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## The Works of Feminist Mystery Author *Lia Matera*

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**BOOK REVIEW:****The Works of Feminist Mystery Author *Lia Matera***

By Judith A. Gaskell and N. Morrison Torrey

We have written this review that covers the comprehensive works of a feminist mystery writer because we are both mystery addicts, who read mysteries not just to escape from attorney anxiety but because this literature deserves a great deal of respect. The genre is important for many reasons: (1) it takes the woman's perspective seriously; (2) it does not denigrate the domestic, everyday details of life; (3) it shows that women are strong, both emotionally and physically; and (4) it often is a critique of the legal and social status quo.

Author Lia Matera has given us two characters who are intricately involved in family life and who puzzle their way out of problems using their analytical skills. We can identify with her characters Willa and Laura, since we can relate to the settings and circumstances of these mysteries. They are not centered on international spy rings or the criminal underworld, but instead are grounded in the everyday working world.

Lia Matera has a superlative grasp of not only legal lingo but also the ambivalence of most thinking people who practice law. This is not surprising since the back flap of her book jacket tells us that Lia Matera is a graduate of Hastings College of Law, where she was editor of the *Constitutional Law Review*. Although she started out as a Teaching Fellow at Stanford Law School, she decided to put her law degree "to even better

use writing mysteries full time." Her two primary characters are Willa Jansson and Laura DiPalma, two female lawyers with guts, who allow Matera to explore multiple possibilities and relationships within the framework of entertaining whodunits.

It is often difficult to reconcile what we do as lawyers with what we believe, what we know, to be fair and just. Willa and Laura deal with these conflicts in all six books. Matera places Willa in a variety of legal positions (law student, leftist law firm associate, Wall Street firm associate, and law clerk for a federal judge) in order to explore these feelings. Unfortunately, her parents' world of total commitment to radical politics leaves her little room to maneuver. Through the haze of marijuana highs, she grapples with her weary conclusion that individual action is ineffectual. While she clings to old and familiar friends and hopes, she realizes that disappointment and betrayal are inevitable. These wanderings would be very depressing if Matera's Willa was not so witty in her cynicism. Matera is seldom trite, even in her obsession with Vietnam. Perhaps she is correct; for Vietnam shaped and continues to shape the generations after 1965.

Willa also has to deal with her feelings about her mother June, under both loving and exasperating circumstances. The mother-daughter conflict is a continuing theme in the Willa Jansson series which is sure to resonate with readers who are exploring the pain and pleasure of motherhood. Willa has the additional burden of resenting her mother's frequent desertions (jail sentences for political protests) of her as a child. Having a global view complicates June's ability to see the intimate problems at home; she sometimes sacrifices Willa's feelings and peace of mind for the "greater good."

Matera's other sleuth Laura is motherless and seemingly without roots. When she and her cousin acknowledge their mutual attraction, they begin co-habiting. Laura tries to ignore the stress of maintaining a relationship while logging in sixty to

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eighty hours a week at the law firm. It takes crises for her to analyze her life and decide what holds meaning for her. But Laura has courage, if not always discretion, and is able to reconcile her beliefs with her actions. Somehow she finds the strength to do what she has to do.

What is most enjoyable about Lia Matera's mysteries is their irreverence. The lampoon's point punctures everything sacred in the legal world -- legal education, law professors, law reviews, lefty law firms, Wall Street firms, federal judges, process, and substance. Everyone from trial attorneys to law professors will identify strongly with both Willa and Laura's identity crises and will recognize the enormous mood swings and feelings of paranoia. It is part of Matera's talent that she reveals deception and betrayal through the reality of two lawyers' work, although Willa and Laura have more of a working familiarity with murder than most of us. You may find yourself wishing you were half so clever as Willa and Laura are in dealing with the daily insults of sexism.

Is there a message in these mysteries? Maybe it is that the small compromises made to survive and succeed day-to-day do not have to undermine our sense of self, as long as we keep our basic values and beliefs firmly in sight. On the other hand, maybe Matera just wants us to have a good time when we pick up one of her books. You will; we did.

