

G is for Grafton: Author talks research, writing and a gal named Kinsey

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Sue Grafton doesn't do much press, so imagine my surprise when the text of a long interview was included with a review copy of her 22nd novel, "V is for Vengeance."

This time around, Grafton's alter ego, private detective Kinsey Millhone, gets involved, both professionally and personally, in a shoplifting case that is not as simple as it initially appears.

Several plot lines run through the novel, and although Grafton tries to wind them up at the end of the novel, the story feels disjointed, leaving the reader to wonder if Grafton's enthusiasm for the series, which began with "A is for Alibi" in 1982, is beginning to dwindle.

So, gentle readers, below please find text from a visit with the best-selling author, reprinted with permission from her publisher, G.P. Putnam's Sons.

G.P. Putnam's Sons: Early on in your new novel, Kinsey says, "I know there are people who believe you should forgive and forget. For the record, I'd like to say I'm a big fan of forgiveness as long as I'm given the opportunity to get even first." Why did you choose vengeance as the keystone of this novel?

Sue Grafton: Personally, I'm a big fan of ven-geance and I'm convinced forgiveness is vastly overrated. I've heard people say that in holding a grudge, you're only hurting yourself, but it's never bothered me a bit. I mean, what could be more satisfying than watching your enemies go down? It's so biblical.

GPP: You've said that who hires Kinsey, and what she is hired to do, are always critically important for you as you start a new book. What's the answer to those questions in this case?

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SG: Essentially, Kinsey is hired to do a background check on a dead woman, Audrey Vance, after her arrest for shoplifting and her subsequent fatal plunge from a bridge. The woman's fiancé is convinced Audrey's death was not the suicide it appears to be. Kinsey and her employer are at odds in their assessment of the woman's criminal culpability. He sees Audrey as an unfortunate victim of circumstances. Kinsey believes she was a career thief, caught up in a professional shoplifting ring.

GPP: Who knew that shoplifting was such a major criminal enterprise, or that it could lead to murder? What is the scale of organized shoplifting in the United States?

SG: The figures I've read are based on the FBI's Crime Index of 2000. Their projection is that with two million shop-lifter apprehensions a year, the true total is probably closer to 200 million shoplifting incidents. Estimates of the cost to retailers is thirty-one billion dollars a year. Trust me, those losses are passed along to consumers, so you and I are picking up the tab.

GPP: What piqued your interest in shoplifting as a context for a Millhone mystery? How did you research it?

SG: In checking back through the many charts I keep about the subjects I've covered to date, I realized I'd never touched on the issue of retail theft. At first I thought Kinsey might be hired as an undercover "shopper" whose job was to investigate internal and external theft. Beyond her skulking up and down the aisles at a department store, I couldn't see how that would play out. It occurred to me that her witnessing an act of shoplifting would put her right smack in the middle of the action. It's Audrey's suspicious tumble from the Cold Spring Bridge that keeps the story in play.

I read any number of books on the subject and talked to store owners and loss prevention officers. There's an entire industry built on security measures put in place to fend off internal theft and inventory shrinkage. I was also able to call on personal experience, remembering the shoplifting I did in grade school. Had I been caught, I'd probably still be in jail.

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