

Women of Mystery

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

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 the sounds 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

F for Fugitive

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 Milhone 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 murderer, 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 we 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 Milhone has become a real person to Grafton! I found a "biography" of Milhone 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

The Shape of Dread

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 Milhone, 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

Tunnel Vision

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