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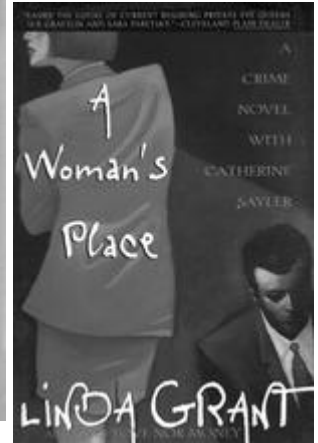
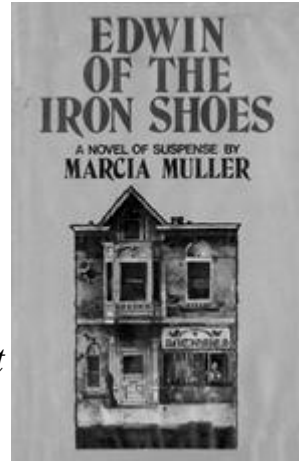
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A WOMAN'S PLACE IS ON THE CASE

Bay Area Mystery Writers

Michaelyn Burnette, Humanities Librarian

Famous for its temperate climate and gorgeous scenery, the San Francisco Bay Area is also widely known for its many fine writers of detective fiction. The most striking characteristic of the Bay Area mystery writers is the large number of women writers.



Perhaps this is not coincidental; Marcia Muller, whose *Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (1977) is often cited as the first contemporary American series featuring a woman, sets her books in San Francisco. Many other detecting women followed; this article is a brief overview of series set in the Bay Area written by area women authors.

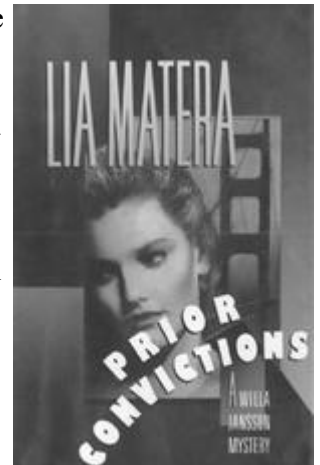
The obvious place to begin is with Muller, whose Sharon McCone matures as a person and as a private investigator through facing the moral and intellectual quandaries presented by her cases. The reader comes to know Sharon and her family and friends through Muller's richly detailed characterizations. A graduate of Cal, Sharon begins her career as an idealistic investigator for All Souls Legal Cooperative, a law firm serving the poor. By the nineties, Sharon establishes her own agency and becomes a formidable investigator with national and even international importance. Few other writers can match Muller for the intriguing nature of the puzzles she sets for Sharon to solve and for the quality of her writing; even fewer writers can make the reader care so much for the protagonist. In 1993, the Private Eye Writers of America presented Muller with the *Lifetime Achievement Award* for her impressive body of work and contribution to the mystery genre.

Though the talented Laurie R. King only published her first Kate Martinelli novel in 1993 (when it won the *Edgar* for best first novel), she has gained a multitude of fans for this series and for her historical series featuring Mary Russell, student of Jewish theology and of crime. Kate is a San Francisco police officer with a secret, which the reader learns in the course of *A Grave Talent*; through her intelligence and insight, she brings to justice a serial child murderer. In *To Play the Fool* (1995), Kate



finds herself relying on Erasmus, a fool who speaks only in quotations, to solve the murder of a homeless man. In *With Child* (1996), Kate must deal with her own guilt as she tries to locate the daughter of her partner, kidnapped while on a trip with Kate. King's background, a bachelor's degree in religious studies from University of California at Santa Cruz and a master's in theology from Graduate Theological Union, is obvious in all her work as her characters struggle to maintain not only justice but also a moral center. Never is that background more obvious than in the Martinelli series--and never is the center in more danger of collapsing--but Kate, and King, keep all together.

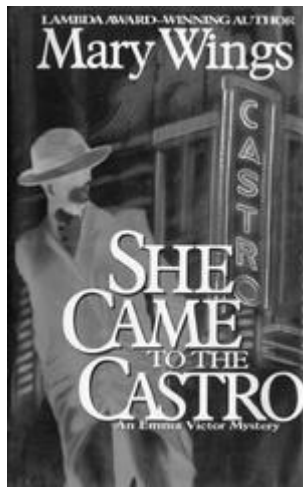
A graduate of the Hastings College of Law, where she was editor-in-chief of the *Constitutional Law Quarterly*, and a former Teaching Fellow at Stanford Law School, Lia Matera has intimate knowledge of legal matters, and her expertise shows in her two series about San Francisco lawyers. Willa Jansen first appears in *Where Lawyers Fear To Tread* (1986); she's a law student who becomes a law review editor and a murder suspect when the previous editor is murdered. Willa is the daughter of sixties radicals, who instilled in her their distrust of wealth and power, and she struggles with her own desires for material success as she uses her intelligence and sense of humor to cope with murder, first at a radical law firm in San Francisco, then at a major corporate Los Angeles firm, and finally in her own Santa Cruz office. *The Smart Money* (1988) introduces Laura Di Palma, whose wit and sense of the absurd take her through adventures at a top San Francisco law firm to her own very south of Market office.



