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They Wrote the Book: Thirteen Women Mystery Writers Tell All

Helen Windrath, editor
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When it first happened, she was shocked. When it happened again, she decided maybe that was just the way she wrote. Maybe all writers write through to strong characters, tricky plots, a scary detail. Maybe a writing room made to resemble a Poe-like cave or protagonists bickering with the author over out-of-character dialogue are just part of the mystery of the writing process.

This collection explores the way in which mystery writers conceive of and execute their novels, and one primary aspect these authors share is the way in which they incorporate their beliefs as women and as a feminists into their mystery writing, a genre historically dominated by male writers with limited characters. Jean Bedford sets forth rules to be followed by the avid writer; Val McDermid quips “if the eyes are the windows of the soul, the mouth is the front door.” Each writer provides readers with insight, direction, and generally some humor.

For those interested in writing or simply reading mystery novels, the authors’ discussion of craft is lucid and easily applicable to most kinds of writing. Everything from mood in the writing room to mood in the novel falls under the jurisdiction of these writers; some authors investigate the use of a homosexual character as a protagonist and the way that choice effects their writing and their publishing. Others emphasize place and facticity, its importance in a genre where the suspension of disbelief is paramount. Each writer constructs her chapter to reflect a tenant of fiction writing: structure, characterization, research, plot, style, pacing, and setting.

For mystery readers and would-be writers, this book reads like a conversation over coffee, an easy exchange of what each author does to create the written word. Ellen Hart relates the consensus of the book: “It’s all process. Nothing is perfect the first time around.”

Still, the authors in this collection have dedicated themselves to the messy and satisfying task of writing and their satisfaction with that decision reveals itself in the playful and informative tone with which they share the experience. For those who have always felt writing to be a type of alchemy, these writers help solve that mystery.
CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (July / August 2000)

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