

KINSEY MILLHONE'S UNCHARTERED ITINERARY

Three millennia ago, fair Helen launched a thousand ships and toppled the towers of Ilium. Today, a darker-tressed woman of wonder, sailing a mere word processor, sends shock waves through the publishing world, not from Troy, but from the equally Mediterranean ambience of Santa Barbara, California.

Sue Grafton's 11th book in her Alphabet series of crime novels, "K Is for Killer" was printed recently in an edition of 600,000 – more copies than the combined total of all the hardcovers ever published by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald. But Grafton does more than just mega-push mysteries to readers in quest of an easy typographical fix; she has consistently earned high marks from the critics for her work.

If you believe in an explainable universe, there is a compelling reason for such an unusual daily double. It goes by the name of Kinsey Millhone, Grafton's narrator. Here she is, introducing herself in "A Is for Alibi" :

"My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I'm thirty-two years old, twice divorced, no kids. The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind. I'm a nice person and I have a lot of friends. My apartment is small but I like living in a cramped space. I've lived in trailers most of my life, but lately they've been getting too elaborate for my taste, so now I live in one room, a 'bachelorette.' I don't have pets. I don't have houseplants. I spend a lot of time on the road and I don't like leaving things behind. Aside from the hazards of my profession, my life has always been ordinary, uneventful, and good. Killing someone feels odd to me and I haven't quit sorted it through."

Often rebellious, always independent, archly self-deprecating, an intriguing mix of the intuitive and analytical, smart-assed when her superego is on a coffee break, and yet deep down a softy, this complex and completely credible modern woman has – in terms of a reader's knowledge of the detective he is encountering – surpassed Hammett's stoic Op, Chandler's knightly Marlowe, and Macdonald's self-effaced Archer as a fully-developed character with whom to identify.

Sexually, Kinsey is a woman of her time – wary of encounters, but Gung Ho once physically engaged. Like most of us, she lies; only this determined woman consciously shapes her prevarications so as to make them more convincing. Unabashed nosiness leads her into dangerous places, and she thinks nothing of picking a lock or two to get there. She is admirably moral and occasionally moralistic.

Of her kinship with her heroine, Sue Grafton one-lines: “I think of us as one soul in two bodies and she got the good one.” Since our trim author jogs several miles four days a week and swims in her pool the other three, this is modesty on her part. Besides, at age 53, Grafton is spotting her fictional alter ego some 20 years.

In a more serious vein, her creator reflects that “Kinsey Millhone is the person I would have been had I not married young and had children. She is more than that. She is a stripped-down version of my ‘self,’ my shadow, my projection – a celebration of my own freedom, independence and courage.”

All well and good. But wishing it does not necessarily make it so. What distinguishes the Alphabet books is the perfect narrative pitch of Kinsey’s voice. The timbre of that voice is analogous to the improvisations of a master jazz soloist who wings it, but only after calling on hard-won technical skills to plumb the depths of his experience. Having done the work, he is finally free to fly.

Grafton calls this “getting connected to your stuff, a sense of authenticity or truth.” Much of that authenticity or truth derives from doing homework. She is an intrepid researcher and has taken classes in women’s self-defense and criminal law. She owns a handgun and has fired it at a target because she wanted to know just how it felt to squeeze the trigger. The Grafton library includes various books on crime detection, technical works on toxicology and forensics among them.

A crucial difference between a superior crime novel and one that is only competent is the preparation brought to the task by the writer. Unlike a ready-made pasta sauce, Grafton’s compositional method can be seen as one in which the ingredients have been carefully selected, blended and slowly simmered. This start-from-scratch writer is not your basic Ragu, but the real thing. She composes for several hours a day, every day, to produce perhaps two pages. Her books confirm the truism that good

writing is rewriting. It usually takes a full year before another letter of the alphabet can be checked off.

Asked why she has committed to working her way through “Z,” Grafton deadpans: “There must be more than 26 ways to kill somebody.” But it is clear that an ambitious being is making funny here.

A serial reading last month of the first ten Kinsey Millhones provided a continuity not possible had the novels been read separately upon their publication over the last eleven years. And clues as to where Grafton may be heading.

The books have been changing – more of an evolution than a revolution, perhaps, but changing nonetheless. The temptation is to guess that Kinsey is changing in direct proportion to changes taking place in her creator. In any case, the last several books betray a deepening of mood. This may not be readily apparent, because the Alphabet series incorporates various constants within its components. As these constants turn up again and again, so do Grafton’s repertory players who are brought onstage to help define Kinsey.

All the books are characterized by keenly observed description – of characters, weather, architecture and interior design. These digressions from the plot proper are limned with a precision of detail and verisimilitude that can only come from a painstaking study of the subject under discussion. Seeing it right enables you to write it right. Or, as Kinsey puts it while reorganizing her notes on a case: “Information accumulates and compounds, layer upon layer, each affecting perception.”

Grafton is particularly good at evoking the topography of Santa Teresa, the Southern California town in which Kinsey lives. Santa Teresa, of course, is Santa Barbara, where Grafton has resided for much of the last two decades. “A” contains the first of Grafton’s evocations of the town:

“Santa Teresa is a Southern California town of eighty thousand, artfully arranged between the Sierra Madres and the Pacific Ocean – a haven for the abject rich. The public buildings look like old Spanish missions, the private homes look like magazine illustrations, the palm trees are trimmed of unsightly brown fronds, and the marina is as perfect as a picture postcard with the blue-gray hills forming a backdrop and white boats bobbing in the sunlight. Most of the downtown area consists of

two- and three-storey structures of which stucco and red tile, with wide soft curves and trellises wound with gaudy maroon bougainvillea.”

