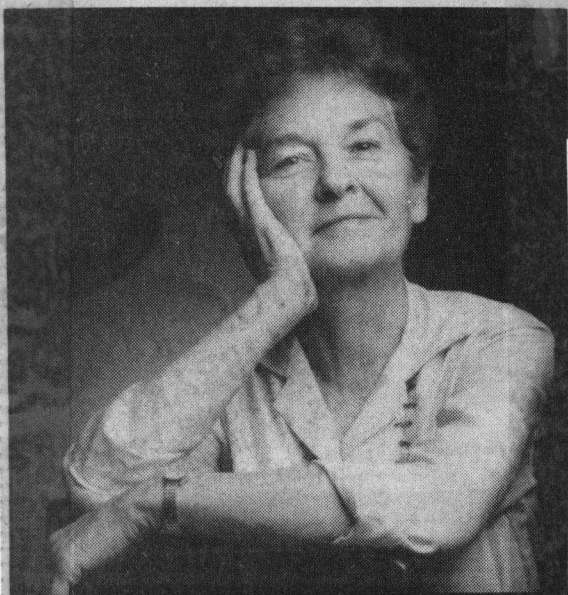


Wally Trabing



Jeanne Hart Schrager

The mystery of writing mysteries

FIRST, SHE murdered the subject. And stuck the body in chapter three. She hadn't killed before and it took some mental muscle.

Then, working backwards she invented the killer, hid the killer amid some other people she created with her typing fingers and called it "Fetish."

And signed it Jeanne Hart.

Jeanne Hart is her maiden name. Easier to pronounce than her married title of Mrs. Jeanne Schrager.

And she is Santa Cruz.

Her first book is causing a healthy stir across the country. And rightly so.

At the library I found myself eighth on the waiting list for a read. Eventually I got my eyes on it. It's a thinnish volume and so entertaining that I read it in short sittings to make it last longer. And that's the truth.

I couldn't handle writing mystery. You know who done it and you can't tell ANYONE.

But there's no mystery about the setting. A thinly veiled Santa Cruz. It's her first novel. Written in her 60s.

This should encourage you late bloomers. But Schrager is a youngster compared to another she admires, Harriet Doerr, who wrote the '84 American Book Award "Stones for Ibarra" at age 74.

Where does one start a mystery? Where is an idea born?

"I was with two women friends at a local church festival last year. We talked of men. The need thereof. Someone joked that they should advertise in the local relationship column for an escort that could handle the three of them."

Schrager was ripe for writing a mystery and, BAM, here was the theme.

And it's a good thing the real ladies didn't carry out their local manhunt because it forboded BIG trouble. At least in her mystery.

It's a little like playing God. Not only did she have to take a life, premeditatively, she had to point her mind at the murderer. She had to write inside the minds of the main characters.

She had to conceal and reveal, tease and expose.

Readers strive for this balance but don't want blind alleys or to be taken advantage of.

Schrager said a Chronicle reviewer said she didn't play fair with some of the clues — that the detective knew something he did not share with the readers.

Schrager admitted that the reviewer was probably right.

Maybe the detective ran out of Pepto Bismo at the time.

Like Dr. Frankenstein, she pieced together her detective with care. But her creation was anything but a monster.

Pedersen the dick ended up taking on the image of the author's late husband, who died in 1980.

"I was also influenced by other mystery writers — the compassion of W.J. Burley's Wycliff; and the love of psychology of Ruth Rendell's Wexford." Both British. She thinks the British are better mystery writers because they are more thorough in developing their characters.

As she wrote, she found herself involved in fantasy about her husband.

Her marriage was long and happy. Schrager's detective was a strong family man and liked small women like herself.

"I wanted Detective Pedersen to be uxorious," which means, wife-doting.

Schrager is not savvy to how detectives feel and work.

She was a university professor's wife who raised three kids, returned to school for her bachelor's and master's and in her early 40s then taught in a Michigan high school for 16 years.

Schrager's "Fetish" is on the gentle side. Her sexual titillations are stylishly effective. She is not a play-by-play roll-in-the-hay kind of mystery writer. "I didn't want to get in bed with my characters. I wouldn't know how to write it."

She had to bone up on police lingo and procedure by befriending a local police lieutenant. More ways than one to lick a cat.

In six months she was finished. She went over it so often she was sick of the whole thing, but let one clue go awry, or a piece of logic go limp and you have reader wrath. I went cattywumpus trying to figure the killer, but she got me.

"The publisher did not change one word," she said, still rather amazed.

The original manuscript went out once, to St. Martins. It was an "over the transom sale." It's an expression from when new authors could not get in to see the publishers, so they threw their work over the transoms into the offices.

She went through agent agony. You can't find an agent until you sell something. It's tough to sell something without an agent. Schrager has a second manuscript finished. Working title is, "A Death Beneath His Dignity." It's at the editors. This time it wasn't over the transom.

That's two murders she's gotten away with.