

Women of Mystery

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Video: Women of Mystery: Three Writers Who Forever Changed Detective Fiction

13 ladies met in the Pinedale library September 8 to view the video of the 3 authors we will be reading and discussing this fall. The authors talked about how they do their research, each much the same with some small differences. The narrator let us know that early mysteries written by women, mid 1800's, were also read by women. the heroines then, if we can call them that, were passive. It was not until late 1800's or turn of the century that women mystery writers began to have their women detectives be more aggressive in their search to solve crimes.

Several ladies are summer residents to the Pinedale area and will not be attending the next sessions. Maybe some of the other local people will hear about this dynamic reading and discussion group and come join in.

August 10, Laramie County Library - Cheyenne

Thirty women attended the showing of the Women of Mystery video. This was the first meeting for our WCH reading group. I started out explaining the WCH Reading Wyoming program and telling the audience briefly about the three books we would be reading and the three authors we would be seeing in the video. The entire audience seemed to find the video fascinating. They all appreciated the background given in the summaries of the history of the mystery and detective novel.

questions and comments from the group first focused on the extent that the authors in the film seemed to identify so strongly with their characters, to the point that they talked about them as if they were real people. This was particularly the case with Sue Grafton who referred to her character, Kinsey, as pouting when she tried to censor her language. All of the authors were very up front about their tendency to work out their own issues through their characters.

Others in the group questioned why these three authors were chosen, so we discussed their reputation as founders of the female hard-boiled detective genre. I also asked for a show of hands concerning who had previously read the three authors' work. Nearly all had read Sue

Grafton (maybe 95%), about 75% had read Sara Paretsky and possibly 30% had also read Marcia Muller.

One woman asked, "What will we have to discuss in these books?" so we talked about the fact that mystery novels are not usually considered the best books for book discussion groups but that I felt that any well written book has things in it to discuss. I mentioned as possible discussion topics, the issues brought up in the book, the characters, the writing style, etc. The group was a completely different crowd than the WCH book groups usually attract, I think I had many more mystery fans than those usually attracted to the more "academic" topics. I think it will make for a very interesting discussion series.

Elaine Hayes
Laramie County Library

We had 18 participants for the first meeting of the Women of Mystery book series at the Sweetwater County Library on Thursday, August 21. It was interesting to begin our book discussions discussing a video that helped us learn about the authors of the books we'll be reading and why they write mysteries. We learned about how the three writers do research before and during the writing of their mysteries. We discussed the settings where the books take place and what we thought we might be reading about in the three books. Some of the participants have read many mystery books by the three different women while others are just discovering these writers for the first time.

Jennifer L. Sorensen Assistant Professor of English
Western Wyoming Community College

Only 4 people attended the discussion today. It was somewhat of a disappointment considering the value of seeing the video. This group decided at the outset to watch the video last, for a number of reasons not that important now. My suggestion is that when other groups use this series by all means watch the video first. The 4 in attendance today agreed we should have. From a facilitator's standpoint it would greatly enhance the value of the discussions.

The video appears to be on the surface interviews with the authors however it is much more than that. The 3 authors are seen putting together their material and gathering pictures used in their writing and telling what they feel as they write and how they interact with the characters. There is no one actually interviewing the authors. It is a very well done video on these ladies and how they write.

After reading the 3 books this group wished they had selected a different series. Now, having seen the video, they would recommend it, using the video first.

Before starting the tape we talked about why people were interested in the series. Most of them are fans of

mystery/detective fiction; others just enjoy reading and being part of this group. I shared with them this passage from Dorothy L. Sayers as a point of departure for the mystery writers we'd be discussing. This passage is taken from her discussion of fictional detectives, who were mostly male. It struck me as a nice counterpoint to the discussions of gender we will no doubt embark on over the next three months.

"There have also been a few women detectives, but on the whole, they have not been very successful. In order to justify their choice of sex, they are obliged to be so irrationally intuitive as to destroy that quiet enjoyment of the logical which we look for in our detective reading. Or else they are active and courageous, and insist on walking into physical danger and hampering the men on the job. Marriage, also, looms too large in their view of life; which is not surprising, for they are all young and beautiful. Why these charming creatures should be able to tackle abstruse problems at the age of twenty-one or thereabouts, while the male detectives are usually content to wait until their thirties or forties before setting up as experts, it is hard to say. Where do they pick up their worldly knowledge? Not from personal experience, for they are always immaculate as the driven snow. Presumably it is all intuition.

Better use has been made of women in books where the detecting is strictly amateur – done, that is, by members of the family or house-party themselves, and not by a private consultant. Evelyn Humblethorne is a detective of this kind, and so is Joan Cowper, in *The Brooklyn Murders*. But the really brilliant woman detective has yet to be created.

From *The Omnibus of Crime* by Dorothy L. Sayers, 1929.

The video was well received, and it opened up a short discussion of what sorts of behavior we look for in our fictional detectives, what level of realism we expect, and other attributes we welcome, such as a sense of place from the narrative. We debated briefly the order in which we'd read the books, made a decision, and distributed that title. The only drawback to the video was that viewing it limited our time for discussion. Knowing that would be the case, I tried to introduce some themes and advertise them as issues we'd discuss throughout the fall. We look forward to spending time with some "really brilliant" women detectives.

Julianne Couch, Laramie

Mesmerized by the video portraying the heroines and writing styles of Paretsky, Mueller and Grafton, there was only one sound of the film. What's not to like! The film is an outstanding documentary, and everyone was excited about the writers themselves and the adventure of reading their books. Most of the group are mystery readers, but few of them had read all three writers. We talked about series writing and how you maintain characters for 20 years. We talked about orphans as the heroines are all orphans. Why? We talked about locations and the different settings and how the author's maintain their

sense of place. We talked about the writers research efforts and the philosophies they expressed about writing with women heroines. The video discussed mystery as "breaking the silence" and "what did they see." It describes women moving from the role of fickle creatures to women on an heroic quest. Like I said--what's not to like? We are all anxious to read and continue the discussion.

Patty Myers, Wright

This was our first meeting of the series. I asked the group a few questions to get us going: What kind of mystery books have they read? What do they expect from women detectives? How do women detectives differ from men detectives? What expectations in general do they bring to a mystery or detective novel? Then we watched the video. I have to admit I was hearted by the video when I previewed it. I had wondered how substantive this series was going to be, but I was intrigued and reassured by the video. The group thoroughly enjoyed it. We talked about the historical references to gothic and sensational novels and how women in mystery novels have changed. We talked about similarities and differences among the three women featured on the film. We had some interesting discussion about the writing process and what gives a writer credibility.

Some ladies in our group had read some of the novels by these women, and all of them are enthused about the series. They went home with stacks of books, and they insist they might be able to finally bring in some more new people for this one. We'll see!

Norleen Healy, Clearmont Library

We began the session with introductions all around, a deduction of who the leader "really" is and a couple of "sleuthing" activities, as well as a short discussion of kinds of mysteries.

After watching the video, the group discussed it as interesting, a bit too long perhaps. We discussed the "blending" of personalities of the author and her heroine, as seen from the eyes of the authors. The general feeling was that the authors took themselves much too seriously, should have more fun with their characters and the process, and this made the authors appear pretentious. Exploring the environments of the authors was intriguing in relationship to the settings of the stories and of the authors' real lives.

As an outspoken, well read group, we should have great fun as we shadow Kinsey Millhone next time and make our way into the patterns of the criminal mind and the clue seeking, detective mind.

Elouise Rossler, Ten Sleep

When I first previewed the video, I could tell it needed to be "broken up" into three sections in the showing, so the

authors would not "run together" in the viewers' minds, and so their attention would not drift as they were watching. I also felt the video needed some sort of fun introduction, so those two decisions guided my research and preparation.

After getting some background on the history of the mystery genre, I put together a short quiz to get the participants thinking about how mystery had developed (with prizes for the best guessers). I also found several published interviews with each author and took information from those to add onto the contents of the video. In some cases there was a direct connection with the video, such as a quote from the Japanese fan who had expressed her interest in V.I. Warshawski's strength to Sara Paretsky. Other information extended ideas on the video, such as Sue Grafton's explanation about how she got started writing mystery when she fantasized about doing evil to the man she was divorcing.

We all agreed that it would be very interesting to now read these authors with the additional information we have on them; typically, readers look up authors after becoming intrigued by reading their works, but we'll be applying that extra information about the authors from the beginning. We also observed that all three authors seem to have unnatural relationships with the private eye characters they've created; it's almost as if the characters have become real to them, and in at least two cases, seem to have control over the authors!

Phyl Sundstrom, Newcastle

In this new group who've not sponsored a series before, there were 15 women and one (brave) man present for the initial meeting. Some of them have participated in other WCH book discussions series, and some were new to the program. All seemed enthusiastic about the subject matter. For our first meeting, viewed the documentary where all three of the writers were introduced and interviewed. Before the film, we talked in general about women in mysteries. I asked them what kinds of mysteries people had read and what expectations they were bringing to the series, i.e. what they expected from women detectives and how might they characterize them.

