

# Femmes Fatales

Ferociously talented women dedicated to the fine art of crime fiction

Volume 14, Number 1

Spring 2009

## Picking Favorites

by Elaine Viets

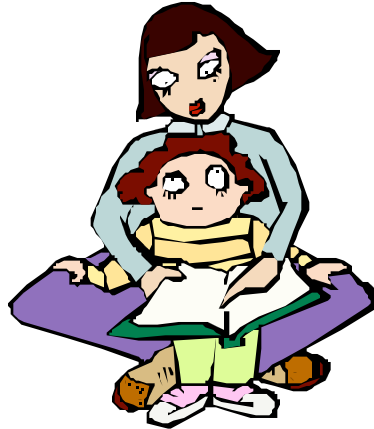
“What’s your favorite of your novels?”

Readers ask us that all the time. I answer with my own question: Which of your children do you love best??

Most parents know in their secret hearts that one child is a favorite, though they would never admit it.

The Femmes also have their pets. We’ve written everything from television news stories to software manuals. Which writing project was our favorite?

Was it our first novel? Our first published article? The book that hit the bestseller



lists? The short story that won a coveted award? Or do we love someone else’s work? I asked the Femmes to share their secret love.*ff*

*Elaine Viets' eighth Dead-End Job mystery, Killer Cuts, debuts in hardcover at the Malice Domestic mystery convention in Arlington, VA, May 1-3. This time, Helen works at a posh hair salon. Elaine will be acting as toastmaster at Malice. From there she goes to the Festival of Mystery in Oakmont, PA, and then on tour. Check her website for additional signing dates and tour cities.*

### Kris Neri

*Kris admits to having played favorites among her own novels, short stories and articles, as well as those of other writers in the mystery world, in the decades since her original mystery favorite, Nancy Drew, first led her into this life of crime.*

Do parents *really* love one child more than another, or just take pride in different characteristics each child displays? For my literary offspring, I fall into both camps.

Mostly, I feel a special fondness for different aspects of different books. Take *Revenge of the Gypsy Queen's* twist ending, more like a story ending than a novel’s—I love the originality. Or the movie scenes that start every chapter in *Dem Bones' Revenge*—I wasn't sure I could think of enough of them, but they wrote themselves, and still make me laugh. And the verisimilitude I captured in the racing scenes in *Never Say Die*, and a sense of place so vivid, real San Diego residents tell me I’ve nailed their city.

I adore my two Derringer Award-winning stories, polar opposite fraternal twins: “L.A. Justice,” the sunny story in which

Tracy Eaton’s madcap series was born, and the darkly original “Capital Justice.” But I take similar pride in other stories of mine, such as “Sentence Imposed” and “The Rose in the Snow,” even if they’ve received less attention.

As for favorites among other writers’ works...where would I begin? I gobble up all the Femmes’ new books, along with others in the mystery world, both our stars and lesser knowns. Perhaps I should limit it to books I secretly wish I’d written. Nope, still too many.*ff*

### Toni L.P. Kelner

*Toni has an ever-changing list of favorites. Favorite foods have gone from hot dogs to spaghetti to burgers to steak to fajitas. TV shows? Brady Bunch to Star Trek to Buffy the Vampire Slayer to Doctor Who. Movies? The Wizard of Oz to Dirty Dancing to The Princess Bride to The Rocky Horror Picture Show. So she'll talk about her favorite of her books today, but it might change tomorrow.*

My current favorite of my books is *Curse of the Kissing Cousins*, and not just because of my prose stylings or because it’s just been released. I love it because of what it represents for me.

A few years ago, I wanted to take a break from my Laura Fleming series, and as it happened, my publisher didn’t want any more of them either. So I worked on something new. I switched from rural NC settings to Boston, traded in my married computer programmer protagonist for a single freelance entertainment reporter, and from Southern lore to classic TV trivia. Writing that proposal was hard because it was wildly different, but it was enormously fun. And it proved to me that I could write a second series, which was most reassuring.

The path *Cousins* has taken to the bookstore has not been a straight one. As many mystery writers have found, it can be harder to sell a second series than the first one. *Cousins* was first published by Five Star as *Without Mercy* before being picked up by Berkley Prime Crime, who have contracted for two more books in the series. But just as the prodigal son was special to his father, this book is special to me because of the tough times.

*Curse of the Kissing Cousins* has given me a new series, a new publisher, and a whole new direction for my writing. What's not to love?*ff*

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## Hank Phillippi Ryan

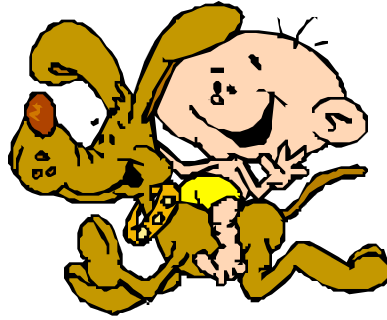
*Hank's not used to being the new kid. Working on her thirty-fourth year as a television reporter, she's more used to a role as eminece grise (with highlights) than as still-novice mystery author. Hank still can't believe she's got two published novels with a third, Air Time, coming in September and then Drive Time in 2010. When all your dreams come true, it's impossible to pick a favorite.*

I've wired myself with hidden cameras, confronted corrupt politicians, and tracked down criminals. Each of my Emmys for investigative reporting shows I've uncovered a secret someone doesn't want you to know. As a result, bad guys went to prison, officials were fired, and consumers got millions of dollars in refunds and restitution. I try to stand up for the little guy and help the system operate the way it should. When it works? That's my favorite.

