

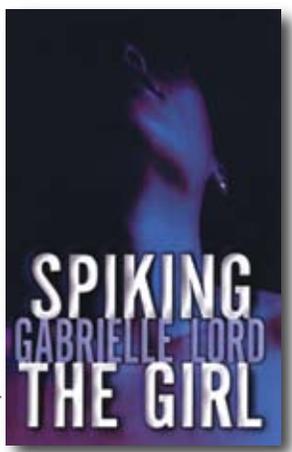
THE MURDEROUS WOMEN WRITERS OF OZ

J. MADISON DAVIS

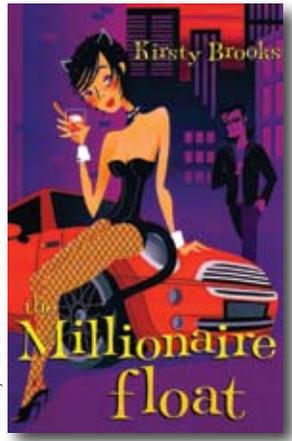
THE ROLE OF WOMEN WRITERS in mystery and suspense fiction has been decisive from the beginnings of the genre. The dime novel and the pulp novel provided women writers an outlet that they did not have in the mainstream publishing of the day. **Seeley Register** is credited with the first American detective novel, *The Dead Letter* (1864), and **Anna Katherine Green** is credited with the first American legal thriller, *The Leavenworth Case* (1878). In England, **Mary Elizabeth Braddon** was influenced by Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) in creating *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), which anticipated the "howdunnits" of R. Austin Freeman and the popular television show *Columbo*. A majority of mystery novels today are written by women—not just "cozies," especially, but in all the subgenres.

As small as the market in Australia has always been, women mystery writers have played an even more prominent role in developing the genre there. Perhaps the most colorful pioneer of the mystery anywhere was **Mary Fortune**, who left Canada for Australia's goldfields, bigamously married a policeman, and died an alcoholic. Her detective stories, first published in 1865, seem to have been the first to use the detective's point of view, a now-standard technique. The first edition of Fortune's anthology of detective stories (published in 1871) exists in only one known copy. Born in England, **Ellen Davitt**, a prominent educator and artist, serialized the first known Australian mystery novel, *Force and Fraud*, in 1865.

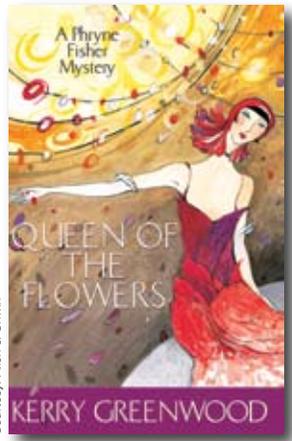
Fertilized by continuous immigration, Australia has developed a rich tradition of the crime novel since these early pioneers, and during the 1980s an explosion in the publishing of crime novels set on that continent found many women entering the marketplace. In 1991 a women's mystery-writers organization, named after Sisters in Crime, Inc., was founded despite the objections of the original organization, which held that the giving of awards was contrary to the founding objectives. Nevertheless, Sisters in Crime Australia now has five hundred



Courtesy: Hodder Headline Australia



Courtesy: Hachette Live Australia



Courtesy: Allen & Unwin

members and sponsors the Scarlet Stiletto award for best short story by an Australian woman and the Davitt awards for the best novel, best young-fiction book, and the Reader's Choice, voted by members of the organization. These awards complement the Ned Kelly award, named after the famous iron-helmeted bandit, which is given by the Crime Writers' Association of Australia.

A. C. Nielsen *BookScan* figures for 2003 and 2004 put former supermodel **Tara Moss** as the number-one-selling crime writer "down under." *Sky News* has called her "a renaissance woman with a list of hobbies that would make your hair curl." Born in Canada, she began writing Stephen King-style horror stories for her classmates when she was ten. She graced over forty magazine covers and traveled the globe before settling in Australia in 1996. Her first novel, *Fetish* (2001), published when she was only twenty-three, was just released in the United States in December 2005. *Covet* (2004) and *Split* (2002) only increased her worldwide reputation, as she has been nominated for the Davitt and Ned Kelly awards and translated into nine languages. She makes frequent appearances as a television host, is active in charity work, and was dubbed one of the "Twenty-five Sexiest People in the World" by *Who* magazine in 2002. Moss exploits the current interest in forensic science that was awakened by Patricia Cornwell and the multiple versions of *Forensic Files* and *CSI* on U.S. television. Moss is a meticulous researcher of investigative procedures while writing, earning much praise for the authenticity of her thrillers. She has visited

the FBI Academy at Quantico, shot with the LAPD, and hung around morgues and Dr. Robert Hare's psychopathy lab at the University of British Columbia. After her debut in the American market, she may well become one of the world's best-sellers.

