

Authors 1990—  
Six writers talk about their cloaks and daggers

# Mysterious Women OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

by Dena Taylor

No less than six women mystery writers lurk and live in Santa Cruz County, killing off people with a mighty pen and having great fun doing it.

In a mountain village 36 kilometers northwest of Gerona, Maria Raurell slipped the Luger out of a pocket in her long black skirt, the gun's metal warmed by her body heat.

Thus opens Denise Osborne's latest book, *Cut to Murder*. When her agent suggested writing a mystery, Osborne soon got into the spirit. Thinking about how to get rid of people was "ever so much fun. It keeps your mind agile and keeps your husband on his toes," she said.

"Publishers like a murder to happen pretty quickly in a book," says Osborne. "They'd probably really like it if the murder came in the first two sentences." She, however, would rather take her time getting to the murder. "It's really just a ploy" to write about what you want."

Lia Matera, a full-time mystery writer who's considered one of the best, agrees. Most of her books have a political bent, and the real joy in writing for Matera is in getting her ideas across. Her latest book, *Designer Crimes*, describes what has happened to labor laws. The critically acclaimed *Face Value*, which just came out in paperback, deals with pornography and the feminist movement.

Christine McGuire, whose newest book is *Until Justice Is Done*, also has an agenda. She says, "We're not used to seeing powerful women." A strong female protagonist, in fact, is present in all but one of these Santa Cruz women's books. The exception is Roxanne Hyden's *Dead Letter Soul*. John Allen is a teacher in Half Moon Bay who gets in a peculiar traffic accident in San Francisco that begins a series of bizarre events in his life.

## Mystery material comes from life

And speaking of bizarre, where do these women get their ideas? "God knows," says Laurie King, named one of the most original talents to emerge in the '90s. "Images, phrases, incidents and characters all seem to drift in and attach themselves to a central thought and when the weight of them reaches a critical mass, I begin writing the book. The stories and characters are entirely invented."

Laura Crum, author of *Cutter*, a mystery introducing female veterinarian-cum-sleuth Gail McCarthy, says she doesn't have to do any

research for her books. "My material comes out of my life," says Crum. "All the events in my books having to do with animals and veterinarians are based on reality. The murders, however, are not based on anything that has happened."

Like Crum, Osborne's ideas come from her experiences, particularly as a struggling screen writer. All of Osborne's mysteries cover an aspect of filmmaking. She does a lot of reading, has a degree in Motion Picture Production and has lived and breathed in Hollywood circles.



Roxanne Hyden

McGuire's books too are based on her own experiences as a prosecutor, with research on topics that are new to her. Hyden, whose first book was just released, says it is based on some real events, but mostly it comes from her imagination. "Getting ideas is the easy part," says Lia Matera. "Just pick up a paper. My stories are based on real things. What I make up are the killings."

## Template for success

So, I asked Matera as we sat outside Bookshop Santa Cruz, what's a typical day for her? "I meander to my computer and do the hard part — the writing — first. Later in the afternoon I research by reading, watching videos, going online, and talking to people. And I hang out with my 12-year-old son."

Her method seems to be working: Matera has published ten books. She stopped working as a lawyer almost immediately after becoming one. "I always intended to be a writer."

Denise Osborne says her writing schedule is very "unhealthy." She gets up, goes immediately to the coffee

pot, then to her computer. "I sometimes stay there all day," she says. "My life is very boring, but not dull. I spend a good deal of time in the library doing research."

Hyden comes from a family of writers (she talked about "Uncle Willy," who was William Saroyan), and does other writing in addition to the mysteries on the same bent, kind of twisted and suspenseful. She has no writing schedule and never had an outline for her first book. Like Osborne, she would sometimes get up in the morning, go to her computer and work through the day. Once, she noticed it was late afternoon and her four-year-old was still in his pajamas. "When school's in session it's great for writing. Everyone's gone by 7:30!"

Children's school schedules had a lot to do with Laurie King's writing habits as well. "When my son went off to preschool three glorious mornings a week, I sat down and wrote *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*." King says aside from her book-related traveling, she lives a fairly ordinary life.

