

Femmes Fatales

Ferociously talented women dedicated to the fine art of crime fiction

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Short, But Not Sweet

by Kris Neri



I've loved short stories since, in seventh grade, I read O. Henry's "The Ransom of Red Chief." Until then I hadn't known a fictional ending could deliver such a deliciously clever punch. I've been addicted to those sparkling little gems ever since, especially mystery shorts, which are the perfect vehicle for brilliant twists.

Short stories are sketches, not the fully detailed oil paintings that novels represent. The trick is capturing within those spare lines, exquisite, memorable flashes of character and plot.

I like to try out potential novel characters in short stories. I equate stories with first dates, in which the characters and I get to know each other before deciding whether we want to make the commitment of

writing a novel together. Stories also give writers a chance to tackle totally different story lines than we typically bring to our novels.

But short story writing presents great challenges. Every word needs to deliver. Stories flex different writing muscles, and stretch the writer's imagination to

its limits. A story that excels in all areas, while sticking to a strict word count, represents the ultimate marriage of art and craft.

The Femmes are masters of short story writing, having collectively corralled almost every major mystery short story award into their stable. How about it, Femmes? Care to share your secrets?*ff*

Kris Neri's short story collection is The Rose in the Snow: Tales of Mischievous and Mayhem. Kris reports that the characters from her Lefty Award-nominated High Crimes on the Magical Plane, and her multi award-nominated Tracy Eaton mysteries, Revenge of the Gypsy Queen, Dem Bones' Revenge, and the recently published Revenge for Old Times' Sake, were all born in short stories

Charlaine Harris

Though she claims she's a homebody, Charlaine has her feet on the road these days. Following her first European tour (Italy, Portugal, Poland, and England) Charlaine returned to the U.S. to get ready for her regularly scheduled May book tour for Dead in the Family. At least she'll be at home, and hard at work, most of the summer.

I've written at least ten short stories, and each one is a challenge. Short fiction writing is an exercise in being concise—no room to wander, no space for self-indulgence. Every paragraph has to count, every character has to work, every plot point has to serve as a mile marker on the way to the climax of the story.

When you set out to frame a short story, don't bite off more than you can chew. You have enough room for one huge surprise, and you have to make it pack a punch. You have to choose each word carefully because one word has to do the work of the ten you could spend in a longer work.

The key to beginning to work in this field is to read some really stellar entries and learn from them. I highly recommend Shirley Jackson, the queen of short fiction. Her novels were wonderful, too, but Jackson was a great, great American short story writer. You'll benefit from studying how she achieves each effect.

By the way—if you decide to write a short story using your novel characters, don't impart any key information. I learned this the hard way. Some readers are not into short fiction. They feel cheated if they missed an important point you introduced to the narrative that way.*ff*

Dana Cameron

Dana never expected to write short stories, but was lured into trying when she was asked to contribute to two holiday anthologies. "The great thing about short stories is that you can try anything once. And if it works, you have a whole new world to explore. Short stories need a different approach than

novels; you're squeezing the juice out of every single word."

When I first considered my story "Femme Sole" for *Boston Noir*, I wasn't sure where to begin. Having had my start in novels, I find short stories intimidating. Like my two previous short stories, I had to start with the basics and break it down.

I'd never written noir before; I knew the elements, but didn't want to sound like I was aping other noir writers. I figured I could find my own noir voice by setting my story in a gritty Boston past. I had a choice of neighborhoods, and wanted waterfront property, so instead of the expected story about the Mafia in the North End, I used harbor-side toughs from 250 years ago.

I had to write a LOT of backstory before I knew enough to start this chapter in my protagonist's life. It's incredibly difficult to let yourself write, knowing it won't be in the story, but you need to so you can soak your prose with your knowledge of the characters. That led me to consider some of the essentials of noir: a protagonist on the wrong side of the law who is involved with a crime, violence and sex, and, ultimately, a choice. A

woman's life was tough back then, and what if she had something everyone else wanted...?

Only after I'd prepared, by examining all the basics, could I shape "Femme Sole."ff

Mary Saums

The last few years, Mary has been so caught up in novel writing that short stories have had to take a back seat. These days research and working on her Thistle & Twigg books take up just about all her time. But, this year, she'll have a new short story published in Delta Blues, an anthology of crime stories with blues themes set in the Mississippi Delta.

I loved "The Ransom of Red Chief" too, as well as "The Gift of the Magi" with its great twist at the end. Recently, when J.D. Salinger passed away, I remembered how I'd loved "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor" as a youngster. It was a heartbreaker though, not one with a funny "a-ha!" moment. I think the frequent use of those two emotions at the end is what makes the short form so popular.

We read a lot of Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty in English class. I remember the feeling from Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," shock and awe at the mixture of humor and regular Southern speech in a textbook. What a strange concept.

Their stories succeed, I think, because those ladies understood the critical elements of good storytelling down through the ages—the story is suited to a short length, story events are off-kilter in some way, facts and humor have just the right amount of stretch, and the narration has a perfect pitch that holds an audience.

