn how to write around a man in the house. If she could do it around their children when they were babies and toddlers... The "children" now ponder this situation from afar and her "fictional" characters wonder how this could have happened so soon.

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Dana Cameron's sixth Emma Fielding archaeology mystery, *Ashes and Bones* (Avon), comes out in August. *A Fugitive Truth* has recently been translated into Italian, and Dana's first short story, "The Lords of Misrule," featuring 18th-century London sleuth Margaret Chase, will appear in *Sugarplums and Scandal* (Avon) in November. Check out her website's new blog to read about Dana's thoughts on writing, reading, and mysteries.



While **Julie Wray Herman** is hard at work on her next book, she's also teaching "Plot Twists and Other Mysterious Writing" at the local community college. She also taught the class in Austin during Texas Mystery Week in May. Worldwide Mystery Book Club has bought Julie's popular series and is reissuing them in the perfect size for purse toting.



E-mail users rejoice! *In Delete All Suspects* (Berkley 2005), the fourth book in the Turing Hopper series, **Donna Andrews** kills a spammer. Is that justifiable homicide? *No Nest for the Wicket*, the seventh book in the Meg Langslow series (St. Martin's, August 2006), features eXtreme croquet, Civil War history—and, of course, murder. Donna's currently studying penguins for the upcoming eighth Meg book.*ff*