## REVIEWS

### Where Lawyers Fear to Tread (Bantam Books, 1987)

*"Law schools don't have football teams, they have law reviews. Law reviews may look like large paperbacks, but they are arenas. Legal scholars maul each other in polite footnotes, students scrimmage and connive for editorial positions, and the intellectual bloodlust of law professors is appeased, rah rah."*

Welcome to the wise-cracking world of Willa Jansson, third year law-student at Malhousie Law School in San Francisco. Nothing is sacred to Willa, not her pompous law professors, lefty-radical parents, her landlord who blames the Trilateral Commission for the decline of the world, and especially law review articles

that begin with sentences like: "Nowhere have egregious judicial dichotomizations been more squarely behind the eight ball than in the conceptualizations of warrantless arrest scenarios in appellate review models." Obviously, Matera has read a few law review articles in her day.

Along the way to solving the murders of the Editor-in-Chief, Executive Editor and Technical Editor of the Malhousie Law Review (some of you maligned law review authors might feel some degree of gratification about those fictional deaths) and a Wills and Trusts professor, Willa can always be counted on to share amusing insights with the reader, such as "lawyers adore redundant word pairs (cease and desist, due and payable, will and testament)." We also meet Lt. Surgelato (the "Surge" to football fans) who, unbeknownst to Willa, is always one step ahead of her but handcuffed by the legal nicety of evidence. Willa does solve the mystery but only after several false starts and at great personal peril.

### A Radical Departure (Bantam Books, 1988)

Two years later, Willa is an over-worked, under-paid and jaded associate with the leftiest of the lefty firms as a result of "contacts" -- her parents are long-time and frequent clients of radical attorney Julian Warnecke. Willa now does the "dull bread-and-butter lawyering - the divorces, the landlord-tenant and drunk-driving defenses. The partners in the law firm . . . weren't about to give the new girl their interesting cases: they weren't all that liberal."

Unfortunately, Warnecke is poisoned by hemlock in his amaretto mousse at a firm lunch. This new series of murders comes on the eve of Willa's testimony in the "law school murders" in which the defendant is represented by Laura DiPalma (a "hell of a lawyer" who gets a jury verdict of voluntary manslaughter). Enter Homicide Lt. Surgelato.

This time Willa's mother, June Jansson (Willa's unmarried parents rejected the patriarchal practice of naming children after the father), is in the middle of the imbroglio after it is discovered that she inherits the bulk of the Warnecke estate. June, with 15 arrests connected to political protests, has extensive experience with passive resistance and a deep distrust of "pigs." This leads to a great deal of cheap wit between Willa and

Surgelato. Luckily, Willa survives her sleuthing; but her trust is wearing thin.

### **Hidden Agenda (Bantam Books, 1988)**

After the demise of Warnecke, Kerrey, Lieberman & Flish, Willa has no plans until she is awakened one morning by a call from a partner at Wailes, Roth, Fotheringham and Beck, the "biggest, piggiest law firm on The Street," asking her to consider applying to its new San Francisco office. Willa is seduced by the \$90,000 salary (compared to \$25,500 at her politically correct firm).

Facing her parents with her decision is another matter; she has to carefully strategize: "Mother . . . I think it's important for women to assume their rightful positions in the power structure. Don't you?" Her parents are forlorn at Willa's decision to sell-out, now representing banks and holding companies instead of farm workers and immigrants.

After being "verticalled" in, Willa is invited to an extravagant firm and client weekend retreat. Meeting one of the firm's better clients, Willa smiles (dazzlingly, she hopes) and coolly observes the client's response: "... he looked at me the way Julian Warnecke's Teamster clients used to look at me. I almost expected him to echo the sentiments of one union man: This broad's spout to be my lawyer?" The downhill spiral continues when Willa learns there is to be dancing ("I'm not graceful and it irritates me that I'm not supposed to lead") and then is sexually accosted by a partner in her room. Later, the very same partner is found dead with hemlock stuffed in his mouth and Willa finds herself calling Lt. Surgelato yet again. This time, however, they find their intimacy based on murder to be strained to the limit. Murder seems to follow Willa around like a lovesick puppy. How many close shaves can she survive?

### **Prior Convictions (Simon & Schuster, 1991)**

Having spent the last year slaving at the Los Angeles office of Wailes, Roth, et al., Willa is about to return to her beloved San Francisco with a new car, wardrobe and furniture and without law school debts. The 362 chalk marks on her apartment wall attest to the rehabilitation

of her bank account and resume. However, the dedication to the book reveals Willa's current state of mind:

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.*

*William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"*

Willa is confused and desperate; her L.A. therapist (from whom she's concealed her adolescent crush) suggests that she should stay put and not make any career or life decisions. But, as Willa notes, she never takes the advice of people she respects -- "I take my own, instead." So, we meet up with Willa as she throws her marijuana off the Santa Monica Pier on her way home.