I asked them to consider whether or how women detectives traditionally have differed from male detectives. After the film, we ended up talking more about the process of writing that the three women detailed than the idea of mysteries. Many in the group who had read books by the authors said they were surprised to hear about how much research was involved. We compared the personalities of the three writers. I suggested they try to remember the writer and see how much of her is reflected in the female detectives as they read the novels. I challenged those who read a lot to try to read another of the books by each author as we go through the series to see how the detective develops.

The challenge for me is to make sure we get into discussions of humanities issues while we do this series. I

feel like this group will help with that. They are definitely looking forward to their reading at least.
Norleen Healy

Pine Bluffs

Fifteen women turned out at the Pine Bluffs Branch Library to watch the video *Women of Mystery: Three Writers Who Forever Changed Detective Fiction*. This is an excellent turnout for such a small town. About half of the ladies were the "regulars" from previous *Wyoming Council for the Humanities* book groups and the other half were newbies attracted by the topic of the series.

I briefly introduced myself, the video and the *Women of Mystery* series. I told them a little background information about the three authors, Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller and Sara Paretsky. I let them know that all three authors would discuss how they did their research, how they feel about their female detective protagonist creations and how they believe the mystery genre has changed with the introduction of the female hard-boiled detective. I told them to watch out for the narrator's reading of passages from books by each of the three authors (including selections from each of the books that we will read in the group) and that the video could or should help guide their reading of a genre not usually considered good material for book discussion groups.

After the video was over we began the discussion with general observations about the movie and the three authors. The discussion sort of took off from there as the ladies became more comfortable with the group. All but one of the women had previously read Sue Grafton's alphabet mystery series and a handful had also read some of Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski novels. No one (except me) was familiar with the work of Marcia Muller. It was immediately noted that all three authors identified heavily with their protagonists. Sue Grafton said that her character, Kinsey Milhone, was "sulking" when she tried to censor her language. Marcia Muller said that her detective, Sharon McCone, "told her" that she was pinning the murder on the wrong man and she had to re-write parts of *The Shape of Dread* after she changed who the murderer would be as she wrote the last chapter. Sara Paretsky admitted that she uses her writing (and V.I. Warshawski's reactions to injustice to women and children) as a way to work through issues from her own troubled youth.

The group really enjoyed the documentary and are looking forward to reading and discussing the books in the series. As of yesterday 19 of the 20 books were checked out to Pine Bluffs residents. Next month we will meet and discuss *F is for Fugitive* by Sue Grafton. Elaine Jones Hayes

Tongue River Library

This was the smallest group we've had, maybe because we were seeing the film instead of discussing a particular book, or maybe because it's Thanksgiving week. I was told that two "regulars" didn't come because it was the finale of "Dancing With the Stars"; I guess we can't compete with that!

Having done this series before and having started with the film, I decided to try doing the books first and ending with the film thinking it would give us more background for our discussion. This worked well. The discussion did seem more productive and there was lots of alluding back to the novels in our discussion of the authors and their writing. Also, having read the books by the three women mystery writers seemed to help the group draw more generalizations about the genre and the commonalities in theme and technique.

We decided at our previous meeting that for this time, since there was a film instead of a book to read, each person would read another book by one of the women authors. All except one person had done that, and happily each of the three authors was covered by someone in this part of the discussion. The group responded with interest to each other's selections and comments.

In spite of the smaller group, the discussion was lively and lasted almost two hours. It was a nice evening.

F for Fugitive

We met at the Sweetwater County Library on Thursday, September 25, where 20 of us had a lively discussion about F is for Fugitive. The group cooperated and changed the meeting date to a week later than scheduled so I could attend the Equality Book Festival in Casper. I am lucky to have such a wonderful group.

Like the Pinedale group that is reading the same books, we discussed why we thought the Wyoming Humanities Council selected this series. We came to the conclusion that we are glad they did because of the many and new faces that joined our last two meetings. We like the fact that the writers and the women characters are strong, smart women and that all the books are focused on social issues.

The participants discussed whether or not we thought Kinsey is in a dark phase in this book and perhaps why she is in this phase. Many said they had figured out who the killer was before the end of the book---but a lot of us were fooled. We decided that we wanted to know a lot more about some of the character that were introduced. At the end of the discussion, we asked each other what we wanted to discuss with others in the group and that's where the discussion really took off. We had a nice evening together.

Jennifer L. Sorensen Assistant Professor of English

A group of 11 ladies met in the Pinedale library to discuss Sue Grafton's "F Is For Fugitive". Only one person did not particularly like the book. Several in the group had read all of Grafton's Kinsey Milhone series.

A couple of interesting questions were offered. Why would the Wyoming Humanities Council use these 3 books? These 3 lady authors are considered to have changed the writing of mysteries. Though they were all inspired by male writers women mystery writers with women as the primary character and detective was different. The video explained this by talking about the difference in women writing mysteries and read by women in the late 19th century. This led to a short disussion of male/female areas of endeavor.

What does the council think mysteries have to do with humanities? What are they trying to teach us? Ttthe WHC is not trying to teach anyone anything. They try to bring

about discussion in all areas of our lives. They are interested in developing dialogue and through the magic of discussion we do learn, hopefully.

About mysteries as humanities material. Every character in the mystery stories exists in real life. The things that take place in mysteries can or have taken place in real life. In my opinion any literature written can be used for a humanities discussion.

The group was given some insight into Grafton's life, how she came to be a mystery writer and her previous work.

Then closed with individuals in the group bringing up thoughts on the book itself. This was a very good meeting.

September 14, 2008

Eighteen ladies gathered around a large, but crowded table in a one of the Laramie County Library's meeting rooms to discuss Sue Grafton's F is for Fugitive. I noted immediately that about half the ladies were new to the group and had not attended the first session where we'd watched the video of "Women of Mystery", so I gave the group another summary of the WCH Reading Wyoming program and talked specifically about the next two books we'd be reading in this group.

We had no trouble getting a discussion started. These women were almost all avid mystery readers. Most had read all or nearly all of Grafton's books (fortunately I've read them all too). There were frequent comparison of characters and events over several of the books. We talked at length about the main character of Kinsey in this book, with some feeling that she seemed more bitter and negative than usual. One lady surmised that this was because this book immediately follows the bombing of her apartment and the injuries she sustained in the previous book. We all thought the character might have been suffering from some post-traumatic stress. We also wondered what life stress the author might have been suffering at the time to make her write so negatively.

We talked about the family issues that come up in the book particularly the absent fathers. Kinsey's parents were killed in an auto accident at age 5, the murder victim was born illegitimate and never knew her father, the killer's father was present physically but not available emotionally to his daughter, etc. One woman observed that the book could have been called F is for Family. We also discussed the positive role models in Kinsey's life. We thought the character of the aunt that raised Kinsey was very important in her development into the tough and sassy, no nonsense detective. Henry, her landlord and best friend was also mentioned as a possible parent figure.

Many other things were discussed such as the use of all five senses in the descriptive passages, the writing style and the way Grafton keeps you guessing as to who the killer might be until the very end, and the benefits of reading the book versus listening to it on tape with a

skillful reader, etc. It was a great discussion, the group is impressively well read, quick witted and vocal.

The Big Piney book group met at the library Septmeber 24 with 8 people to discuss Sue Grafton's "F Is For fugitive". This is the 2nd book in this series. The people are not as interested in this series as they have been with the others, although a couple have read several of her books. One participant said, "these are what you call one cell reads; it only takes one brain cell to read them." That being said let's get on with the rest of the discussion. The group was told that Grafton's plan to become a mystery writer came from her terrible divorce from her 2nd husband. She suffered through a 6 year custody battle and during that time admits that she thought of various ways to kill her ex-husband. Some of them eventually showed up in her mystery series. After reading "The Gashlycrumb Tinies", an alphabet picture book, she decided she could write an alphabet series of novels. She once said in an interview that she wished she had never started the idea of an alphabet series but is going to stick it out. "T Is For Trespass" has been completed leaving her 6 more books to write. At her standard rate of one every 1 -2 years she will be somewhere around 75 years old when finished.

The group heard that she is a determined writer as well as person. Her early writing years were spent writing for movies and television. She has been approached to sell her book rights to movies and television but is determined not to. She said her years working with Hollywood were enough and the rights are not for sale and if her children sell the rights after she is dead she will haunt them. The group thought the actions and lives of the people were plausible. It was obvious that Kinsey Millhone disliked men. They did agree that the author was very good at getting the reader to think a certain character was the killer and then decide it was someone else and that finally at the end the killer turns out to be someone not expected at all. One lady in the group suspected the real killer early in the book with the clue that who would be the one to have access to the belt found around Bailey's neck.