In my Charlotte McNally mysteries, how can I choose? I love *Prime Time* because I'm still secretly delighted with my plot. (And because every time I see its Agatha teapot, my heart bursts with happiness.) I love *Face Time* because it has a truly important theme. I love *Air Time* because the bad guys use an ingenious (if I do say so myself) scheme that could actually work. I love *Drive Time* because it was so difficult juggling multiple plotlines—and so very rewarding when I happily typed "The End." Don't make me choose!

And now I'm pregnant.

With a new story. I'm consumed with Charlie's next challenge. Will it be *Show Time*? Maybe about movies, or an art



gallery. Hmmm. Maybe. Will it be *Equal Time*? Maybe about politics, or discrimination. Or balancing career and family. Hmmm. Or maybe something altogether different.

It'll be my new baby. And I'll love them all the same.*ff*

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## Mary Saums

*Though her list of favorites changes from day to day, Mary wanted to make a few recommendations of authors she loves and are on her mind at the moment. For comedy, the Grace Smith series by Liz Evans. For tough but beautiful, anything by Ken Bruen. For totally delightful, the Dr. Siri series by Colin Cotterill.*

It's easy to think of favorite books by other authors. But a favorite of my own books? No. When I finish up a book or short story project, I love the moment right after typing "The End." Maybe for a day or so afterward, I enjoy the relief of finally being done.

And then it's gone. As soon as the last edit is done, I forget the whole thing. Understand that I am not recommending this to other writers as a good method. It's a fault I have, not an asset that helps propel me into the next project. In fact, it's pretty darned embarrassing. At library or bookstore talks, questions from the audience often stump me. My readers remember more about my books than I do. This is not good. For example, if someone were to ask why Cal, a fairly major character in my Thistle & Twigg books, did something, I'd most likely do a panic sweep of the old pea brain and think, "Now who was Cal? The guy with the dog, right? Or was it a horse...?"

I can say for certain that my favorite type of writing is fiction writing. I have a harder time with nonfiction, writing it

and reading it. For me, reality is a strange concept and not what it's cracked up to be.*ff*

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## Donna Andrews

*Donna remembers when picking her favorite of her books was a no-brainer because she only had the one. And now Swan for the Money (St. Martins/Minotaur, August 2009) will be book number fifteen. Does the thrill of seeing her words in print fade after more than a dozen books? Don't stand between Donna and the package she's expecting around August 1!*

My favorite book?

I could make a case for any of them. *Murder with Peacocks*, my first published book, won a few awards—obviously I love it. But I also love *Murder with Puffins*, which made less of a splash, partly because there are no "Best Second Book" awards. I finished *Crouching Buzzard, Leaping Loon* despite 9/11. *You've Got Murder* opened up a whole new fictional world. *Six Geese A-Slaying* hit the *New York Times* extended best seller list.

You get the idea. Love 'em all. But do I have a favorite?

Yes. The one I'm not working on. The one that's finished. And my least favorite is whatever I'm currently working on, putting in long hours at the computer and staying up worrying about whether I can pull it off.

So until the second half of March, my least favorite of my books was *Swan for*

## Femmes Fatales

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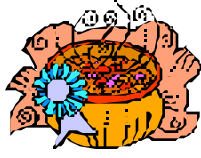
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## Prize-winning Writers



**Hank Phillippi Ryan's** *Face Time* is the "One Town, One Book" selection for Billerica, MA.

**Donna Andrews'** 2008 Christmas book *Six Geese A-Slaying* was nominated for the Lefty Award for Most Humorous Mystery and the Agatha Award for Best Traditional Mystery Novel.

**Dana Cameron** and **Toni L.P. Kelner** will be throwing down at Malice Domestic—both have been nominated for the Agatha for Best Short Story. Dana will be competing with "The Night Things Changed," published in *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe* (edited by Charlaïne and Toni) while Toni is going with "Skull and Cross-Examinations," which appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* (Feb. 2008).ff

*the Money*. But on March 23, after sending the proofed galleys back to my editor, I reread a few pages and was charmed. Clearly I'd misjudged this wonderful book. By the end of March, it had become my hands-down favorite, and is likely to remain so...until I finish the book I'm currently slaving over and it undergoes the same magical transformation from caterpillar to butterfly.ff

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### Dana Cameron

*Dana's stealing time for several new favorite projects these days. She's hard at work revising a Fangborn novel based on her short story, "The Night Things Changed" (from an anthology edited by fellow Femmes Charlaïne and Toni) and writing several short stories. Soon she'll be stealing away to Greece, where she'll investigate the origins of her Fangborn and collect ideas for an archaeological thriller.*

For me, stolen stories are the sweetest, the ones you wrote when you were supposed to be doing something else. I think most writers either start out this way or have experienced it, stealing time when you had other deadlines or obligations pressing. I wrote *Site Unseen* when I was still writing archaeology lectures. *A Fugitive Truth* came when, by day, I was in a splendid library with lovely people doing research and by night, I was bumping off researchers and placing valuable objects in jeopardy. *Ashes and Bones* is a favorite too, because although I was writing full time, it pushed me incredibly hard (and eventually, it earned an Anthony). The

short stories were gifts, and in a sense, those are stolen, too, because I had the chance to try something new. They've been good to me, as well, with Anthony and Agatha nominations.

