

# Femmes FATALES

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## Don't You Dare Kill That Cat!

by Charlaïne Harris

One of the most rigid rules in traditional mystery writing is, "Never kill a cat." It's very nearly a given that book lovers are also animal lovers. The Femmes can decapitate men, abduct children, and leave women lying in ditches in happy abundance; but they can't harm animals.

Cats, dogs, and the occasional parrot or hamster scamper through the pages of the Femmes Fatales' books, depicted with love, irritation, and...immunity. As someone who's seldom added a pet



to her character list, I asked the other Femmes what they think a four-legged (or two-winged) friend adds to the plot.

*With only one chick in the nest, Charlaïne Harris expected work would get easier, but that hasn't happened. After she turns in her next Harper Connelly (An Ice Cold Grave), she'll launch into the next (untitled) Sookie Stackhouse. And she'd like to write a short story. Does someone have some hours they'd like to sell? Charlaïne can't find any on eBay. ff*

### Elaine Viets

*Elaine writes her novels with the help of Harry, a striped cat who sleeps by her computer and lashes her keyboard with his tail. Harry collaborates on two series: the Dead-End Job mysteries with Helen Hawthorne and the Josie Marcus Mystery Shopper novels. He's doing a good job. Elaine signed with Signet/NAL for two more books in each series.*

"Are you sure you want a cat? Will you take care of it? Cats need food, water, and a clean litter box every day."

Every Mom puts her kids through that interrogation when they plead for a pet. Every mystery writer should ask the same questions before putting pets in her series.

Cats add complications. My character, Helen Hawthorne, has a six-toed cat named Thumbs.

Thumbs started as a plot twist in *Shop Till You Drop*. Thumbs' feline DNA helped convict a killer. After capturing a killer by a hair, I couldn't send the cat to a shelter. Helen had to keep the cat.

Thumbs changed her life. Before she rushed off to track down the killer, Helen had to find someone to feed the cat. Ditto if she wanted a romantic weekend with Phil.

Worse, I had to find something for the cat to do. My cat can't solve mysteries—he can't even figure out how to open his food. Cats sleep, stare out the window, and demand dinner. None of these activities adds much to the plot.

Ah, but a cat gives a character depth and humanity. I believed that, until I heard this statistic: One out of three criminals has a cat.

Here's a mystery: Why do so many writers, including me, keep cats? Does the cat appeal to the criminal in us? ff

### Dana Cameron

*Pets in mystery? It's a tough balancing act, Dana says. So many animals in fiction are rendered as either superhuman or squicky cute, but, honestly, who among us hasn't been caught cooing and calling the cat "Tiggy-wiggy-piggy pie?" Maybe she's just jealous: a picture of Dana's benevolent feline overlord, Kate Chaos, appeared in Mystery Scene before Dana herself graced the pages.*

I've always been afraid of dogs and five years ago, a gigantic Grand Pyrenees moved in near us. Walking past

'Brunhilde' is always a little scary, despite the presence of an electronic fence. Brunhilde has boundless energy, tearing around the yard, stopping just short of the sidewalk, constrained by that invisible fence.

One night I was walking past, and not seeing Brunhilde, assumed she was inside. Just as I passed the house, a canine head the size of a picnic basket popped out from behind the stone wall. With a single, seismic WOOF! Brunhilde sent me into low-Earth orbit. While I was still screaming, I realized that the dog had somehow evaded the electronic fence and waited for me, calculating how high she could make me jump with one, perfectly timed bark. She sat there, wagging her tail, as I freaked out. A dog with a sense of humor.

I used that incident in *Past Malice* and I'll use Brunhilde's genius in my new book, when one of the characters acquires a dog. The pair connect instantly, packmates separated from birth, and while I haven't a clue about how to be a dog person, I can learn. I fake killers and thieves all the time. It's what a writer does. I may even lose some of my fear of dogs.