"Oh my gosh, this is so small town!" one of the lady participants exclaimed. "Look at us dissecting these characters like they are our neighbors!" And of course we were. Sue Grafton says that she has a fascination with "aberrant behavior" and all the characters in F IS FOR FUGITIVE fit her description, and PI Kinsey Millhone is fascinated too. The Women of Mystery series, like all the discussions, actually gets better as more books are read and the comparisons between writers, stories and characters becomes more active. The discussions about justice, the heroines as orphans, the role of viewing life from the outside, and family secrets are lively. Both Muller and Grafton begin and end their investigations with men wrongly imprisoned, which led to discussion of how do you recover from injustice. The majority of readers like the faster pace of Grafton, and the copywrite dates and changes in the times, equipment, events were discussed. Both books were published in 1989 but there were

differences in them, and there were definite plot twists that cell phones would have changed. Patty Myers, Wright We started discussion with character, and whether or not we found Kinsey Millhone likeable compared to other women detectives in the series. We pondered the similarities between Kinsey and the others, including living arrangements, clientele, and background. We also talked about the relatively mild amount of violence in this book compared to others in the series, and to what degree we would continue reading a writer whose books were very violent. Our discussion of the actual novel was relatively brief. I introduced some information about Sue Grafton's history and her writing habits that I learned from an interview on internetwritingjournal.com. I recommend book discussion leaders check that interview out. It explains how she came up with the character, why she continues to set the novels in the recent past instead of the present, and how she goes about journaling for each novel. The group at the Eppson Center was very interested in hearing about Grafton's writing process, and they were surprised that so many pages of journaling went into each relatively brief novel. This discussion led into a planned activity of the day. At our last meeting, I'd given the group "homework": to come up with a list of traits for our own ideal female private detective. With white board marker in hand, I jotted down their answers to questions about where our detective lives, her marital status, her age and appearance, her preferred weapon and car and alcoholic beverage, and so on. We had a great deal of fun coming up with this detective, whom we've named Kendall "Kate" Jackson. We've even developed a premise for the story. I hope at least some of the group members work on writing the story during the long gap until we meet again next fall.

Julianne Couch, Laramie

Sue Grafton's F IS FOR FUGITIVE was not really liked by most readers.

Characterization drew comments about Kinsey-the "outsider" who is chasing her father's ghost and is developing as Grafton writes more of the alphabet. Most other characters were seen as shallow. The group felt there were too many characters; the number interrupted continuity of the plot and created confusion.

Grafton's writing style has too much meaningless detail (everyone agreed on this!). She writes in a conversational tone, some of it almost reads like a journal (referring to her statement about journals being very important). Re-invention of a character is a common ploy used in Bailey, Ann, and Kinsey.

Setting wasn't considered realistic to most of the group; they felt it would be hard to find a beach town that lazy and with so few people. Discussion of how setting causes certain things to be possible or not possible ensued. The general laziness of most of the town contributed to the availability of time and opportunity for crimes, affairs, etc.

Distractions are an element of mysteries. We talked about the many distractions in this book - too much detail, the school superintendent, Tap Granger, the pastor and his

wife- and how they threw some of us off the track to solution. However, one of the group members had it solved in the first 20 pages!

We touched on the theme of missing fathers - both Sue and Kinsey had some experience with this and also Kinsey's sense of humor.

The idea of "women being groomed" with a plodding nature and infinite patience spawned a discussion "grooming on teams, in classrooms, and led to a discussion of how the 60's and 70's shaped us. Comparisons of reactions in the 60's and now brought interesting side discussion.

We felt justice was gained for Bailey in freedom and Ann caught for her crime were a couple of examples.

Who was the fugitive? Kinsey was first named, running from her past and herself and when she ran from the police. Ann, who ran from police for murder, was a fugitive and was also a fugitive of her family. Bailey had been a fugitive for years and was once again for a short time. We caught the fugitives!

-Elouise Rossler, Ten Sleep
January 22, 2007 Book Discussion Group

I think someone else in an earlier report mentioned the site I found useful in discussing Sue Grafton: www.writerswrite.com. In it is an interview with Sue Grafton where she discusses her writing process as well as some revealing information about her personal life that is reflected in her books: 2 divorces, long battles with the legal system over child custody issues, her own growing up in what might be considered a dysfunctional family (parents who were alcoholics- though she says "alcoholics of a quite intellectual and benign sort"), etc. We talked about elements of Grafton's background and personality we can see in her protagonist. We think Kinsey's is sort of Grafton's fantasy life. We analyzed why WE like Kinsey and listed the qualities that appeal to us, and probably most women: her independence, her naturalness (no worry about make-up, clothes), her physical fitness, her instincts about people, and, most of all, her sense of humor.

The small group in Clearmont liked Grafton's book very much. One of our ladies has read all (!) of Grafton's books, and the rest of us were new to the alphabet series.

We enjoyed the setting and this group thought the little seaside town was believable for when the story took place. One person noted that the Northwest and Northeast still has lots of places like that on the coasts. We talked about the detailed descriptions of the setting, and most of us liked how specific her sense of place is, though one person thought it was a little too detailed. We discussed the characters and thought it interesting (and maybe a little telling about Grafton) that the most evil of them was the minister (worse, even, than the murderess, who at least evoked some sympathy for the life she had led). Much of the humor in the story was in the dialogue;

the characters' voices rang pretty true. Small towns tend to have certain types, even Clearmont!

We had a good time with this discussion. We agreed that we realize this is "escape" literature, no great big themes to take away, but interesting possibilities for discussion.
Norleen Healy, Clearmont

We started with some general information about Sue Grafton, such as her stint as a screenwriter in Hollywood, and a few published reviews of Fugitive. Then returned to general discussion. I had prepared a list of ten topics, which participants could comment on or not, as they interested them. We discussed most of the characters, all agreeing on how much we enjoyed Kinsey's independence (and her ability to function without the technology we've all become accustomed to), how much we disliked the "invalid" Ori Fowler, and how we had a tendency to feel pity for Dwight Shales, despite his inappropriate activities with Jean Timberlake. On the less positive side, we agreed that Sue Grafton's scene description went on a bit long for readers who just wanted to get to the story, and there were a lot of "loose ends" not really resolved; for example, we'd have liked to get to know Bailey Fowler better. The scene between Bailey and Kinsey early in the book had some intriguing aspects, but we never really got to pursue them. Several people enjoyed reading aloud from the book, having marked places where the description was especially interesting or thought-provoking. One example is the scene following Bailey's escape from the hearing, when neighbor ladies seem to be able to bring over Jell-O salads and casseroles in record time! (p.98) We all agreed that Grafton's mystery was entertaining, but didn't have much depth to it...there weren't hidden themes to uncover; in fact, in looking for messages we almost felt like we were scrambling to find and interpret them. We also observed that not only is there a tendency to equate the private eye character Grafton created with our perception of her as a personality, but it's almost as if Kinsey Millhone has become a real person to Grafton! I found a "biography" of Millhone on Grafton's web site, and reference to the communication she has with anyone writing to her with Kinsey's name, or having just named a child Kinsey!

Phyl Sundstrom, Newcastle

Twenty women and one gentleman gathered in tiny Story to discuss **F Is for Fugitive** by Sue Grafton. Following up on our discussion last month when we viewed the film featuring the three female authors of detective fiction, I explained how Grafton views herself as a writer - "very disciplined," "writing is a professional job," "much research precedes each book" etc. The group agreed that she takes her role as a writer seriously, yet her writing really can't be considered anything more than "escape" literature. We found a little ironic her comment that "today writers are in too much of a hurry - cranking books out..." considering the number of alphabet books she has put out in the past 20 years, almost one a year. All that being said, we had a lively discussion about the book. Several in the group had read others of the "alphabet series," and filled in details of Kinsey Millhone's life. We found ourselves talking about her as though she is a real

person! We discussed the expectations we bring to detective fiction (many of these ladies and our one man joined in the Story library group last time when we did "Crime and the Cultural Landscape"), and whether or how this book fulfilled them. The group felt that Grafton had overdone the "red herrings" by bringing in a lot of characters who, as it turned out, really served no purpose in the book. We were sort of disappointed that the Minister hadn't "done it" because we felt he was the most evil character and seemed to get off scot free. We had an interesting discussion about Grafton's choice to leave the setting of the books in the 80's before computers and cell phones and effect of this. Everyone seemed to have read the book and had lots to say, but when I went around the group and asked them to rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, most gave it a 4 or 5. They're a pretty discerning bunch. They're having fun with the books though and seem to appreciate the predictability the plots offer.....maybe a nice release from the woes around us!

Norleen Healy

Pine Bluffs discussing of "F is for Fugitive" by Sue Grafton

Seventeen ladies met at the Pine Bluffs public library to discuss "F is for Fugitive" by Sue Grafton. Most of these ladies are avid mystery readers and enjoyed the book and the opportunity to discuss it with a group of their friends and neighbors in this small community. But it was soon evident that the group members saw the book in vastly different ways.