Among other women writers glean- ing the forensics fields in Australia is **Gabrielle Lord**, who has been nominated for several prizes and won the 2002 Ned Kelly award for *Death Delights*, the main character of which is a forensic scientist. She has also won the Davitt. After what she describes as a misspent youth, Lord began writing novels at age thirty and, after a couple of failures, struck pay dirt with crime. She has written thirteen novels to date.

Private eyes also are popular in Australia, and among women writers, **Marele Day** has earned an outstanding reputation for her four novels featuring protagonist Claudia Valentine:

The Life and Times of Harry Lavender (1988), *The Case of the Chinese Boxes* (1990), *The Last Tango of Dolores Delgado* (1993), and *The Disappearances of Madalena Grimaldi* (1995). Day has not continued her series so far, but it still remains vivid in readers' minds. *Tango* won the best-novel award from the Private Eye Writers of America. The four are frequently referred to as "minor classics." In the meantime, Day has published literary novels, including *Lambs of God* (1997) and *Mrs. Cook: The Real and Imagined Life of the Captain's Wife* (2003). In an interview, Day once remarked that she became a writer in order to capture a sense of place but that she is most inspired by "the quirkiness of human nature. That, and the mortgage payments."

Other private-eye writers include **Kirsty Brooks**, **Lindy Cameron**, and **Caroline Shaw**. Brooks's novels are light and set in Adelaide, which is a city of a more modest size than Sydney or Melbourne. Her heroine is a part-time P.I. whose day job is renting videos. Cameron created Kit O'Malley, a former policewoman who, as reviewer Katie Hughes observed, has a good relationship with her cat and a bad one with her mother, like many a fictional female



Kirsty Brooks

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

PRINT

"Murder Down Under," *Mystery Readers International* 20:4 (Winter 2004–2005), a special issue with essays and author commentaries

ORGANIZATIONS

Crime Writers Queensland

www.connectqld.org.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=27436

Partners in Crime (formerly Sisters in Crime), Sydney

www.geocities.com/Athens/Styx/7255

Sisters in Crime, Australia

home.vicnet.net.au/~sincoz

AUTHOR WEBSITES

Kirsty Brooks www.kirstybrooks.com

Lindy Cameron www.bryson.com.au

Phryne Fisher www.phrynefisher.com

Gabrielle Lord www.gabriellelord.com

Tara Moss www.taramoss.com.au

detective. Shaw's detective is Lenny Shaw, addicted to pills and living in Melbourne, whose detecting consists largely of finding rich folks' cats.

Historical mysteries have also done well in Australia, with one of the most charming and successful series set in the 1920s around character Phryne Fisher. The author, **Kerry Greenwood**, has worked as a folk singer, but on April Fools' Day 1982 she completed her law degree and now works in legal aid as a "duty solicitor" (public defender). She had written a thesis on a 1928 wharf strike and thought it would be easy to set a novel in the period.

The background was more difficult than she imagined, and Phryne had to have all the advantages in order to compete in what was still a man's world. She is titled, self-assured, rich, and bold—reminiscent of such plucky, sophisticated male heroes as Simon Templar and James Bond. Phryne is a fantasy character, but readers obviously enjoy identifying with her. The first novel came out in 1989, and there have been fourteen since. The Crime Writers Association of Australia honored her in 2003 with a lifetime achievement award. Greenwood says she will continue with the series until her readers lose interest. *The Age* newspaper asked Greenwood what she would change in the world if she had

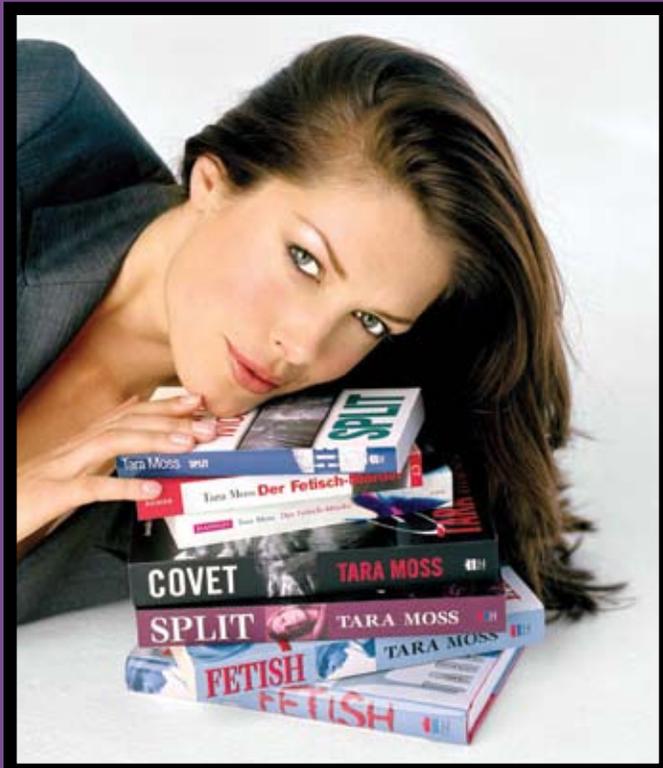
the power. "I'd call up my legions of genetic engineers," she answered, "and decrease the amount of testosterone in the world to a tenth. A little is essential but the amount that's around at the moment just causes trouble." One shouldn't dismiss this; Greenwood's living companion is a registered Wizard. Maybe that explains how she has written nearly thirty novels of various sorts, often three a year! **WLT**