"I write until I run out of words or, more likely, something interrupts me. I do laundry, cook dinner, supervise homework, write for another hour sometimes, and go to bed. Yes, the life of a mystery writer is all glamour, and a thrill a minute."

King, who did her master's thesis on the "Feminine Aspects of Yahweh," says her intellectual and emotional interests are "primarily in nurturing children, the phenomenon of religion and the workings of the human mind — especially women."

## More than a hobby

For McGuire, writing is a hobby, squeezed into her busy life as Assistant District Attorney and her work with the Santa Cruz County Domestic Violence Commission, which she formed a year ago. "I wouldn't quit my day job, but I love writing," she says. "It forces me out of the prosecution realm — and into an area that allows me to mix with artists and away from the world of lawyers." McGuire manages her hectic schedule with a lot of help from her agent, editor, writing coach and husband.

Laura Crum says, "Other than the murders, my life is not too different from the books." She grew up on the Brown Ranch, roping cattle where Gottschalks now stands. A fourth-generation Santa Cruzan, Crum is the great-

granddaughter of James Brown, founder of the Brown Ranch. "When I was growing up, the Bank of America was the only building there." She has been involved with horses all her life — showing, training and roping. She told me a cutter horse (the subject of her book) is one who's been trained to separate one cow from a herd, often with the grace and beauty of a gymnast. Not one for schedules, she writes in the morning unless something else is going on.

Getting started in the mystery writing life is as varied as their writing schedules. "I was running out of things to read," says Laurie King. "Even a wonderful book is over in a couple of days, and I thought writing one would be bound to take longer." Not much, however, as she wrote her first book in 28 days! At first, her writing was a hobby that her husband generously put up with. Her first published book, *A Grave Talent*, won the prestigious Edgar Award, given by Mystery Writers of America for the best first novel of the year.

Laura Crum also started writing mysteries because she needed more to read, especially by her favorite author Dick Francis. When Laura finished her first book, she looked in *Writer's Market* for an agent. "She didn't like the protagonist, she didn't like the style, she didn't like the villain and she didn't like the plot," says Laura. What did she like? "That it was set in Santa Cruz."

That it was set in Santa Cruz.

Laurie R. King



Denise Osborne (left) and Christine McGuire (top)

Good Times 11/9/95

County and it was about horses!" Laura rewrote the book until the agent was satisfied, and then it was sold to St. Martin's Press, which gives her free rein to write what she wants.

Hyden also landed a publisher through *Writer's Market*. I found "who was looking for what," and sent out the manuscript. The fourth publisher accepted it. "I never thought I wanted to write," says Hyden, whose father was a frustrated writer. She wanted none of that. "There was something about turning 40," she said, "And I had to start writing."

Osborne, a full-time writer, was an adventure book author when her agent suggested she try the mystery genre. She has published a total of nine books and seven screenplays. She believes it takes three or four books to really get going as a writer. With your first book you need to learn everything, "the law, anatomy, how to kill people."

McGuire's agent, too, encouraged her to try mystery fiction after her successful first book, *Perfect Victim*. The time was right for a female prosecutor protagonist.

Women mystery writers, actually, are on a roll. "They totally dominate the industry now," Crum told me. In fact, male mystery writers are writing books with a strong female lead and using only their initials, as women used to do, to disguise their sex in order to get published.

## Sister act

Sisters in Crime is an organization founded by Sara Peretsky to further the interests of women mystery writers during a time when women's work was not getting the attention it deserved. The organization is open to everyone (including "brothers in crime"): published and unpublished mystery writers — and those who enjoy reading them. Mystery Writers of America, however, is for published authors only.

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All of these mysteries can be solved at a collective book signing on Friday, Nov. 10, at Bookworks in Aptos.

## MYSTERIOUS

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Happily for us, our Santa Cruz writers are busily writing and thinking about new books. Laurie King writes two series of books. One features San Francisco detective Casey Martinelli and includes *A Grave Talent* (released in '93) and *To Play the Fool*, which came out this year. *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*, published last year, is the first in the Mary Russell series. Russell is a young student of the famed Sherlock Holmes. *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*, just released, gives a feminist slant on Christianity.