One of the first comments was from a woman who thought that Sue Grafton spent too much time describing the scenery and not enough on character development. A couple of the group members agreed but several had the opposite impression. They appreciated and enjoyed the description of the town and the ocean etc., but also thought that one of Grafton's strengths was character development. Those that had read Grafton's books previously said that the character of Kinsey Milhone is what kept them coming back when each new book in the alphabet mystery series was released. Those that didn't like the description as much thought they read more for the thrilling mystery (the plot) and those that appreciated the descriptive passages also tended to enjoy Grafton's detective Kinsey and possibly also appreciated Grafton's writing style more in general.

I asked the question; if this book was not named "F is for Fugitive" what would you rename it (as in F is for ____)? I was trying to get to the underlying themes of the book. The answers were very perceptive, such as "F is for Family", "F is for Fowler" or "F is for Fathers". We noted how often Sue Grafton addresses dysfunctional family issues in her books and how many missing fathers there were in this particular book. Both Kinsey's parents are dead, the victim never knew her father and was carrying a baby at the time of her death whose father remains a mystery. The killer's father was around but always emotionally unavailable to her.

We spent a good deal of time dissecting Kinsey's personality. Her orphan status, her upbringing with her

unconventional Aunt Gin, her failed relationships with men, her short career as a police officer, her violent tendencies and her penchant for skating on the edge of legality in her investigations. We also discussed Kinsey's sense of humor, disregard of her physical appearance, her intelligence and pluck.

We also discussed whether the town described in this book really seemed like California to us. Many thought that the small town of Floral Beach didn't seem like our impression of California at all. We decided it was probably the fault of the media that we expected all of California to be like Los Angeles (all sun, surfers, and Valley girls). We discussed how the strange insular, gossipy and uneducated people that Kinsey found in Floral Beach can be found anywhere in any town in America. We also thought that the small town provided a conveniently closed group of suspects that could be expected to still be in the area seventeen years after Jean Timberlake's death. This is a literary device Agatha Christie often used in her books by placing all her suspects in a train, or a boat or an isolated estate so that the murder could not be blamed on a stranger.

Most enjoyed the mystery and all (except one who figured it out early) were completely surprised by the actual identity of the murderer. Elaine Jones Hayes

Ranchester Library 12 participants

I did this series last year and started with the film (Women of Mystery). This time around I suggested we do the books first and end with the film, and I think there are advantages to both approaches. The film does introduce and give background on the three writers and, I think, sparks interest, but I didn't feel it left a lot of fodder for a discussion afterwards. Starting with one of the books seemed to get us right into discussion of the author's voice and use of setting, especially in terms of the intensive researching that the writers discuss in the film.

As expected, several in the group had read others of Grafton's books, and many had not. Because there's so much material (interviews etc) available on the internet, I gave a fairly lengthy introduction to Grafton herself, both in terms of her personal background and her writing. The readers here were interested in hearing all this, especially the part about how she got into mystery writing by imagining how she could kill an ex-husband while she was going through a bitter divorce!

We discussed the expectations readers bring to traditional detective novels. harking back to the series we had done together several years ago, Crime and the Cultural Landscape, in which the detectives were male. We agreed that there a significant differences, but we still see even the modern female detective as being somewhat of a loner and having a code, not necessarily societal. During our discussion of Kinsey, we agreed that she is undoubtedly every independent woman's fantasy, certainly at least Sue Grafton's.

This group really enjoyed the book. The thought the setting was believable and the characters interesting. Most said they were surprised at the who the murderer

was. We talked about the "red herrings" Grafton employed. We discussed one of Grafton's themes that all families have secrets. I pointed out that some families aren't allowed secrets (the Kennedys for example) and we decided that that's worse.

This group is very excited about this series; they said they were ready for something "light" this one time, in spite of my trying to steer them elsewhere!

The Shape of Dread

Ten ladies met in the Pinedale library Monday, November 3, to discuss Marcia Muller's "The Shape of Dread" This is the 11th book in her so far 28 books in her Sharon McCone Private Investigator series. The 17th of her 36 novels, as well as 7 short story editions, 1 non-fiction and 12 anthologies, the anthologies with her husband also a writer.

For some reason this book brought out a broader range of discussion than almost any book this group has discussed in several years. Maybe it was the fall air or what they had for breakfast but it was most enjoyable for everyone. One participant had read all of Marcia Muller Sharon McCone mysteries and was most helpful in adding those thoughts to the discussion.

Discussion came up regarding crime in general, culture and the "festering of inner cities" as the ladies had seen themselves. Along with that they talked about the loss of cities in the Oklahoma and Texas areas when the oil fields began to fade out. Could the same thing happen in the Sublette County area and other counties in Wyoming that depend almost entirely on natural resource industries? More than likely.

We talked about the influx of many workers to the area and the problems with not enough housing and the burden placed on small towns with inadequate water, sewer, gas, and communication lines and not enough money to provide for them in a timely manner. When the drilling is completed and the gas field begins to deplete itself the towns will be over built.

In our discussion on the clash of culture we even got into a little anatomical discussion regarding the sudoriferous glands not to mention scheidopygia (sp). {I'll let that remain the mystery we give to all you out there in WCH book reading land.}

The group made comparisons, both likenesses and differences, between the writing of the two authors we have read so far.

Happy reading.
Reading Wyoming

Sixteen women gathered on a chilly autumn afternoon at the Laramie County Library to discuss "The Shape of Dread" by Marcia Muller. The group was fairly evenly

divided between those who thought this book better (deeper, more literary) than "F is for Fugitive" and those that didn't like Marcia Muller's descriptive writing style and preferred the more lively and entertaining Kinsey Milhone character in Sue Grafton's book.

Many in the group noted the similarity between the plot of "F is for Fugitive" and that of "The Shape of Dread". Both feature a man wrongly and unjustly convicted of the murder of a young woman. Many also noted the large cast of characters and the fact that Muller kept you guessing until the very end. Many of these characters were guilty of something, another crime or a "crime of omission", even if not the murder. Those who appreciated Muller's writing style noted that they couldn't put the book down. Several mentioned that they finished the book in just one or two days.

Fifteen dedicated readers met on Thursday, October 16, to discuss The Shape of Dread by Marcia Muller. We are lucky that some many of our group members have read many of Muller's other books in this series, so they helped us fill in some unanswered questions about the characters that appear in most of the books and make brief appearances in this book.

We compared the social issues that appear in both The Shape of Dread and F is for Fugitive such as lesbian/gay lifestyles, marriage infidelity, the under privileged and their experience in the judicial system, and women in the workplace. Some of our readers enjoyed more romantic threads and diversions in this mystery. Also, we continued to note the changes in technology from the 1980s and compared it to what we have in our lives today.

Jennifer handed out information concerning how to access the Wyoming Arts Council book discussion wiki and some group members expressed an interest in a place on the wiki to discuss the books they are currently reading such as the Women of Mystery series.

Overall, the group is enjoying their time together because this diverse, interactive group that has a lot to say to one another.

Jennifer L. Sorensen Assistant Professor of English,
Western Wyoming Community College

Marcia Muller's detective protagonist Sharon McCone was not liked as well as Kinsey Milhone in Grafton's novels but most of us believed that Sharon was more realistic or "normal" than Kinsey. Sharon is always on the lookout for a relationship while Kinsey seems to be completely indifferent and independent from men. Kinsey is fearless while Sharon fears going into a dangerous slum area of San Francisco.

We also discussed the undercurrent of human psychology in the novel. Tracy's (the murder victim's) notebook was full of her astute psychological observation. Tracy's father is a psychologist who eloquently explains the difference

between being selfish and being self-centered, while Tracy's mother is slowly and painfully losing touch with reality because of her grief.

After we finished the discussion we watched the movie again since many of the ladies did not attend the first session. Nine stayed to watch and discuss the excellent "Women of Mystery" documentary.

Elaine Jones Hayes
Cheyenne

The Big Piney book group met with just 6 people today to discuss Marcia Muller's *The Shape of Dread*. This is the last book in this series as there is a video in conjunction with this series that will be viewed next time. The group was told about the large number of books she has authored as well as the number she has coauthored with her husband. Mrs. Muller is an extremely prolific author and much rewarded for her efforts. I informed the group that Muller had signed her book rights to this particular book to CBS and Lorimar as a potential TV movie and possible TV series. However, the producers picked Geena Davis as the proposed detective and she turned the part down and no further action was taken, although by now there may be interest again..

The problem with this series is that the group has not been that interested in it. They would rather read as they put it, "books with more meat in them." I suggested they would be quite interested in reading the series connected to the "Between Fences Program."