The clarity of Grafton’s prose reflects the years she spent writing for television and the movies, media which demand directness and terseness of expression. When she does resort to a figure of speech it is usually to the point, stripped of ornateness, and wedded to the plot. In “K,” for example, the splattered blood on the baseboard of a fatally assaulted young woman whom Kinsey befriended “looked like tears of paint.”

When social detail is presented, you can bet that it will have a direct bearing on the story. The inner workings of a Santa Teresa water treatment plant and a contentious water board meeting between polarized civic interests advance the plot of “K,” and the lap pool that figures pivotally in the story is much like the one Grafton recently installed in her home.

In this, the 11th Alphabet novel, the defining elements are darkness, sadness and self-doubt. Here are Kinsey’s ghostly thoughts from the first page of “K”:

“The victims of unsolved homicides I think of as the unruly dead; persons who reside in a limbo of their own, some state between life and death, restless, dissatisfied, longing for release. It’s a fanciful notion for someone not generally given to flights of imagination, but I think of these souls locked in an uneasy relationship with those who have killed them. I’ve talked to homicide investigators who’ve been caught up in similar reveries, haunted by certain victims who seem to linger among us, persistent in their desire for vindication. In the hazy zone where wakefulness fades into sleep, in that leaden moment just before the mind sinks below consciousness, I can sometimes hear them murmuring. They mourn themselves. They sing a lullaby of the murdered. They whisper the names of their attackers, those men and women who still walk the earth, unidentified, unaccused, unpunished, unrepentant. On such nights I do not sleep well. I lie awake listening, hoping to catch a syllable, a phrase, straining to discern in that roll call of conspirators the name of one killer.”

Sunny Santa Teresa? Not. More like Lotusland metastasizing into Nightmare on Elm Street. No wonder Kinsey is distraught. Much of her investigating takes place in the dead of night, causing her biological time clock to be thrown off. One hopes that her disorientation is of the enlightening kind that

foreshadows a more profound understanding of self. In last year's "J Is for Judgment," the proudly self-sufficient Kinsey, who grew up orphaned and learned to keep her inner feelings pretty much under wraps, began to untie the knots of the past and, while investigating the crime she was hired to unravel, went down into her faintest memories, stoically accepting the pain of intimacy she had long avoided.

Grafton is at heart a psychological writer. Understanding human behavior is a central concern throughout her work. Yet, even when dealing with such slippery concepts as human motivation, she maintains a firm grip on her prose. So much of what passes for psychological fiction today is like painting by numbers. The finished portrait is one of uniform obviousness. Foolish psychobabble parades as understanding. Grafton, too, lays out behavioral clothing for the reader, but wisely permits him to dress himself.

In "A," the man Kinsey sleeps with is romantically referred to as "a sheltering cave of flesh." He turns out to be the killer, and in the last chapter Kinsey blows him away. The murder victim, Grafton has let on elsewhere, is patterned on her ex-husband. Disposing of a hateful individual in her fiction becomes the author's sly revenge. Sublime sublimation as this may be, such playfulness is becoming notably scarcer in the more recent books, so that when Kinsey makes tentative contact in "J" with unknown family members, she is plumbing submerged emotional territory.

"K" is darker yet. Kinsey's friends are little in evidence. She is too depressed to do her jogging. Even her celebrated sense of humor has an edge to it. What we are being made privy to is a life view turning bitter. Kinsey examines a murdered woman's photograph and sees not a beautiful body but dead meat. "In some ways, it's hard to know which is more sordid, the pornography of sex or the pornography of homicide ... Decomposition has erased most of the definition from Lorna Kepler's flesh. The very enzymes embedded in her cells had caused her to disintegrate. The body had been invaded, nature's little cleaning crew busily at work – maggots as light as a snowfall and as white as thread."

Is it any surprise, then, that this law-abiding investigator comes to condone vigilantism; that she is, if not technically outside the law, in moral limbo? The novel's last sentence, "Can I find my way back?" clearly suggests that Kinsey is at a crossroads. Given the symbiotic relationship of the character and her creator, one wonders where the former is leading the latter.

Sue Grafton is not the first detective novelist to dead-end in this way. Ross Macdonald, another notable user of the Santa Barbara / Santa Teresa locale, incorporated large chunks of contemporary social issues into his last three novels. The use of such natural events as a forest fire that threatened the local environment or an oil spill that betrayed irresponsible civic behavior clearly indicated that Macdonald was consciously broadening his books, perhaps returning them to their origin, the general novel itself.

Sue Grafton is upping the literary ante on a more personal level. If Kinsey Millhone is perplexed, then so must Sue Grafton be. Sensing that more is at stake, she will be slowing down the pace that has produced a book a year since 1985. Her publishers have been told not to expect the manuscript of "L" on the same implied annual basis.

Sitting in her living room amidst an imposing pile of "K" to be autographed, Sue Grafton heaves a deep sigh: "I come down these mornings and look at the blank screen of my word processor. It is a scary sight." Probed several times about where the series may be heading, the author remains silent. She focuses directly on her inquisitor, then looks through him into the distance. "I don't know," she finally says.

In this context, "L" could unkindly be interpreted as "Lost." But, given the clues that have been planted, it seems likely that greater achievements are in the offing for Sue Grafton and Kinsey Millhone.

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