King had a wonderful time writing her period novels. And they are not Sherlock Holmes stories. She began writing the Mary Russell series because she wanted to see what would happen when Sherlock Holmes, "the ultimate Victorian male," encountered a 20th-century female. King is working on new books in both series.

Laura Crum's *Cutter* came out last year and the paperback was just released. Crum's second book, *Hoofprints*, will be out in January. Both books are set in Santa Cruz. Crum is now putting the finishing touches on her third book, *Roughstock*, and she's got more in her head. "I've got them all planned out," and they're all about horses. "I try to write books about the bright side of life," says Crum. Even though they're about murder, they're about people's good qualities rather than bad. "They're meant to be fun."

Laura Crum doesn't do much to promote her books. "It's not my style. I simply would rather be with my horses and my garden. I know self-promotion is a big thing now. If that's what my career stands or falls on, it may just fall."

Lia Matera's newest book, *Last Chants*, which will come out next June, is set in Boulder Creek and focuses on the point "where shamanism and cybernetics overlap." Her following book will be on space aliens and the abductee experience, set in Santa Cruz and Davenport. She talks online to contactees and abductees. Although her first book was set in her San Francisco law school, most of her mysteries take place in this area. Her protagonist, Laura Di Palma, "a lawyer with principles," appears in five of Matera's books.

Denise Osborne has published two mysteries, is at work on her third, and has a fourth one planned. Her first,

*Murder Offscreen*, which got rave reviews, came out in 1994, and her second, *Cut to Murder*, was released in August. Her heroine is a struggling screenwriter named Queenie Davilov who likes to drink Jack Daniel's and smoke hand-rolled cigarettes.

Roxanne Hyden's second book "will be a more straightforward mys-

lighted to have a mystery writer in it, Hyden's family thinks it's great, but Crum says, "No one seems particularly impressed." Matera's son doesn't think it's cool at all that she writes mysteries. "He's so blasé about it," Matera says.

No one had positive remarks about the O.J. case, but McGuire said she liked watching prosecutor Marcia Clark. They went to the same law school in Los Angeles. There are not a lot of role models who are women, and McGuire liked seeing how Clark worked. "It was such a learning experience. I know what it's like to be the only woman in the room, and unfortunately, some of the things women prosecutors face are gender-based."

These writers (except for Laurie King who is in England) will be at the Bookworks in Aptos on Nov. 10: Christine McGuire, 4:30-6 p.m.; Lia Matera, 5-7 p.m.; Roxanne Hyden, 5:30-7:30 p.m.; Denise Osborne 6-8 p.m.; Laura Crum, 7-8:30 p.m. On Nov. 12, Roxanne Hyden will be at the Scotts Valley Village Book Cafe at 1 p.m., and at Bookshop Santa Cruz Nov. 15, at 8 p.m.



Lia Matera

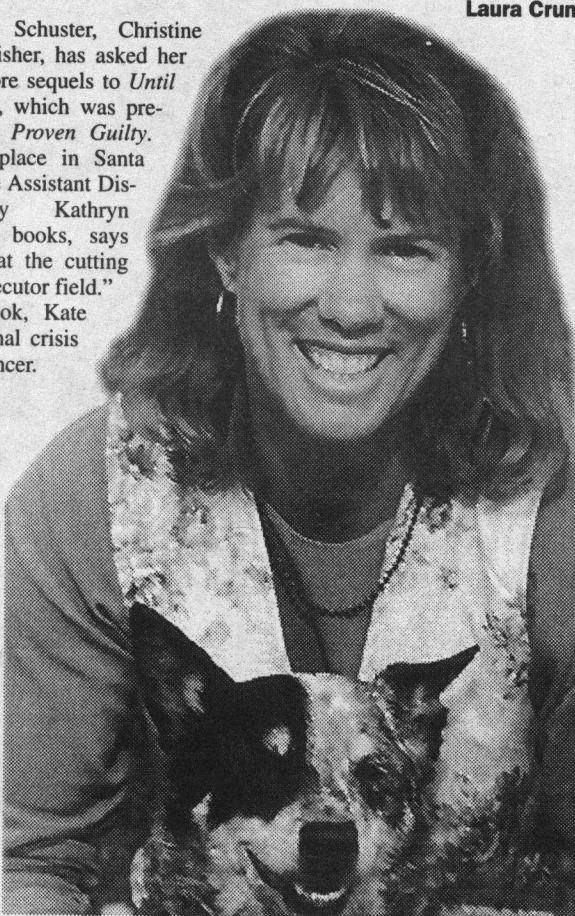
tery," she says.