Both series have garnered Matera several *Anthony* and *Edgar* nominations for best mystery novel of the year.

Berkeley author Linda Grant is the creator of Catherine Saylor, a San Francisco private investigator (p.i.) who specializes in solving corporate crime. The compassionate, tough, and intelligent Catherine first appeared in the *Anthony*-nominated *Random Access Murder* (1988), in which she solves the murder of a corporate secretary. Her most recent case, *Vampire Bites* (1998), involves live-action role playing (LARPing) on Bay Area streets, the homeless children lining Telegraph Ave., and high-tech theft and murder. In between, Catherine takes on bank computer crime and the theft of experimental seeds from UCB. Grant is a former president of Sisters in Crime and has worked in the Peace Corps and as a high school English teacher.

Other San Francisco sleuths include Gloria White's Ronnie Ventana, a Latina p.i. who learned many useful skills from her cat burglar parents. Her first appearance, in 1991's *Murder on the Run*, earned White an *Anthony* nomination; subsequent outings have drawn multiple award nominations. In her first appearance (1987), Mary Wings's Emma Victor is a volunteer at a Boston woman's hotline and solves the murder of one of the callers. By the time of *She Came in a Flash* (1990), Emma is feeling at home in San Francisco and is part of



the lesbian scene. Her creator, Mary Wings, is particularly adept at depicting the gay ambiance of San Francisco and the complexities of that city's politics. Readers wanting a change from the contemporary might try Dianne Day's Fremont Jones, introduced in *The Strange Case Files* (1995). Fremont flees her upper class Boston home to set herself up as a typist in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. When one of her clients dies mysteriously, Fremont sets out to find his murderer. *Fire and Fog* (1996) opens with the Great Quake, and Day's description of that event and its aftermath form a fascinating backdrop. In *Emperor Norton's Ghost* (1998), Fremont makes the transition from amateur to professional detective as she solves the murders of two

spiritualists.

From their nineteenth century origins, fictional investigators are often outsiders, connected to society primarily by their dedication to punishing injustice. When we first meet Lora Roberts's fortyish Liz Sullivan in *Murder in a Nice Neighborhood* (1994), she is the ultimate outsider, a homeless woman living in a VW bus on the streets of wealthy Palo Alto. Liz ekes out a marginal living by writing magazine articles and growing vegetables in the community garden. Victimized by her husband and the criminal justice system that punished her for resisting his abuse, she shuns all but casual human contact. Liz draws herself back to society by solving murders that often literally land on her doorstep.

Susan Dunlap is the only American writer to publish series in the three primary mystery subgenres: the police procedural (Berkeley cop Jill Smith, introduced in 1981's *Karma*), p.i. (Kiernan O'Shaughnessy, former medical examiner turned La Jolla investigator), and amateur sleuth (Vejay Haskell, PG&E meter reader). In her attempts to bring justice to the Berkeley streets, Jill often runs afoul of her superiors in the police department and of the town-gown politics of the city. Dunlap has a keen eye for location, and part of the fun of reading the novels is tracing Jill's path through Berkeley and trying to identify local characters.



Down the sort of mean streets of Sacramento walks a woman alone; oversized-purse on one shoulder, her husband's dry-cleaning draped over the other, she listens on the cell phone to her mother hector her about a murder. Meet Theresa Galloway, size sixteen and a woman busy juggling the demands of family, civil service job, and a mother whose interest in the affairs of others keeps getting them involved in murder. Terris McMahan Grimes depicts the results in *Somebody Else's Child* (1996) and *Blood Will Tell* (1997). Grimes, the recipient of the 1997 *Chester Himes Award* for her work, attended school in Oakland and graduated from Cal State Chico with a degree in English. She writes of Theresa's forays into detecting with compassion, humor, and perceptive details about African-American life in Sacramento. Theresa learns to appreciate her own abilities and toughness as she helps justice along.

The Bay Area's women authors have garnered an impressive array of mystery awards. Their works present

**The Don Herron Collection of
San Francisco Mystery Stories**

puzzles to challenge the reader, fascinating characters to make the reader care what happens to them, and also present details about modern life and mores found in no other genre.

Recognizing the talent among these Bay Area authors and the scholarly value of their novels, The Bancroft Library recently purchased the Don Herron Collection of San Francisco Mystery Writers so that future scholars will have access to a genre not widely available in research libraries.

The Bay Area is fortunate indeed to have so many women on the case. Happy sleuthing.

A fascinating addition to Bancroft Library's collection of San Francisco lore is this collection of about 170 mystery stories set in San Francisco. The books range in date from 1922 to 1996, and it is particularly gratifying that they are generally in excellent condition with their original dust jackets (usually the first things to go). Included are well-known authors Dashiell Hammett, Ellery Queen, and Erle Stanley Gardner, as well as less known literary names: Florence Hurd (*The House on Russian Hill*), Betty Antoncich (*Mystery of the Chinatown Pearls*) and Gordon DeMarco (*Elvis in Aspic*). Purchase of the collection was made possible by the Joseph M. Bransten Fund and funding from the State.

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