University of Oklahoma



Kerry Greenwood

Tara Moss



Courtesy: Pinnacle PR

TARA MOSS has successfully made the transition from top international model to best-selling author of the crime novels *Fetish*, *Split*, and *Covet*. Her work has been published in nine countries and five languages, helping to make the young author “one of Australia’s most successful female authors in any genre.” Her novel *Fetish* was just released in the United States in December 2005.

Moss began writing gruesome “Stephen King–inspired” stories for her classmates when she was only ten and started writing her successful debut novel, *Fetish* (2001), when she was twenty-three. Her crime novels have been nominated for both the Davitt Award and the Ned Kelly, two of Australia’s most prestigious honors. She earned a diploma from the Australian College of Journalism in 1997 and in 1998 won the Scarlet Stiletto Young Writers Award for her story “Psycho Magnet.”

Not a writer to rely solely on imagination, Moss’s in-depth research has seen her tour the FBI Academy at Quantico; spend time in squad cars, the morgue, prisons, the Hare Psychopathy Lab, the Supreme Court, and criminology conferences worldwide; take polygraph tests; shoot weapons; pass the Firearms Training Simulator (FATSII) with the LAPD; and pull 4.2 Gs doing loops over the Sydney Opera House flying with the RAAF Roulettes.

Born in Victoria, British Columbia, Moss traveled the world as a top model before becoming a resident of Australia in 1996. She is now a dual Australian/Canadian citizen and resides in Melbourne with her film-producer husband, Mark Pennell. When not researching and writing her fourth novel, Moss enjoys riding her motorcycle, spending time with her faithful dog, Bogart, and serving as ambassador for both the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children and the Bone Marrow Donor Institute. Moss’s popularity has also paved the way for numerous television appearances. In 2005 she hosted a nine-part documentary series on *National Geographic Presents*, mediated a GNW Debate, and served as an MTV Canada guest host.

A Brief Conversation with Tara Moss

World Literature Today What recent book has captured your interest?

Tara Moss I’ve been fascinated by *The Cosmic Serpent*, by Jeremy Narby. It is written as a page-turning personal adventure and a study of anthropology/ethnopharmacology that touches on a revolutionary, thought-provoking theory about intelligence, consciousness, and the origins of life. I rarely get drawn into an unrelated read while I am finishing a novel, but I couldn’t put it down.

WLT What outside the realm of literature has drawn your attention of late?

TM I have also developed a recent obsession with herpetology, earning an Australian wildlife license and obtaining my first snake six months ago, a seven-and-a-half-foot diamond python. The physical mechanisms in reptiles operate very differently

than those of humans, which is wonderful to learn about. Snakes move with mesmerizing stealth. I am often transfixed by the most basic activities of my python, Gomez (named for the Addams Family character because he is creepy and kooky). I hope to breed pythons one day. Pythons are non-venomous, but some of the most deadly snakes in the world also exist in Australia, including brown snakes, copperheads, death adders, red-bellied black snakes, Taipan snakes, and tiger snakes, none of which I would feel quite as comfortable with around my neck.

WLT What current writing projects do you have underway or have planned for the near future?

TM I am currently writing a novel with the working title of “Hit.” It is the fourth crime thriller in my series with Mak Vanderwall, and the research has involved attending conferences on human trafficking and drug abuse and spending time talking to workers in the sex industry and hit men, in addition to my usual hands-on research

with detectives, pathologists, barristers, forensic psychologists, and criminal investigators. I am currently spending much of my days shadowing prominent forensic psychologists and barristers and interviewing exotic dancers and sex workers. It has been fascinating.

In addition to finishing my fourth novel, I am also launching into Germany with my third German-language thriller, “Killing Me Softly”; promoting new translations in Russia, France, and Italy this year; and presenting a series of crime documentaries for National Geographic in the UK. I am also taking advanced motorcycling lessons at Phillip Island race track (I currently ride a ZZR sports bike), and I wish to pursue a pilot’s license. I will also be cycling the 590-kilometer, nine-day Great Victorian Bike Ride as honorary ambassador for the Bone Marrow Donor Institute to raise money for children suffering from leukemia and other cancers. It will be a busy twelve months.

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