Simon and Schuster, Christine McGuire's publisher, has asked her to write two more sequels to *Until Justice Is Done*, which was preceded by *Until Proven Guilty*. They all take place in Santa Cruz and feature Assistant District Attorney Kathryn Mackay. These books, says McGuire, "are at the cutting edge of the prosecutor field." In her next book, Kate Mackay's personal crisis will be breast cancer.

## Living with mystery writers

What do their families think of having a mystery writer in their midst? King says her children "laugh at questions like this and respond with questions such as 'How does your family relate to having a mother in its midst?'"

Osborne's family is de-



Laura Crum

# Comic Crime

## The token male among Santa Cruz mystery writers

by Virginia Lee

Marc Darrow's a man who's had many careers. Having started off as a college gym teacher, Marc soon discovered that he cared more about contact with people than how they contacted with the volleyball. After blowing out his knees on a bad gym floor, Darrow instead chose to follow the spiritual path, which led him to experience his fair share of gurus, philosophers and meditation retreats.

Having decided that his next calling was to guide people along the path of self-realization, Darrow became a spiritual counselor of sorts and eventually got his MFCC from JFK University in Cupertino. Now, Darrow's a practicing psychotherapist, but what does he do in his spare time? He writes murder mysteries.

"I wrote my first book at the age of 19 as a way to pass the time when I was trapped in a campground," says Darrow who admits that as a manuscript it was terrible. "Writing has always satisfied the search for meaning in my life." During the '70s, Darrow wrote kids' books like *The Dog that Burped his Way to Jupiter* (originally titled *The Dog that Farted his Way to Mars*), but for some reason they never got published. But he did get hired to write for a junior high school football fiction series under a pseudonym. "I kind of put the spiritual stuff on the shelf," he admits.

But now Darrow's come full-circle and has written his first book under his own name. *The Santa Cruz Guru Murders*, published by Steve Lawton of Otter B Books, is a delightful mélange of Santa Cruz geography, humorous spiritual stereotypes and the mysterious element of murder — all the things that Santa Cruz is famous for.

"I came up with the idea to write this book while I was a student at JFK," continues Darrow. "At the time, I was grappling with trying to tell the difference between what was spiritual and what was downright crazy. The book deals with heavy stuff in a light hearted way, as it embraces the basic universal struggle between good and evil." According to the liner notes, you're sure to believe in karma by the end of the book.

The storyline is about a grad student at UCSC who inadvertently gets mixed up in a crime. After meeting a series of gurus

who have a habit of getting murdered, Slocum is forced to sort out what's real and what's a hoax. "The main character sees the underlying comic absurdity of the whole thing," explains Darrow, "and it all takes place right here in Santa Cruz — from the lighthouse on West Cliff Drive to a homeless encampment in Felton to an ashram up in the Santa Cruz Mountains."

Everything's fictitious, of course, and the most fun thing about the book is its unpredictabil-



Marc Darrow

ity. "I didn't even know how it was going to end," confesses Darrow. "I just figured out the plot as it went along. I learned to trust the writing process. I'm not a formula mystery writer."

Marc Darrow's taking his career as a writer a lot more seriously these days. Writing comes on the heels of several other of Darrow's illustrious careers, which includes being co-owner of Folk Arts when it was located below the old *GOOD TIMES* office before the earthquake — and singing on the street as country western singer Verlin Whisk. ("When people tried to give me money I just told them to go shop in my store" says Darrow.) "I like to push the envelope of the genre," concludes Darrow. The mysterious psychotherapist who's worn so many hats just may be on the wave of the future — singing all the way to the bank.

Marc Darrow joins a host of other mystery writers appearing at Bookworks in Aptos, Friday, Nov. 10, 3:30-5 p.m., and will appear later at the White Raven in Felton at 7 p.m.