The impetus for this migration is an unexpected job offer of a clerkship with the Honorable Michael J. Shanna, federal court judge, Northern District of California, one of the few remaining liberal Carter appointees. Even though Willa is having serious trust problems, she seems to accept this offer at face value. Perhaps her desperation truly is driving her:

*Six or seven months' reprieve. Then I'd have to figure out what I really wanted to do, launch another volley of resumes. Maybe by then the prospect of practicing law would not give me the dry heaves.*

Instead of wrapping herself in the love and warmth of home, however, Willa finds that those she loves the most betray her rather than trust her. Even Lt. Surgelato, who has been silent for a year, has remarried his previously estranged wife. It's time for Willa to grow up and deal with the conflicts that obsess her. We last see her returning to therapy with a commitment to do so.

### **The Smart Money (Bantam Books, 1988)**

Laura DiPalma has returned to her hometown and has to agree with her cousin Hal when he calls her a "hotshot fucking lawyer . . . Opening an office in the backwater just so you can stick it to your ex-husband." Laura first achieved fame when she defended a man who'd shot and killed two Republican senators as they

stepped off a chartered jet. Although the jury acquitted him by reason of insanity, Laura had utilized experts to establish that the defendant had been conditioned to violence by too much television -- the so-called "t.v. defense" critiqued by every national news magazine. Less than a year later he was released from a psychiatric institution when a medical review board declared him sane. Her reputation grew even larger when she later got a manslaughter verdict against the so-called "law school murderer" (see Where Lawyers Fear to Tread).

Laura has cooked up a complex scheme to obtain a humiliating vengeance against her former husband and his lover, whose husband apparently committed suicide. Small town politics combine with bitter memories and lingering effects of the Vietnam War to twist and turn the plot. It is frightening to believe that someone you care about can commit cold-blooded murder. It is terrifying when you aren't sure who did it -- your father, your ex-husband, your cousin (who is provoking all sorts of uncontrollable feelings), your investigator/lover, your uncle, or any number of other potential suspects. But Laura's intelligence and instincts help her in real life as well as in the courtroom.

### **The Good Fight (Simon & Schuster, 1990)**

Laura is back in San Francisco, in her sixth year as an associate with White, Sayres & Speck, the small law firm she put on the map with her infamous criminal defense work. Laura honestly admits to her clients that "two luridly publicized murder trials had created an association in the public mind: Laura Di Palma was the hired gun for guilty clients, not innocent ones. The antithesis of Perry Mason." She is living uneasily with her cousin Hal, who has a difficult time accepting her affluence.

The story begins with Laura having hospitalized Hal, who suffered what the doctors can only surmise to be a stroke since his previous head injuries (his Vietnamese girlfriend shot a large portion of his head off) make CAT scans unreadable. Laura is frantic with worry, and goes off the deep-end when Hal "escapes" the hospital.

Meanwhile, her pro bono work has landed Dan Crosetti as a client. Dan has spent twenty years as a pacifist activist, keeping his fervor even after a National Guard truck ran over his legs and left him without them.

Now Dan is accused of killing his best friend after discovering him to be an FBI infiltrator.

Laura is torn between hunting for Hal, investigating and strategizing for Dan, and continuing to represent paying clients. After she intervenes, unsuccessfully, in Dan's suicide Laura is no longer able to contain her frustrations with the police and the conservatism of her firm. Her conscience prods her to continue digging in Dan's case, and she decides to hold a press conference about his death. We get a glimpse of how Laura approaches her job:

*Another day I'd have prepared carefully for a press conference. I'd have chosen the appropriate suit, depending upon whether I wished to project strength, optimism, or right-headedness. I'd have planned and rehearsed my statement with the same deliberation I brought to jury trials.*

In the process of discovering the truth about Dan, Laura confronts her ambivalence about the lack of meaning in her own life.

**Authors' Note:** *We are astonished when people question the existence of a substantial body of work in this genre. We hope these reviews are well-received and are happy to direct your attention to other authors, such as Barbara Wilson, Patricia D. Cornwell, Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller, Lillian O'Donnell, Amanda Cross a/k/a Carolyn Heilbrun, Judith Van Gieson, P.D. James, Carolyn Wheat, Sarah Paretsky, and Sue Conant (for all of you dog lovers).*