

FAVORITE WOMEN MYSTERY WRITERS (and one man)

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Here are some of my favorites women mystery writers, along with the 1st book in the series. (I think it's much better when you read them in the order they were written. Truth be told, I'm incredibly compulsive about this):

Linda Barnes, "A Trouble of Fools." One of my favorites. Her detective, Carlotta Carlisle, is 6'1" tall; a Boston cab driver and private investigator. The relationships and characters are complex, the writing good, the mysteries satisfying. One of the things that I like best is that Barnes has kept up the quality in her series - no psychopaths who've seemed perfectly normal for the whole book, only to be unmasked as the murderer. [An all-too-common plot technique that's a dead giveaway that the author's run out of ideas.]

D.B. Borton, "One for the Money." [Note that this is the same title as the 1st in the Janet Evanovich series, below. Also like Evanovich - Titles of subsequent books all begin with the next number; she's up to 6.] This is the nom de plum of Lynette Carpenter, a feminist literary scholar at Ohio Wesleyan. Her heroine, Cat Caliban, is a 58-year old widow, not at all sad at being released from a 37-year marriage to a completely boring man. Cat is now determined to live the interesting life she's never known and aspires to be a private detective. She figures that her experience as a mother makes her a natural detective. She buys a small apartment building in an unfashionable Cincinnati neighborhood. Her tenants include a gay man whose her "Dr. Watson" and a lesbian couple. I liked numbers 1, 2 and 3 a lot; #4 was so dull I didn't even finish it; #5 and 6 were okay, but I will not rush out to read later books. Under the name of "Della Borton," Carpenter has started writing ANOTHER series, this one for movie lovers. The first is called "Fade to Black" and features a very eccentric family of Hollywood types; the sleuth is one of the few relatively sane family members. Being a huge movie fan, I enjoyed it, but I'm not sure non-movie lovers would (many of the references are not explained).

Jill Churchill, "Grime and Punishment." I like the first several in this series a lot; the most recent ones have been somewhat disappointing and I've stopped reading them. Reviewers on Amazon seem to agree that Churchill has lost her touch. Throughout all the ones I've read, the mysteries are only fair, but in the early books I didn't care because her heroine, Jane Jeffreys, is a suburban single mom who helps with detection by understanding suburban mores. There's a slightly conservative undercurrent that I don't care for, but I still enjoy this series, because

it's filled with the lives and relationships of real women. [Example: Jane wants to have someone else take the car pool, but understands the complex chit system under which this favor means she'll have to do popcorn at the school Mardi Gras in 2 months.] Churchill has now started a second series, which is called the "Grace and Favor" series, set in the 1930's. It features brother and sister sleuths. The first title in the new series is "Anything Goes." I thought it was cute but nothing special.

Harlan Coben, "Deal Breaker." The only male author on this list. (Although I do like both the Spencer series from Robert B. Parker (1st one: "The Godwulf Manuscript") and the books of Robert K Tanenbaum (1st one: "No Lesser Plea")). But Coben and his Myron Bolitar series are very, very close to my heart.

Myron is a 30ish former star basketball player and lawyer, who's now a sports agent. The books are very funny. But there are two other things that make Coben's books special. First is how real Myron, and many of the other characters, are. For example. for most of the books, Myron is still living with his parents - not because he's a Mama's boy (his mother is a very successful criminal defense attorney) - but because he likes his parents and enjoys being around them. Second, Myron really likes women and - though himself straight - is affirmatively non-homophobic. This is so rare in detective fiction written by men. Women are either sex objects or invisible. And gays/lesbians/bi - forget about it! Myron's best friend is his bisexual female assistant, with whom he has a completely believable platonic male-female friendship. There is one incredible character, Myron's psychopathic friend Win, who is also an expert in all kinds of killing and who often acts to help Myron escape from impossible situations. (Myron himself is, by his own admission, lousy at violence - another unusual trait for male authors.) But even the over-the-top Win just adds to the fun of this series. The more recent books in the series have been a bit more serious, but I've really liked that.

Coben has also written several stand-alone mysteries, all of which I've read. Some are pretty good, others merely okay.

Patricia Cornwell - "Post Mortem." Her Dr. Kay Scarpetto series is very famous. Uneven, in my opinion, but the good ones are very good.

Carole Nelson Douglas, "Good Night, Mr. Holmes." Takes the character, Irene Adler, from one of the famous Sherlock Holmes stories, and redoes the entire story from Adler's point of view.

Janet Evanovich, "One for the Money" -- one of my absolute favorites. My one piece of advice: beware if you try to read Evanovich in public, or in bed when your partner is asleep. You'll have to muffle your laughter. Really, she consistently has me laughing out. Her detective, Stephanie Plum, is a former lingerie buyer turned bounty hunter; she lives in Trenton, NJ and is tough but fun. As with Borton, titles go in numerical sequence. I always wait expectantly for each new installment. In

recent years, it feels as though sometimes she's cranking them out too fast. But I always enjoy them.