They did like this book better than the previous two. They liked the way the author was able to put the number of twists in the story she did. No one was able to figure out who the killer was until they got to the part here the author let the reader know. As far as social value or determining whether this fit any actual probability there was no interest. The consensus was that this was like most mysteries, an easy read but not much else. As a facilitator for the group when there is that little interest in a book one should not try to force anything down their throats. We will see what happens next month when we view the video with interviews of the 3 women authors in this series.

The book we started with is *The Shape of Dread* by Marcia Muller. Several in the group had read at least a few Sharon McCone mysteries and like them enough to read more. We started by discussing our general reactions to the book. Some loved the amount of scenic detail Muller provides about locations in San Francisco. Others were made impatient in descriptions of places that really didn't matter that much. I suggested that Muller is using a writerly technique of minute detail of the mundane in order to establish credibility when she moves into descriptions behind the scenes at the comedy club and other locations more exotic. We touched on other aspects of the book, such as characters we liked or didn't like. Most of us agreed that we knew all along Tracy was dead and cared about the outcome mostly for the sake of her parents. We

explored in some depth Sharon's reasons for getting involved with George, the murder victim's father. We talked about the sympathy / empathy / enthusiasm continuum Sharon muses over, and her reasons for doing detective work through the All Souls Legal Cooperative. We also talked about the issue of forgiveness that comes up later in the book. We concluded by speculating what will happen to Bobby, if and when he is finally released from prison. Some thought he would gravitate to a life of crime because of his prolonged exposure to prison life. Others thought he would just live a quiet life of little consequence. We all figured his mother would have something to say about his choices, whatever they were.

- Julianne Couch, Laramie

The Shape of Dread by Marica Muller is not their favorite, but the discussion was lovely on Monday, Oct. 16. Justice and violence are so much a part of this story that every character in the book can be examples. McCone struggles with the kill or not to kill theme, but not as strongly in this book as in other titles. The readers like the twists and facets in the story, and at the end of the discussion we watched the Muller segment of the film again. Muller talks about the characters taking over and changing the villain at the end of the story. That was an "ahhh" moment. The readers did not like Sharon McCone love affair, and they are not sure Bobby will ever be healthy, even with his mom pushing him. That's a lot of anger to carry. We talked about the importance of the location and Muller descriptions, which some thought was too lengthy, but it will be interesting to compare them to the other writers

This is a great series for conversations about the writers and writing styles. I think we have all become fascinated by the differences. The Wright library has a large display of all the books by the 3 women writers, and participants are reading "extra" from the series. Patty Myers, Wright

Grafton and Muller have differing styles we decided. Each one uses background information from her own life. Each one grapples with societal issues; Muller connects to personal and social responsibilities and addresses issues like the death penalty, etc. Grafton looks at human relationships more than issues. Muller's writing has more meat than Grafton's, which seems to have a preoccupation with writing detail even when not needed. One person pointed this out as a trait for her P. I. who needs to have sharp and detailed observation.

Place was important to *DREAD*- San Francisco is a city of mazes as explored through routes of travel, human webs, weather (not enough fog in the book according to one reader). San Francisco seems a great place for a mystery to me!

We discussed the death penalty as seen in the book and some included their own feelings about it. We especially noted Bobby Foster's take on the death penalty from beginning to end.

Our list of victims beyond Bobby and Tracy was long - George and Laura (loss of child), Lisa (used and moved), Jay (loss of money, life), Kathy (loss of promise from husband and ultimately loss of everything), even Sharon who lost a love.

Justice was deservedly coming to Bobby: Rob was also getting what he deserved eventually.

Tracy's use of people was a moral issue with this group. They saw her as "less" a victim because of her brutal use of others. We discussed her possible reasons - still searching for parental acceptance, her obsessive ambition and desire for success and her utilization of the theory that one must live it to use it, hence her use of Bobby and Lisa.

Another action perceived as unnecessary to the story was Sharon sleeping with George. This was a moral question also for the group.

We decided DREAD has an amorphous shape and its color is gray. The tone of the entire book was gloomy and gray as described in the first two paragraphs of the book. Certainly San Quentin and Alcatraz are "gray."

Several themes came out: black men more likely to get less justice, blacks can better themselves (Bobby's mother), the undercurrent of "sleaze" in the aspiring entertainment business, dysfunctionality of many families regardless of status and economic stature (Bobby's family, Tracy's family).

The discussion had humor - one person said, "If the fire had taken place someplace like a school they would have gotten almost everyone out." Another replied, "They don't sell beer at school!"

At this point, we have no converts to either mystery reading or feminism.

Elouise Rossler, Ten Sleep

Interestingly, the group seemed to like this mystery even more the one we discussed last month, *F Is for Fugitive*. When I asked what they particularly liked about this book they said it made them think more, and one person said she particularly found the journals of the victim to be interesting. They seemed to find Sharon McCone more "real" than Kinsey Millhone.—"just an ordinary person trying to make a living." All of this rather surprised me because I liked the Grafton novel for the self deprecating humor of the protagonist. In reviewing Muller's biographical details, it's clear that she has struggled a lot both personally and professionally to achieve her place in contemporary fiction, and we decided that she projects this on her protagonist. Even so, we agreed that it's clear that these female detectives tend to be the writers' fantasy of what they would like to be: attractive, athletic, courageous, independent, etc. This group in little isolated Clearmont loves the attention to detail in the setting that these mysteries give. We get to travel to other places through these books.

Muller wrote that she likes detective stories because "unlike in real life, both reader and writer are presented with answers and closure." We decided that's why we read them too.

Norleen Healy, Clearmont

We met on April 11, 2007, in the county library meeting room; once again, 18 people participated in the discussion, this time of Marcia Muller's [The Shape of Dread](#). We started with some general information about Marcia Muller, such as her aversion to technology, some website addresses for extended information, and a [Publisher's Weekly](#) review of [The Shape of Dread](#). I also shared a copy of an essay Muller had published on how she joined the world of technology, mostly because she realized Sharon had to and so Muller had to in order to include technology like the use of cell phones and online research.

Then we turned to general discussion with a list of topics, which participants could comment on or not, as they interested them. We started with a comparison of Sharon McCone to Kinsey Millhone, noting more similarities than differences, and enjoying the independent streak we saw in both characters. We all agreed, though, that we preferred Muller's main character and her plot, because both had more depth and development.

While that development was generally appreciated, we sometimes felt that Muller brought in extraneous information that was more distracting than helpful, such as the New Year's Eve party, the description of George's temporary home, and even the information on personality types which he shared with Sharon.

That led into a discussion of unrealistic aspects in the book. The relationship between George and Sharon seemed to move awfully quickly, there was a discrepancy between Bobby Foster's character (and dialogue) and his mother's, and the "shootout" at the cottage seemed pretty farfetched with a fishing pole weapon and Sharon's quick apprehension of Rob (and his gun!).

We all agreed that one of the areas we respected most in Muller's mystery was her research base; it was obvious that she had studied topics like no-body convictions and comedy clubs in order to present her characters and scenes realistically. We also enjoyed the San Francisco setting and the detail included so that we could not only envision it, but also remember details for those of us who had visited that city.

To close the evening the participants separated into small groups, each group being given a reader review from the Amazon.com website. The small groups discussed the review, agreed/disagreed, and prepared a brief report for the large group; some shared and commented on the review while one group rewrote to create its own review.

Phyl Sundstrom, Newcastle

17 women and 1 man(!) gathered to discuss *The Shape of Dread* in Story. I gave them a bit of background on the prolific Marcia Muller and how she came to writing detective fiction (claiming to be "working out her demons", eerily similar to Sue Grafton of our last discussion). We talked about her Sharon McCone character, what the appeal is, how she differs from and is similar to other prototypes. There was general agreement that the group found *The Shape of Dread* to be more compelling and believable than *F Is For Fugitive* although still several pointed out details where the novel stretched credibility. I asked them what engaged them in the novel and the discussion took many tracks here. No one seemed bothered by the detailed descriptions of the setting; most liked that, especially those with any familiarity with San Francisco (we segued a bit here into a discussion of the movie MILK which many of us saw last week). When I asked what, if any, broader issues the novel made them think about (trying here for some humanities discussion), I got some good insightful comments about capital punishment, the nature of violence in people, how greed, power, and/or jealousy seem to form the basis of most crimes, etc. The comment that I loved came from a lady who said early on in the novel she read the following: "I know from bitter experience that every death diminishes us..." and that that line had an enormous effect on her. She told us that she suddenly felt like she wasn't the only one who felt the way she did four years into a loss, that until she read that line she thought she was alone in that she couldn't recover who she was before the loss of the loved one. What a great opportunity this gave us all to talk about the value of literature in our lives. It raised the whole discussion to another level as far as I was concerned.