My favorite short of all time is "Children On Their Birthdays" by Truman Capote. And, of course, life wouldn't be complete without the stories of Sherlock Holmes. As different as Capote and Doyle are, they



grab readers the same way, with unique characters and events told with unique writing styles.ff

Elaine Viets

Half-Price Homicide, Elaine Viets' newest Dead-End Job mystery, got a starred review in Publishers Weekly. Helen Hawthorne works at a designer resale shop where the clothes are to die for—literally. Helen wants to go home to St. Louis to clear her name. She wants her ex to disappear. She wants to marry Phil. Helen will get most of what she wants—and regret she gets what she wants most.

Writing a short story is like trying on hats: This one looks good. That doesn't work. This one is fun—for a while.

Short stories let me try on new personas and venture into areas my writing rarely goes. I like to go into spooky places, but only for a short time.

In "Vampire Hours," I wrote about an ordinary woman of a certain age. Losing her looks and her husband, she already feels undead. She chooses eternal death—and vengeance. "Vampire Hours" is in *Many Bloody Returns*, an anthology edited by Femmes Toni and Charlaine.

"Wedding Knife" is a frothy tale of a jealous woman forced to wear a hideous bridesmaid dress. The bride wound up serving time for this sin. Readers seemed to sympathize with the situation. "Wedding Knife," written for *Chesapeake Crimes I*, won the Anthony and Agatha Awards.

"The Bedroom Door" is a tale loosely based on my Grandmother Frances Vierling. Grandma had second sight. She confided that dead family members

and friends stopped to say good-bye before they departed on their final journey. "The Bedroom Door" is in *Crimes by Moonlight*, the new MWA anthology edited by Charlaine.

I try on many black hats for my short stories, possibly because my mystery novel heroines—Helen Hawthorne in the Dead-End Job mysteries and mystery shopper Josie Marcus—never wear anything but white ones.ff

Hank Phillippi Ryan

Hank writes short stories every day—and has for the past thirty years. As a TV reporter, she takes huge hunks of complicated information and distills it all into a three-minute television report. A short story. Still, if you'd asked her, "Have you ever written a short story?," she would have said no. Until now. Her story "On the House" is a twisty tale of broken hearts, complicated revenge, and a surprise killer. And now it's an Agatha nominee.

What's essential in a short story—my opinion, of course—is a moment of realization. An epiphany. The instant where the main character is hit over the head with what they should have done or should have seen or should have realized. When they understand what they have to do next. A moment of clarity, or of facing the truth.

And of course, you're giving the readers the same moment. The writer makes them laugh out loud. Or gasp. Or understand that the way they thought the puzzle pieces were fitting together isn't how they fit at all. You give them that smile of satisfaction that comes when they realize they were fooled again.

Femmes Fatales

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Award-Winning Femmes

Kris Neri's paranormal mystery *High Crimes on the Magical Plane* was nominated for a Lefty Award for most humorous mystery by Left Coast Crime.

Charlaine Harris will receive the Career Achievement Award in Urban Fantasy at the Romantic Times Booklovers' Convention in April.

Dana Cameron's short story "Femme Sole" (in *Boston Noir*) was nominated for both an Edgar Award and an Agatha Award for Best Short Story



Hank Phillippi Ryan is up for two Agatha Awards: *Air Time* was nominated for Best Novel and "On the House" (in *Quarry*) was nominated for Best Short Story.

Donna Andrews's *Swan for the Money* was nominated for both the Lefty and the Agatha awards

Toni L.P. Kelner's story "The Pirate's Debt" (in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*) is nominated for the Derringer Award for Best Short Story. *ff*

The way I see it? The beginning of the story is the main character moving through what they think is reality. Then, POW, the epiphany. And then the final (and briefest) act of the story is what happens next. The twist. Then the clincher.

"On the House" has a completely different feel from my Charlotte McNally mysteries. It's darker, more sinister, more psychological. It came into being because I had this great (I thought!) idea for a murder. And I knew that the ending was so quirky that the plot would never hold up for a whole book. I knew I had to get in, and get out. Exactly the timing for a short story.)*ff*

Donna Andrews

When Donna commits short stories, she's as likely to be writing fantasy as mystery—examples include "Haire of the Beast," (in Wolfsbane and Mistletoe, edited by fellow Femmes Charlaine and Toni) and "Spellbound" (in Unusual Suspects, edited by Dana Stabenow). But her latest short story is pure mystery: "The Plan" in the newly released Chesapeake Crimes: They Had It Comin' (Wildside Press).

What do I like about short stories? They're...well, short. Novels take months. A short story weeks—or days. Not instant gratification, but a lot closer than with novels. Of course, word for word they're more work than novels. But if you're on deadline for a novel, playing hooky with a short story can feel like a vacation.

At least once during the course of every novel I write, a fabulous short story idea grabs me. Sometimes I'm virtuous, and wait till I finish the novel, or at least get

ahead of schedule. But I've learned it's worth putting the novel aside briefly for a short story. It cleanses the palate, so I return to the larger work refreshed and reenergized. And I suspect any idea that manages to fight its way into my brain when I'm in the middle of a novel is usually a pretty good idea. The last time I said "what the heck" and put the novel aside for a few days, the resulting short story, "A Rat's Tale," won an Agatha award.