With each book and story, I get another education. With each project, I learned how to write, how to build a world, how to shift gears and stretch. So remembering that, how can I single one out? I think books take turns being favorites, like when a reader says a story has moved her, or when a reviewer gets exactly what you were trying to do. When a book goes into reprint. The moment after you've finished revising it, and it is perfect, to you.ff

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### Charlaïne Harris

*This year, Charlaïne's staying home until June. Her last chick is graduating from high school, and between softball*



*games, senior play, and prom, there was so much on her personal schedule that Charlaïne bit the bullet and told her publisher she was foregoing her book tour. The upside? This will be her first Mother's Day at home in four years.*

My secret love? I've never really considered it, but there are a few books that have done exactly what I wanted them to, books that have come closer to achieving "the best I can do" status. That's an inner thermometer that registers how close I can come to writing the best story I can write, and it's incredibly personal. It doesn't match up to sales figures, that's for sure.

I think the books I've written that best represent my goals as a writer are *Shakespeare's Landlord*, the first Lily Bard book, and *An Ice Cold Grave*, the third Harper Connelly. After some thought, I'd add *Living Dead in Dallas* to that list. The first two added together haven't made as much money as the third, but all three of these books engaged me heart and mind, required (in parts) the kind of writing that required me to abandon my previous safe practices, and stretched my capacity as a writer.

Writing and acting have a lot of similarities. I think when you're writing your best, and you feel that you're at the absolute top of your game, it's like Charlaïne Theron playing Aileen Wuornos, the serial killer. You almost expect people to say, "Oh my God! You wrote that?"

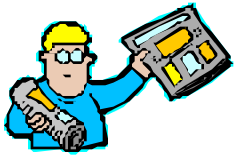
Okay, maybe they shouldn't be *that* astonished...ff

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## News from the Femmes Fatales

The Japanese rights to **Elaine Viets'** third Dead-End Job mystery, *Dying to Call You*, were sold. Elaine wonders what the Japanese will make of telemarketers and sex in coffins. The paperback edition of *Clubbed to Death*, the seventh book in the series, will be published in May 2009. Elaine signed a contract for two more Dead-End Job mysteries in hardback and paperback editions.



**Kris Neri's** next published novel, *High Crimes on the Celestial Plane*, a funny urban fantasy that will introduce some wacky and wonderful creatures, will debut from Red Coyote Press in Fall 2009. After *High Crimes*, Tracy Eaton and her madcap gang will return in *Revenge for Old Times' Sake*, due out in Spring 2010 from Cherokee McGhee Publishing.



**Toni L.P. Kelner's** *Curse of the Kissing Cousins*, the first "Where are they now?" mystery, has just been released in paperback by Berkley Prime Crime. Next up are another pirate mystery story in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and her first PI story in Carolyn Haines's anthology *Delta Blues*. Toni will be at Malice Domestic and Bouchercon.



Hank Phillippi Ryan's *Prime Time* (Winner of the Agatha for Best First

Novel and nominated for two RITA awards) and *Face Time* (a BookSense Notable Book) are back! They're being reissued in July and August from MIRA Books. The brand new *Air Time* arrives from MIRA in September and *Drive Time* in February 2010. She'll be giving seminars on writing suspense at Craftfest in New York and the RWA Convention in Atlanta.



**Mary Saums** will be at Malice Domestic in May. In October, her short story, "Run Don't Run," will be in the anthology *Delta Blues*. Come to the anthology's book launch party October 3 at Ground Zero blues club in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Contributing

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authors including Mary, Charlaïne, and Toni will be in the blues band. Don't miss it!

*Swan for the Money*, **Donna Andrews's** eleventh book in the Meg Langslow series, features competitive rose growing, belted Tennessee fainting goats, and a wealthy eccentric who has carried her monochromatic décor to the livestock on her estate—only black, white, or gray animals allowed. And yes, the swans are suspects in the ensuing homicide.



**Dana Cameron** is looking forward to Malice Domestic, where fellow Femme Elaine will be Toastmaster. Along with Femmes Toni and Donna, Dana has been nominated for an Agatha: "The Night Things Changed" is up for Best Short Story. If you're an early riser, Dana will be on panels Saturday and Sunday morning, so stop by for some fun!



This year is an exceptionally busy publishing year for **Charlaïne Harris**. Her new Sookie, *Dead and Gone*, will be out May 5, and the fourth Harper Connelly will be on the shelves in October. *Strange Brew* (July), *Must Love Hellhounds* (September), and *Delta Blues* from Bleak House (October) will all contain original short stories.