Norleen Healy

Pine Bluffs Discussion of *The Shape of Dread*

Seventeen women came together at the Pine Bluffs library on October 6th to discuss the second book (*The Shape of Dread* by Marcia Muller) in the *Women of Mystery* series. All but a couple of the women were able to finish the book. The general reaction to the book was split. One said she found it so compelling, she read it in just four hours. Another said she finished it but found it easy to lay down for a day or two, read something else and get back to later. As with "F is for Fugitive" some appreciated the author's sometimes detailed descriptions of the surroundings and others found it distracting to the storyline. Some of the women said they would recommend the author to their friends who read mysteries, others would not.

I mentioned to the group that Marcia Muller herself suggested that this book be the one read in the *Women of Mystery* series because in it she felt that she had finally found her main character Sharon McCone's voice. We discussed why she would feel that way. We talked about how in this book Sharon faces her violent impulses and doesn't act on them, her relationships with other characters and how Sharon figures prominently in an effort to free an innocent man from death row. We agreed that

to fully answer the question of why/how Muller found Sharon's voice in this book we would have had to read some of her previously written books and compare (and none of us had).

We also discussed whether or not justice was served in the novel. Bobby Foster is still in prison at the end of the novel, the real killer has been shot and killed, other innocents have been killed in an effort to cover up the crime, and another truly bad man is behind bars for the murder of Marc Emmons. In addition to the two murderers in the novel at least three others are guilty of what Muller refers to as "crimes of omission" by not telling the police what they know and allowing Bobby to be convicted of the murder and sentenced to death. All the characters at the Comedy Club acted in their own selfish interest and sacrificed a young black man (Foster) to a negligent and/or corrupt justice system.

We also compared Sharon McCone to Kinsey Milhone (the detective character in Sue Grafton's *F is for Fugitive*). In a sense McCone is more professional than Milhone. Sharon works out of an agency (All Souls Legal Cooperative) and has an assistant to help her. She also stays carefully within the law in her investigation where Kinsey tries to find an excuse to snoop or enter a house illegally. But in another sense Sharon McCone's behavior is not as professional. Sharon wastes no time becoming physically and emotionally involved with the victim's father. This kept her from being as unbiased as she could have been.

We had a lively discussion that lasted almost 1 ½ hours and the group looks forward to our next and last session where we will discuss Sara Paretsky's book *Tunnel Vision*. Elaine Jones Hayes

Tongue River Library

10 ladies gathered to discuss the second novel in the *Women in Mystery* series. Initially we talked a bit about Marcia Muller and her prodigious writing career. In her interviews, she was much like Sue Grafton in that she told how she was drawn to write mysteries because it allows her to impose some order on the world, having suffered a lot of trauma in her life, and because it is a genre that she has always enjoyed reading. She too claims to do a lot of research for details in her novels, something which we agreed was obvious. She also admits that Sharon McCone is her "alter ego" enjoying her (Muller's) fantasy life.

In our discussion the novel itself, most felt that it was "darker" and certainly more complicated than the Grafton novel. Several said they found it confusing up through the end. We tried to clear up some of the questions. Most admitted that they weren't as drawn to Sharon McCone as they had been to the protagonist in the Grafton novel. We discussed the differences and similarities of the two female detectives.

This novel does allow for some serious discussion of issues like the justice system (we felt Muller is a bit jaded in her views here), capital punishment, gender issues, and the variations in the way people deal with grief.

A couple of the ladies had read several of the (27!) SHaron McCone novels and wanted to fill us in on the details of her life. We agreed that there were several especially interesting characters in McCone's work place that would be fun to follow up on by reading some of the subsequent novels, a good play on Mullers's part

Tunnel Vision

We had our last mystery writers discussion group in Baggs last night (5/19); we were a little low in numbers, since Baggs was dealing with a flood (at least it was a change from the blizzards): five participants and me. It was a good, fast-moving discussion: /Tunnel Vision /by Sara Paretsky seemed to be everyone else's favorite as well as my own. It's a fast moving novel of action and ideas: Linda listed all the issues involved, about 10, from abuse (emotional, physical and sexual) to corporate corruption and housing issues. We discussed the plot: the symbolism of the decaying setting (Vic's office and the underground passages/tunnels of Chicago), the serial crises, climax and resolution. We thought the theme, and perhaps the central conflict, was corruption vs. integrity. V. I. Warshawski is an example of such integrity that she's unable to compromise even when it places her or someone she loves in danger. It was a fun discussion, I thought, though we kept it a little shorter than usual so that we could watch the video /Women of Mystery/ again. Two of our group hadn't seen it, since they had missed the first gathering; the rest of us got more out of it after reading the books, I think. We discussed it briefly, then closed, just a little later than usual (about 8:15).

I have enjoyed the discussions and books, and I look forward to the next series. Thanks for your help!

Mary Karen Solomon
Baggs Book Group

12 ladies met at the Pinedale library on December 1 to discuss this book by Sara Paretsky. This author may be the most aggressive, as far as activism outside her writing, of any of the authors we've read. I told the group about the number of forums she belongs to as well as her mentoring of Chicago inner city kids and the scholarships she give to the U. of Kansas. Also that she has been asked several times not to talk about certain things when she is asked to appear before a group, particularly since 9/11.

This group is not at a loss to begin to talk about anything their minds conjure up reading these books. In the first ten minutes they talked about the tunnels under Chicago where the author set part of her story and then went to the underground in several other large cities in the United States. One lady had gone to an exclusive restaurant in the Atlanta underground and had to tell about that experience. Some thought the story was too difficult to follow with too many characters. And, they could not keep up with her explanation of how all the money got from one

country to another and then funnelled through various banks in order to eventually get to the "bad" guys. A couple liked the book because of her great discription while others did not like it as well as the other 2 books we read.

However we did a lot of discussing brought about by various passages in the book and how it related to our own experience or what we think we see around us. Several passages talked about abusers and the author herself has talked about that issue in her lectures and other writing. Local and personal issues were brought into the discussion.

In the early part of the book the author has a sentence saying, ".... in Chicago it's kind of shameful not to know how to buy an elected official." This discussion went into a number of areas of politics especially on the local level and not involving "buying an elected official". With the elections being not quite a month old there was much for them to say.

There was a sentence where the detective talked about a writ of certiorari. So we received a little legal knowledge. We also caught the author in a blunder when the detective said, "They wanted to do a CAT scan to see if my brain waves were OK." To check brain waves a machine using electrical current is necessary such as EEG or PET. The CAT scan of the head only picks up any anomalies.

Several of the group also knew that her 2001 book, Total Recall, was made into a movie.

How we got into a short discussion on "The Sound of Music" I do not recall. Everyone remembered Julie Andrews but it took a few minutes before someone remembered that Christopher Plummer played the father. Several thought they were married in real life but they were not. She was married to Blake Edwards.

Ah, BOOKS, the pictures and thoughts they bring to mind. Isn't it great! Merry Christmas to all and to all good reading.

On November 20 at the Sweetwater Library, fifteen devoted women gathered to discuss our last Women of Mystery book, Tunnel Vision.

The group wondered if they should have read more meaning into the title or whether it was the obvious reference to the drama that occurred underground in Chicago. We finally agreed to disagree on this point.

Many readers had a difficult time with V.I. Warshawski's character because they thought she was too rough to be believable, especially with her dealings with the Messenger family and V. I.'s bold stance with Emily. V. I. seemed to be almost a super hero and super human with what she could away with. We discussed the themes of domestic violence and women's roles in this book as well as in the other two we read. A majority of the readers were left with unanswered questions about the battered woman and her children who opened and closed the story.

Additionally, the group wondered why the three independent women P. I.'s all lived in near poverty economically and emotionally--hopefully these educated women have progressed in the last twenty years. The rape topic seemed to obvious and a disappointing distraction in the story.

Several of the group members said they enjoyed reading about the big cities in each of the books because it reminded them of the places they had lived. A few readers remembered times in their lives when it became the norm for women to gather in bar settings after work. Some of them shared fond memories of such gatherings and good times in Rock Springs.

We ended by sharing women mystery authors and books we thought others in our group would enjoy. Overall, we enjoyed this series and meeting together and wished the series had gone on longer.

Jennifer L. Sorensen Assistant Professor of English
Western Wyoming Community College

Ten women attended the session at the Laramie County Library.

The group members had radically different impressions of the novel. Several of the ladies who arrived earliest commented on how much they had enjoyed reading the book. One woman said she read the 464 page book twice in row because she enjoyed it so much. These women were really taken with the pluck of private eye V.I. Warshawski. Even though she turns forty in this book she still climbs 39 flights of stairs, crawls through rat-infested and flooded tunnels to rescue a homeless woman and her children, and carries her wounded lover to safety after he is shot. They also were impressed with how she kept to her liberal ideals despite all these adversities and despite the fact that she wasn't getting paid to do this particular job.