I just hope none of my new characters collects spiders. ff

## Donna Andrews

*A visit to the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha helped inspire Donna Andrews's eighth book in the Meg Langslow series, The Penguin Who Knew Too Much. As she and several writer friends approached the penguin enclosure, they heard a child's voice saying, "Mommy, look! The penguins are fighting!" Closer inspection revealed what the penguins were really doing, and a plot was born.*

Confession time: I practice pet-jeop. Yes, in every book I put at least one animal in jeopardy. Usually Spike, the Small Evil One, the tiny furball who technically belongs to Meg's boyfriend's mother. Why do I keep doing this?

Partly because it's fun, throwing Spike into dire peril so Meg can snatch him out again. Says something about her character. She won't admit being fond of Spike, but still risks her neck for him, because that's what the good guys do.

And partly because I can do it without offending the readers, who know no one off's pets in Meg's world. A critiquer wrote in the margin of an early Spike-jeop scene: "Don't hurt the dog!" She needn't have worried. Spike can venture into the lion's mouth, literally, because Meg will always pull him out. If I ever write a book that includes pet carnage, I'll use a pseudonym, or at least a cover warning: "Beware! This is not Meg's world! Bad things happen here!"

### Awards!



Two Femmes were among the nominees for the Lefty Award for the funniest mystery of 2006, given at Left Coast Crime: **Elaine Viets** for her first hardcover mystery, *Murder Unleashed*, and **Donna Andrews** for *No Nest for the Wicket*.

**Toni L.P. Kelner** has been nominated for an Agatha Award for Best Short Story of 2006 for her story "Sleeping with the Plush." The Agatha will be given at Malice Domestic in May.*ff*

In *The Penguin Who Knew Too Much*, I have greater opportunity than ever for animal-jeop. When the bank forecloses on a small, financially troubled private zoo whose owner has disappeared, most of the zoo's inhabitants land in Meg's backyard (or in her bathtub). But the llamas, camels, agoutis, lemurs, sloths, naked mole rats, wolves, bobcats, hyenas, and penguins who appear in the plot are never in serious danger.

Okay, Spike is, once or twice, but I seem to remember that once again, Meg saves the day.*ff*

## Marlys Millhiser

*Marlys hopes to survive the forests of Costa Rica where she'll slosh, jog, trip, slip, splash, climb and ride a horse, paddle a canoe—all to view birds, animals, amphibians, God knows. If you believe all this, you haven't met her, but we indulge our authors because this is what they do—tell stories—much like the travel brochures they read.*

Charlaine is right about writers and cats, and not just cozy writers. Many a hard-boiled author will admit to cat-paw prints on his computer screen and it is no surprise felines appeal to his protagonists as well. The best reason is that felines are as disobedient as children but less needy and far more mysterious. The protagonist can go off and leave puss with food, water, and a litter box for as long as it takes to chase down a lead or villain without becoming a cruel, insensitive jerk. I like to think animal lovers are more sensitive and more likely to read fiction. One thing I find astonishing is that people who love and feed birds also are likely to have cats. That is **so** not a good combination.

Right now I'm working on historicals and the animal is a horse. I don't understand horses either but this one mostly adds complication to the story line, much as cats do in real life and in fiction, but horses are a lot more work to care for and an added complication for my saucy but beleaguered heroine. Then again you can't jump on a cat to race away from a dangerous

situation. There's also a mule who is arguably the brightest light in the book. But that's another story.*ff*

## Julie Wray Herman

*Now that her children are both off to college, Julie Wray Herman is adjusting to empty nest syndrome by adopting yet more animals. While this gives her plenty of incredible pet stories—Julie's lab can eat 79 latkes with no adverse effects—her characters refuse to follow her lead in adopting large numbers of pets.*

I have a soft spot for just about anything with four legs and a tail. My home computer desk chair has a cat permanently ensconced on the upholstery. Peaches gives me a new appreciation for living on the edge of my seat. Not to mention an aversion to wearing black. (He's a ginger cat.)

