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King is back to solve another

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KATE MARTINELLI almost didn't make it to her second book. The fictional detective, centerpiece of Watsonville author Laurie King's "A Grave Talent" and her new book "To Play the Fool," came this close to getting rubbed out — not unlike the victims whose murder she investigates — even after she'd wrapped up her first adventure.

The suspect: Laurie King.

The motive: boredom.

"Whenever I finish a book with her, I find her more and more dull," said King. "At the end of 'Grave Talent,' I thought 'God, can I dump this woman off a bridge?'"

It's a confession, no doubt about it, but luckily, it was temporary insanity. King's central character was lauded as "a worthy addition to San Francisco's fictional police ranks," by the Chronicle, and "A Grave Talent" was widely praised for its complexity and suspense upon its publication in 1993. King also picked up an Edgar Award for Best First Novel.

You wouldn't think any author would mess with that kind of success, but with King, who will discuss and sing copies of her new book at Bookworks in Aptos Wednesday, you never know.

This is the woman who spoke at a workshop on writing, and, after previous speakers had explained the best ways to get published by anticipating book company needs, said: "I don't think I can teach you to write, or that I should. I think you should write what you want to. Don't pay any attention to what the market wants."

This is the woman whose credo is: "Other than good grammar and punctuation, don't pay any attention to the rules. Write something for yourself."

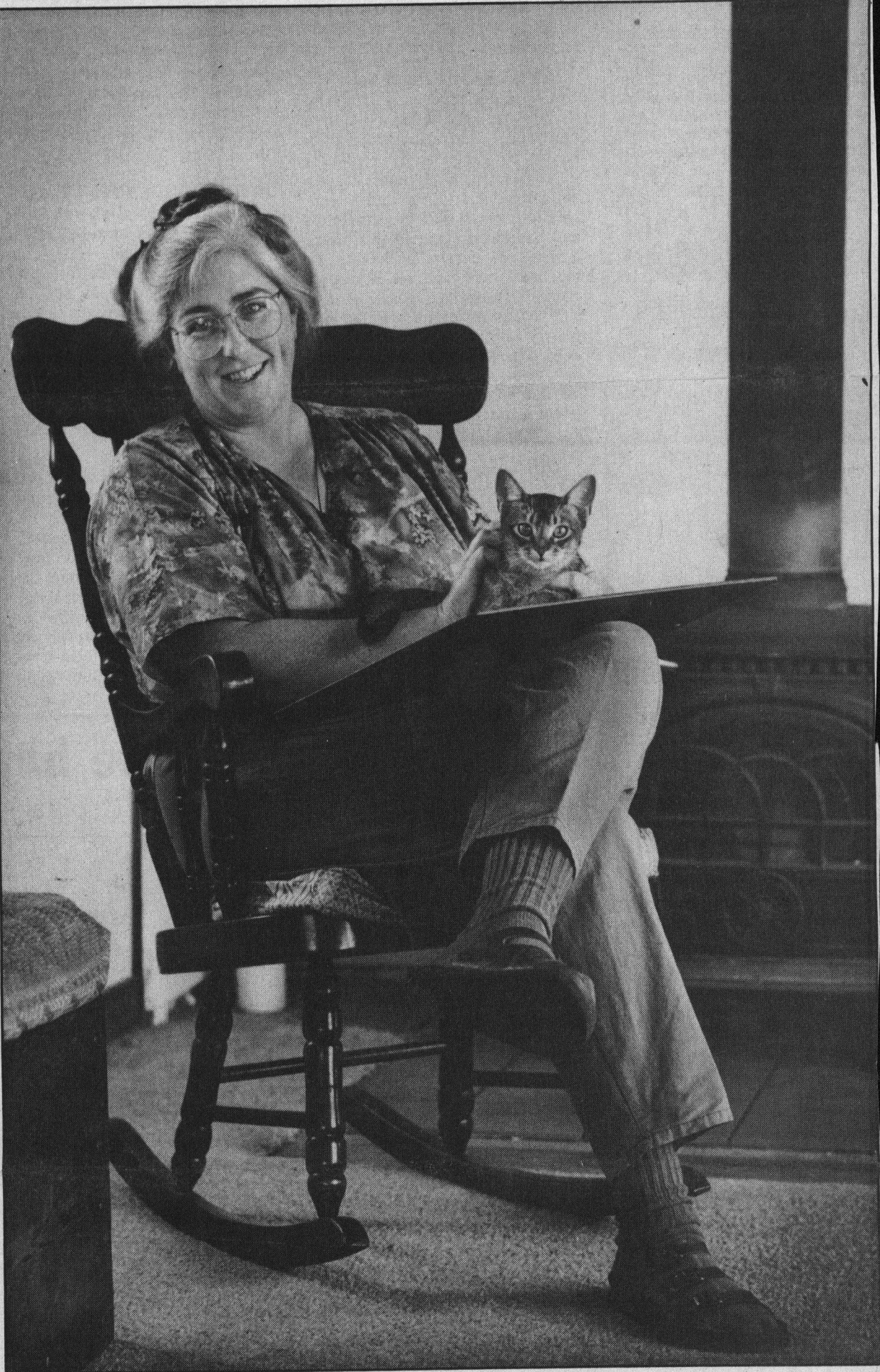
It might sound simple, but many aspiring writers may find their grip on integrity increasing tenuous in a publishing world where art is also commerce. Or, as King puts it, there are too many books written "as if the goal of getting published was enough."

Mystery may seem an odd genre for an author like King to choose, since it is often driven by convention, and is a veritable minefield of cliches waiting to happen. But one way critics and fans seem to agree King has ducked these problems is through in-depth character development.

There's the question of Martinelli, for example. Despite the occasional bouts of frustration and hostility, King is genuinely interested in fleshing out a complex, flesh-and-blood-quality character.

"I really don't know what makes Kate tick," said King. "I've never felt terribly in control of my characters. If anything, I have to allow her to have a strong enough voice of her own."

There's also the supporting characters in "To Play the Fool," which centers around the murder of a homeless man — and later, a homeless woman — in San Francisco. Brother Erasmus, whom King describes as "a spokesperson



Kurt Ellison

Laurie King has brought her award-winning detective back to solve another case in 'To Play the Fool.' She plots her novels at her Watsonville home.

for the disenfranchised," is a monk-like character who speaks only in quotations. Martinelli must uncover his identity and history with the help of her invalid female lover, who is a psychotherapist.

Another way King seems to skirt cliché is through unconventional themes. The spirituality which threads through "Fool" is already winning her new acclaim for superb, thoughtful writing.

One thing local readers will find familiar is the setting of the novel. Though most of the action takes place in San Francisco, Santa Cruz

County does pop up among the locales. For this series, King likes to keep it as local as possible (her other series, which began with "The Beekeeper's Apprentice" last year, is set in Paris), but there's always that problem of realism with a detective who's continually investigating unusual murders. In the end, San Francisco came through for her.

"It's big enough to justify the number of homicides a particular detective has to investigate," she said. "It's always difficult when you have a detective who's set in

some small town like Santa Cruz or Watsonville, and every year they have another murder. We just don't have that many — at least not ones that would involve much investigation."

King is currently working on a third novel in the Martinelli series, and the sequel to "Beekeeper's Apprentice" will be out in September.

Laurie King's book signing will take place Wednesday from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at Bookworks, 36 Rancho Del Mar Center, Aptos.