After everyone had arrived we began getting comments from a few people who really disliked the book, the Warshawski character and/or Paretsky's writing style. One lady wondered why all three books were written in the first person and wondered if it was a characteristic of women mystery writers. The woman who brought this up said that when she reads a book written in the first person she always expects a lighter, less literary read. Several said that they thought Paretsky needed a better editor because they noticed frequent grammar and punctuation mistakes. Another women with legal experience noticed some mistakes made in the book concerning non-profit law. One woman said that she was disappointed that she didn't get a good sense of Chicago from Paretsky's novel. But then another group member countered that her sister lives in Chicago and that her sister loves the local detail in Paretsky's books.

Some didn't think that V.I. Warshawski was realistic. They thought at her age and physical condition (recently beaten) she wouldn't have been able to do the things she did in the novel. Defenders of Paretsky and Warshawski

thought that V.I. was operating on adrenaline and maternal instinct when she was saving the children from the flooded tunnel. Some also were dismayed by her frequent law-breaking, such as breaking into offices, disturbing crime scenes, etc.; although they did admit that this characteristic seems to be common in fictional P.I.'s, both male and female.

We also speculated on how close Emily's character is based on Paretsky's own childhood. This detail was alluded to in the "Women of Mystery" movie and confirmed in her biographies online. From the movie and the books it's obvious that all the authors in the series and their characters are "working out" their issues through their characters actions in the novels.

This is our last book in the series and the ladies were all sad to see it end. It was a fun group. We sat awhile longer and discussed other options for book groups in Cheyenne. And we also voted on their preferences for the next WCH book group. Hopefully many of these women will be back for other book groups at the library.

Elaine Jones Hayes
Laramie County Library
Cheyenne

We had our last mystery writers discussion group in Baggs last night (5/19); we were a little low in numbers, since Baggs was dealing with a flood (at least it was a change from the blizzards): five participants and me. It was a good, fast-moving discussion: *Tunnel Vision* by Sara Paretsky seemed to be everyone else's favorite as well as my own. It's a fast moving novel of action and ideas: Linda listed all the issues involved, about 10, from abuse (emotional, physical and sexual) to corporate corruption and housing issues. We discussed the plot: the symbolism of the decaying setting (Vic's office and the underground passages/tunnels of Chicago), the serial crises, climax and resolution. We thought the theme, and perhaps the central conflict, was corruption vs. integrity. V. I. Warshawski is an example of such integrity that she's unable to compromise even when it places her or someone she loves in danger. It was a fun discussion, I thought, though we kept it a little shorter than usual so that we could watch the video *Women of Mystery* again. Two of our group hadn't seen it, since they had missed the first gathering; the rest of us got more out of it after reading the books, I think. We discussed it briefly, then closed, just a little later than usual (about 8:15).

I have enjoyed the discussions and books, and I look forward to the next series. Thanks for your help!

Mary Karen Solomon
Baggs Book Group

The Big Piney group, with 8 people present, met at noon on Monday, August 27. in the library and discussed "Tunnel Vision". The feeling toward this book was at best ambivalent. There were 2 people in the discussion who are extensive mystery readers and were not impressed

with this one. I thought the author did an excellent job of keeping the reader off guard and letting us know who the perpetrator of the murder was as well as others involved in the crime until late in the story. It would be difficult for the reader to out guess the author in my opinion. One lady even said she didn't think there was anything to discuss regarding the story, yet was willing to talk about the actions and thoughts of the characters. Several said they would not read any of Paretsky's other books, while at the same time a couple others said they had already read some of her other books.

We talked about my proposed question that maybe we see so many mystery /murder TV shows that when we read a murder mystery we have lost some of our ability to imagine and create pictures from the story. We are so used to being entertained that being entertained by reading a story like this does carry what it might have some years ago. I compared it to radio. Before TV and our later technology I tell younger people we used to "watch" radio. We could all develop pictures of everything that went on in those old radio shows. Today, because of all of our powerful video imaging, as well as the ease of ownership and size of equipment, we have lost a lot of our ability to imagine. Reading helps create that in us. I'm amazed at the number of young people I encounter who cannot carry on a conversation, although they seem to do quite well text messaging their friends. On the other hand we are in fast forward mode and expect gratification quickly. There are very few TV shows that last more than 20 minutes when the advertising is taken out. The longest we can sit to be entertained is by going into a movie house. So, sitting down and reading a book that may take upwards of 10 hours or more is probably not welcome by many people. (while at the same time the purchase of books and library use seems to be increasing.

These ideas carried more discussion than the book itself. Was that good or bad? Any discussion a book generates is valuable. I am curious to see what the group decides about Sue Grafton's "F Is For Fugitive". She is a widely read mystery writer with as many titles or more in print than Sara Paretsky. I am looking forward to this next one with much curiosity. Keep reading.

We knew it would be the longest and most complicated story-line of the three novels in the Women of Mystery series, so we thought reading it for the middle session would be a wise choice. We had a much smaller group this time than we had for the first two meetings. It was probably not because of the book. In fact, the folks at the Eppson Center had another event going on that day that provided a very tempting alternative, and I know several of our regulars opted for that other activity. In some ways it was nice having a smaller group. It gave more people a chance to talk, including some of those who are sometimes rather quiet. We examined the arc of the story for awhile, and why one has to get to page 92 or thereabouts before a character manages to be murdered. One woman kept saying she misses her "grocery store whodunits" by which I think she meant simple escapist mysteries where someone gets offed in the opening chapters. The most reflective part of our conversation

centered on VI's relationship to the law specifically, and right and wrong in general. We started by itemizing the actions she took we felt were "wrong" but quickly discovered that list was rather long. Instead, we turned to a review of things she did we thought were morally or ethically right, though perhaps not strictly within the law. I think taking that tack helped the group see the gray areas Paretsky was illustrating with Vic's various inner conflicts. Finally, some readers took exception to the Vic's various character traits, with one person calling her "masculine" and another "just like Mike Hammer." We talked a bit about how writers (and actor) go about creating characters by determining all sorts of seemingly small characteristics. For the first time ever I gave the group "homework." At our next meeting, we'll each come with a list of traits we'd want our ideal female private eye to possess. For example, what does she look like? What does she wear on her days off? What does she like to eat? What music does she enjoy? What sorts of pets, if any, does she have? What car does she drive? What are her hobbies, special skills, and so on. I think it'll be a fun exercise for our final session, in which we'll be discussing the Sue Grafton novel, which is neither long nor complex.

Julianne Couch, Laramie

There are more characters, story lines, and humanities topics in this mystery than any other book I've ever read. Whodathunkit! Three little mysteries are just full of justice, psychological behavior and misbehavior, bizarre issues of illegal immigration, family abuse, homeless people, academia and judicial systems, law enforcement honor and dishonor. All three authors are different; the three private detectives are different; the locations are different, and it is amazing how much we learned about the writers and characters of the series. I just loved Women of Mystery.

"She wants to be a man" was the first statement for the discussion, and the personality of V.I. Warshawski was dissected, as was her decision making, her sense of justice, and the complications of her case. Participants liked the threads of the story, especially the Hawkings family, young Ken's crush on the detective, the inclusion of the Romania illegals, Emily Messenger-her mother's death- and her father's abuse, Officer Neeley, the criminality of Senator Gantner. Still V.I. worked as a vigilante and put her friends in danger. Our single male participant explained that men are simpler creatures than females, and mainly they want a semblance of normalcy in their love life and home. No wonder our female detectives have trouble keeping their men. Miss Marple, Jessica Fletcher and Mrs. Peabody are other examples of women concentrating on crime not domesticity.

In the series there was a conclusion that Agatha Christie's statement that every crime must have a solution is not a goal of these women writers who view social issues as currently unsolvable. The series concept was intriguing to many of the reader who became interested in following the lives of Warshawski, McCone and Milhone because their lives were obviously changing.

This final conversation was lively. The readers had fun with the series, and we talked about the next application. I have some concern that some participants are die-hard mystery readers and won't enjoy the more serious discussion series. But we shall see.

Patty Myers, Wright

Gender bias, racism, homelessness, sexual and physical abuse were discussed in relation to characterizations. VI was seen as pushing the envelope even though her basic ideals and reasons of operation are positive and well intended. The relationship between Conrad and VI seemed contrived for the sake of politico-social issues. The Messenger household was dysfunctional in so many respects with Fabian and Diedre being equally unable to function normally. Diedre drank excessively because of her inability to be herself at home; became involved as a volunteer to shore up her poor self esteem. Fabian was hellbent on becoming a judge at anyone's expense. Emily was caught in between these two inept parents.

McKenzie Was comic relief. Mr Contreras battled the generational gap and age bias quite well as well as keeping VI on track with running the dogs.

We applauded the sewer rescue for bravery, but deemed it unrealistic. Chicago can't allow water to flow backwards in to the underground tunnels for it would destroy the currently used system.

We laughed about some of the actions of McKenzie Graham. Humor crept into the book and was appreciated. Mr. Contreras and the dogs gave a lighter touch to the book also.

Mary Neeley, the policewoman turned partner in VI's private eye business, was admired by all of us for her risk taking and standing on her principles. It would be interesting to read a follow-up of VI and Neeley and the children after about a ten year span.