So lately I've been a lot more ready to listen when a short story idea comes calling, even at an inconvenient time.

(Am I finished with my piece yet? I have this novel to write, and I can already feel a short story coming over me.)*ff*

Toni L.P. Kelner

Toni's most recent short stories are a mixed bag: a Mississippi delta blues noir story, a vampire pirate romance, a geezer noir story, and a vampire courtroom drama. Plus she's pondering another pirate mystery. As Robert Heinlein said, "Specialization is for insects."

We've all heard about actors being typecast once they've had success in a



role. Writers have a similar problem. Once you get a reputation for a certain kind of book, that's what people expect to see from you every time.

Now that's not all bad. It means that readers liked your work so much that they want more like it. But writers are like anybody else—we get bored doing the same thing all the time.

Take me, for instance. I wrote eight Laura Fleming books, cozy mysteries set in a North Carolina mill town. Now I'm writing the less cozy "Where are they now?" series. If I were suddenly to start writing serial killer novels or hard-bitten police procedurals, my readers would be taken aback. Moreover, that's not the first thing an editor is going to want to buy from me. But sometimes I want to write something totally different.

So how do I manage the expectations of readers and editors with my own need to push the envelope? Short stories!

My story "Sleeping With the Plush" (in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*) was set at a fifties-era carnival, and featured one of my few male protagonists. I set "Security Blanket" (in *Riptide*) at a science fiction convention. In "Old Dog Days" (in *A Hot and Sultry Night for Crime*) and "The Death of Erik the Redneck" (*Malice Domestic 5*) I wrote about cops. Nothing in my usual territory.

Lately, editors are giving me wonderful opportunities to try new things. Carolyn Haines invited me to write a noir story set around Mississippi delta blues, and I wrote my first private eye story. Bill Crider figured I was getting old enough to write a geezer noir story. And with my co-editor Femme Charlaine, I've dipped my toes into urban fantasy several times.

When it comes to short stories, I never worry about typecasting. *ff*

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News from the Femmes Fatales

Kris Neri has enjoyed reconnecting with old friends and fans during her recent Southern California appearances, as well as meeting new friends during her many Arizona signings and workshops. Spring has seen the publication of the third adventure in Kris's multi-award-nominated Tracy Eaton mystery series, *Revenge for Old Times' Sake*, featuring the daughter of eccentric Hollywood stars.



In addition to finishing *Dead in the Family*, **Charlaine Harris** has been hard at work editing the various pieces that will make up *The Sookie Companion*, due to be on the shelves in February 2011. As the title implies, this book will contain all things Sookie: book plots, character bios, recipes, a map of Bon Temps, an original novella, and various other delights for the fans of the telepathic waitress.



Dana Cameron is gearing up for Edgar Week and Malice Domestic. She'll participate in the launch of *Crimes by Moonlight* (including her story, "Swing Shift") and on a panel at the MWA Symposium. She's looking forward to seeing everyone gussied up for the Edgar and Agatha banquets and is honored, awed, and grateful for all the support she's received!



Mary Saums' short story "Run Don't Run" appears in *Delta Blues*, an anthology edited by Carolyn Haines. Other contributors include Femmes Toni and Charlaine, James Lee Burke, John Grisham, and other great short story writers. For more info, check deltabluescollection.com.



Elaine Viets will sign *Half-Price Homicide* in Virginia; Maryland; Washington, DC; Oakmont, PA; St. Louis and Columbia, MO; and Florida in May. She tours the North Carolina Research Triangle in June. "Unarmed and Dangerous," the Carolina tour, includes bestselling authors Donna Andrews, Rosemary Harris and Meredith Cole. Is Elaine signing near you? To find out, check her web site.



Hank Phillippi Ryan's *Drive Time* (MIRA, February 2010), the fourth in the series, was called "superb" by *Mystery Scene Magazine*, and received a starred review from *Library Journal*. Hank is now a member of the national board of Mystery Writers of America. She'll be moderating a panel at the Edgar symposium, interviewing the guests of honor at Murder 203 and

Malice Domestic, and is presenting a seminar on the writing life at the Backspace Writer's Conference. Her essay "Masquerade" will appear in the new anthology from International Thriller Writers.



Stork Raving Mad, the twelfth book in Donna Andrews's Meg Langslow series, comes out in July 2010 from Minotaur. In it, Meg is eight and a half months pregnant—with twins! Donna also has a new short story, "The Plan," in *Chesapeake Crimes: They Had it Comin'* (Wildside Press), the fourth volume in the award-winning anthology series from the Chesapeake Chapter of Sisters in Crime.



Toni L.P. Kelner has four short stories coming out this year: "Taking the Long View" in *Crimes by Moonlight*, edited by Femme Charlaine; "A Man Feeling Bad" in *Delta Blues*, edited by Carolyn Haines; and "Kids Today" in *Damn Near Dead 2*, edited by Bill Crider. Plus in August she has "Pirate Dave's Haunted Amusement Park" in *Death's Excellent Vacation*, an anthology she co-edited with Femme Charlaine. For variety's sake, Toni's novel *Who Killed the Pinup Queen?* was released in January.