Sue Grafton - "A is for Alibi." Another top author. You always know which one's next because they go by the alphabet. As would be typical in such a lengthy series, quality is uneven. But all of them are good and the best are just terrific. You definitely want to read these in order, as the protagonist, Kinsey Millhone (that's a woman), goes through lots of events and changes. FYI, I thought "A" and "B" were only fair, but the series really starts really cookin' with "C," so don't despair.

Sparkle Hayter (her real name!), "What's A Girl Gotta Do?" Light but very funny and enjoyable. The female sleuth, Robin Hudson, is a reporter at an all-news network (Hayter worked at CNN). The first book, which is all I've read so far, is set at the network has a real ring of truth to the characters - good, bad and ridiculous. For me, laugh out loud funny at points.

Laurie R. King. Has two series, as well as several non-series books. My favorite is her series featuring lesbian San Francisco detective Kate Martinelli and her partner, Alonzo Hawkins. The first in the Martinelli series is "A Grave Talent." The other series (first book: "Beekeeper's Apprentice") is another reimagining of Sherlock Holmes. It's from the viewpoint of a young feminist woman who hooks up with - a later marries - a 50ish Holmes (and Watson, etc.) in the 1910s.

Margaret Maron. She has two quite different series, both of which are excellent. Her first series features New York City police detective Sigrid Harald. The first title in this series is "One Coffee With." Good characters, believable mysteries, very well-written. You absolutely MUST read this series in order, as Sigrid goes - believably and uninsultingly - from "plain Jane" to swan. The Sigrid Harald series also features the most plausible relationship I've ever seen between a younger woman and an older man, a renowned artist who's younger at heart than our heroine. For reasons I can't comprehend, some (maybe ALL) of the Harald books are out-of-print. Your library should have them on the shelves or via InterLibrary Loan, and check Amazon for used copies. Maron has not written in this series for more than a decade.

Maron's other series is more celebrated. It features Deborah Knott, a North Carolina judge. The first book in the Deborah Knott series, "The Bootlegger's Daughter," won every major mystery award, and with good reason. A VERY different feel from the Sigrid Harald series, but once again filled with first-class writing and characters. The main character, Deborah, is overtly feminist, and also a keen observer - and participant in - Southern ways. Here's just a sample of the kind of writing and observation that makes me like Maron so much. From early in the Deborah Knott series: "Aunt Zell's my mother without the wild streak - one of those good people that help hold the world together. They pick up the pieces, clean up the messes, and try to make sure nobody goes to bed hungry. If that makes her

sound trivial, try running the world without women like her in it." I thought Maron hit a rough patch in the Deborah Knott series a few years ago, but they're now as good as ever, with a turn of events in Deborah's personal life that I won't spoil.

Lia Matera, "The Smart Money." Smart, somewhat dark look at law and life. Her other series, featuring Willa Janssen, I didn't care for.

Marcia Muller - "Edwin of the Iron Shoes." She has several series, but the best known is with detective Sharon McCone. Considered the foremother of the modern renaissance in women detectives; she has been writing the Sharon McCone series for 30 years and has maintained the quality better than any other series I read. Somewhat similar to Sue Grafton, who openly acknowledges her debt to Muller. I like her a lot. I STRONGLY recommend you read them in order.

Katy Munger - "Legwork." Combines the humor of Evanovich with the North Carolina observations of Maron. Her heroine, Casey Jones, is large, full-figured and overtly sexual. Keenly observed, at times very funny, well-written and deeply believable. I've stayed up till the wee hours of the morning reading Munger, less to see the mystery solved than to spend more time with Casey and her companions (which include her boss, a one-of-a-kind obese bailbondsman/Lothario). The books just keep getting better and better. I was so satisfied after reading the latest one, I literally kissed the cover when I was done. Sadly, she has not written any new ones for a number of years.

Barbara Neely, "Blanche on the Lam." Her sleuth, Blanche White, is an African-American domestic worker. In the first book, she's able to figure things out, in part, because her white employees assume she's an idiot. In the second book, "Blanche and the Talented Tenth," she goes to a rich black enclave in Maine, where she's treated terribly because she has dark skin. The third entry, "Blanche Cleans Up," I didn't like very much at all; the fourth, "Blanche Passes Go" was okay but, for me, not up to the excellence of the first two.

P.S The Web has many resources about mysteries. Check out especially the "Stop, You're Killing Me" site at <http://www.stopyourekillingme.com>. Under "Author Index," you can look for your favorite author and get a list of her/his books in order.

P.P.S. If you end up really getting into women mystery writers, I'd recommend "Detecting Women" (3d edition) by Willetta Heising. It lists just about every series written by women mystery writers, and gives you the order of the books. Includes list of what awards different books won, which I find helpful in trying to separate the wheat from the chaff. If you want to have something you can carry with you to the library, the book also comes in a separate "pocket guide" format. Heising has also written "Detecting Men," covering the same ground for male authors. These books are all available from Amazon.Com.