We felt the title was very appropriate. The "tunnel vision" of the police dept., the immigration officials and VI was noted. Discussion about VI breaking laws for good results, the law enforcement stance and how this dichotomy exists in our society. P. I.s are not "official" but do work often necessary to prosecutors. The problem with this issue, with child abuse and homelessness is the "law" on the books, not the action needed.

For a group of readers not really into this genre, we had a great discussion. We did a couple of fun exercises matching Villians in literature with their book and author and matching who the P. I. or detective is in movies and television series. From Arthur Dimmesdale to Mulder and Scully we had fun remembering and forgetting! Great group of readers to work with!

Elouise Rossler, Ten Sleep

We finished the series with Sara Paretsky's *Tunnel Vision*. I wondered how these ladies in Clearmont would respond to VI Warshawski in that she's quite "liberal" by Wyoming and definitely Clearmont standards. I'm happy to say that they were, however, unfazed by the fact that she has a relationship with a black man and that she speaks of having worked in the abortion underground. They appreciated that VI is older (40) and continues to age in subsequent books and that she has such money problems (no health insurance, can't always pay her bills, etc.). Even so, we did recognize that she, like the other two female detectives we've read about, still is a creature imbued with qualities that the writers and female readers would like to have: she's independent, strong, courageous, athletic, smart, attractive, etc. I explained that Paretsky is credited with being one of the first to introduce this kind of modern female detective.

Of the three novels in the series, this was the one that moved us into the most discussion of issues outside the book. Paretsky's background of moving to Chicago in the 60's to do social work is reflected in the straight forward attitude about social ills and issues that we saw in the novel. When I asked what social issues come into play in the novel, they listed the welfare system, women's centers, child custody issues, white collar crime, abuse, homelessness, and the justice system. Almost every one of these got us off on tangents concerning our own communities.

We had intended to review the part from the video about Paretsky since we looked at the video the first session before we started reading the novels, but the technical set-up didn't work out. It was clear how intimately the author knew her setting, something true of all three of the books, and most of the readers liked that strong sense of place so different from OUR place.

Over-all, the series was more interesting than I frankly thought it might be. The small group of readers in Clearmont thoroughly enjoyed it (all have claimed to be reading many more books by the three authors) and the discussions were generally fairly substantive.

Norleen Healy, Clearmont

Most participants agreed that this was the best of the three mysteries in the series. We started with an overview of the evening: some general information about the author, discussion of the book, a 20 minute clip from the [V.I. Warshawski](#) movie I'd gotten through Interlibrary Loan, selecting our series for next year, and completing surveys on this year's series.

Research on Paretsky included her reasoning behind creating a female private eye, her popularity in Japan, and her concerns about such things as her tendency to over-describe and how to control the aging of her main character. Discussion topics included the complexity of the plot line, the wide variety of characters (and some difficulty in keeping them all straight), and our difficulty in believing some of the story's events. For example, V.I. seems to recover very quickly from her near-death experiences, and we found it hard to believe the tunnel rescue went as smoothly as it did! On the other hand, we

enjoyed characters like Mr. Contreras and the relationship he and V.I. have.

The movie is approximately 15 years old, stars Kathleen Turner, and is a 90 minute story based on the three books Paretsky had written prior to Disney purchasing the rights to V.I.'s character. Although the author was disappointed in the movie and it's not an award winner, Turner's portrayal of V.I. is very well done and we enjoyed watching a segment to see that.

As we concluded the evening with our plans for next year, all participants expressed interest in joining the group again. We generally agreed that the women of mystery series doesn't provide as much basis for discussion as we'd like, and we're looking forward to a series with more depth next year.

Phyl Sundstrom
Newcastle

Almost to a person, the group disliked *Tunnel Vision* and VI Warshawski. They felt that the story had many places that stretched credulity and went on to detail these places. They complained that there were too many characters and too much detail (something that Sara Paretsky admits to herself). They said they couldn't "connect" to VI, that she was too much of a rule breaker and to no good end in many instances. They found her to be unbelievable.

In a desperate effort to encourage them to find some redeeming qualities in the book, I asked them how they envisioned the author, Sara Paretsky. They decided they were dubious about her too, but this allowed me to give them some of the background information on her that helped them see where her concern with the many social issues in the novel came from and helped explain her connection to the character of the young girl, Emily. We talked at length about the social issues and decided the same issues were at least as prevalent, if not more so, in our society in 2009 as they were in 1994 when the book was published. They were decidedly more receptive to this aspect of the discussion.

Since this was our last discussion, I asked them which of the three novels they liked best and why. Interestingly they seemed to favor Sue Grafton, which, as I recall, they had "issues" with we discussed that one! On the whole, this is a pretty sophisticated group of readers, and I think they would have been better off with a more challenging series. They did *choose* this one though!

We had decided last month to watch the film again this evening after the discussion tonight. They felt like it would interest them to see the authors again after reading the books. SO that's how we ended the evening: popcorn and a film!

Norleen Healy

Tongue River Library 9 participants

I spent quite a bit of time initially talking about Sara Paretsky's background, including her coming of age in the tumultuous 1960's in Chicago and her abiding passion for social justice, and its reflection in her writing. In spite of all that, of the three women detective novels we've done in this series now, Sara Paretsky's *Tunnel Vision* was unanimously voted the least favorite of the group. Ironically, *Tunnel Vision* probably has the most material for discussion of various social issues (particularly those facing women) and even humanities-related issues, but the over abundance of detail confused and put off several of the readers. Most said they couldn't ever fit all the pieces together. I did inform them that even Paretsky herself admits this is a flaw, especially in this particular novel. Another problem several of the group had was with the protagonist, VI Warshawski -- they said she was so cold and abrupt that she didn't engage them and/or interest them as much as

Sharon McCone or Kinsey in the previous two novels. After comparing the three detectives in detail though, we concluded that they were more alike than not; After a bit of venting, we did have a good discussion about the many social issues that came into play in *Tunnel Vision* - i.e. the welfare system, women's centers, child custody, abuse, homelessness, and white collar crime, Many of the ladies had stories of their own to relate on some of those issues.

Because we are watching the film next time and don't have a book to discuss, I suggested that we each choose and read any other of the many novels by one of the three authors since they are readily available in the library. They agreed to do that if I would read C.J. Box whom I had to admit I hadn't read in the past and who seems to be quite popular in this group!

Twelve women gathered around the table to munch on cookies and popcorn and to discuss the mystery novel *Tunnel Vision* by Sara Paretsky. We were struck by the multitude of characters, plot lines and details in the book. There were at least eight organizations to keep straight in your mind, all with intersecting employees, volunteers, clients and board members. We also counted at least nine major social issues addressed by Paretsky in the novel (homelessness, domestic violence, political corruption, AIDS, big business corruption, sexism, illegal immigration, the death penalty, racism and inter-racial relationships). Most of the group appreciated the complicated plot and believed that for all the confusion it did all come together in the end.

Some of the ladies who didn't like the long descriptive passages in *F is for Fugitive* by Grafton or *The Shape of Dread* by Muller were glad that Paretsky was more action oriented. This led into a discussion of all the action in *Tunnel Vision*. V.I. Warshawski breaks into the office at Home Free and is shot at when she visits the Home Free construction site, later she is beaten at her apartment, arrested by the INS along with a truckload of illegal Romanian construction workers, saves homeless children from a flood, sneaks into a private airport and blows up the

bad guy's plane to save herself and her kidnapped and unconscious boyfriend (whom she has to carry to get away). It seems it's all in a day's work for V.I. Warshawski because she is portrayed larger than life, "like a superhero" one woman in the group remarked.

For some of the women, Sara Paretsky was their favorite author of the series and V.I. Warshawski their favorite female P.I. Others preferred Grafton's Kinsey Milhone because she was more realistic, down to earth and more entertaining (funnier). Some also thought that Paretsky's political views played too large a part in the novel. I then shared with the group Paretsky's biography, her experiences as a member of one of the very few Jewish families in Lawrence, Kansas in the 1950's and 60's, her parent's refusal to pay for her education although they happily paid for the education of her three younger brothers, her work as a community organizer in late 1960's inner-city Chicago, and her current political activism.

We also read and analyzed the very intense poem, *A Mouse Between Two Cat*, which was written by the character Emily who is the abused fourteen year old daughter of the murder victim. We discussed who we thought was the mouse, who we thought were each cat, and what it told us about Emily's treatment by her parents, her intelligence and psychiatric condition. I also shared with the group information about the real April 1992 flood of the Chicago underground tunnels and sub-basements.

This was the last book for us in the series and it was sad to see it end so soon. Many of the ladies in the group have attended several previous *Reading Wyoming* book discussion groups and they appreciated that the selections for the *Women of Mystery* series were more like what they would choose for their own leisure reading. It was a very successful series for our group. Elaine Hayes