It is therefore surprising that there aren't more pets in my novels. Korine only has one cat. Half wild, and not a major part of the books, Korine's calico is nevertheless an important part of her life. Korine named Olmstead for her favorite landscaper, Frederick Law Olmstead, who designed New York City's Central Park, among others. I spent many hours enjoying one of Olmstead's most beautiful creations, the city park system in my hometown, Louisville, Kentucky. Korine is more familiar with Olmstead's



### Sites for Sore Eyes

Not only do the Femmes have a group web site and blog, but several of us have our own sites as well. Surf on by for the latest news.*ff*

femmesfatalesauthors.com  
femmesfatales.typepad.com  
mysterygarden.com  
www.danacameron.com  
www.donnaandrews.com  
www.elaineviets.com  
www.krisneri.com  
www.charlaineharris.com  
www.tonilpkelner.com  
www.marysaums.com

design of the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, which is what lead her to name her cat for him.

Characters need pets. Cat people and dog people may bicker about which animal is the better companion, but we all agree that pets make people better. From an author's standpoint, it allows our characters to show yet another side of themselves. I cannot imagine connecting with someone who wouldn't have a pet, so it seems natural that my characters would enjoy their company as well.*ff*

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## Toni L.P. Kelner

*Though Toni grew up in a house overflowing with poodles, it had been years since she had a pet. But recently, two guinea pigs joined the family. Younger daughter Valerie named one Hershey, for the chocolate-colored splotch on her nose, while elder daughter Maggie named the other Tama, for some reason known only to Maggie.*

I've not done a lot with pets in my mysteries, but when pitching a story for Carole Nelson Douglas's anthology *Midnight Louie's Pet Detectives* a few years ago, I suggested using an elephant. Carole thought it was a great idea, and it seemed like a good idea to me, too, right up until time to actually write the story.

It turned out that elephants aren't exactly designed for mysteries. You might think that never forgetting would help, but I'm afraid that that's a myth. They are intelligent, but not really in a detective or bloodhound kind of way. And they aren't terribly stealthy. My elephant mystery wasn't shaping up too well.

Then I remembered the one thing elephants have that no other animal has: elephant jokes. Lots and lots of them. My story "Where Does a Herd of Elephants Go?" was the result.

One other thing. If your sleuth is defending herself from a villain, who would you rather see at her side? Some wimpy pooch or self-preserving cat? Or a mighty elephant, with feet just made for squishing bad guys?

So forget your preternaturally intelligent felines and supernatural hounds—give me a pachyderm any day!*ff*

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## Mary Saums

*Mary has always had cats around the house. She prefers, however, to write about dogs. Her new book, Thistle and Twig, is the story of two ladies in their sixties, one British and one Southern, who fight mean bad guys with the help of a good dog, a few benevolent spirits, and an assortment of fine assault rifles.*

When it comes to fictional animals, nobody writes them better than Martha Grimes. Her portraits of smart dogs who help get the bad guy, even if only in a small way, stick with me. That lady knows how to pull on the old heart strings.

Critics sometimes complain that Grimes overuses both animals and kids, but I don't feel that way. I love it. It's something that draws me to the Jury series. It works for me because, by including them, she reminds us there is still pure goodness in this world. What better way to do that than through the character of dogs, whose love and protective nature will not be compromised, no matter what? Grimes puts these dogs and children in dangerous situations, a reminder that real villains will destroy the most vulnerable among us if left unchecked. With this, Grimes delivers by tapping our desire to see the good but weak triumph over stronger, evil oppressors.

My own books have dogs. A golden retriever named Buddy takes care of Willi Taft in her stories, though not with heroics. He's more of a therapist.

## Femmes FATALES

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**Webmaster:** Donna Andrews  
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In my new book, the noble beast is a black lab, a country dog with outdoor skills and a lot of heart, who is a mix of therapist and hero.*ff*

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## Kris Neri

*Kris Neri has been owned by a long line of canine and feline companions. Her current handlers—Philly, a Maine Coon cat, and Annabelle, a Cocker Spaniel—report that while her training is coming along well, she still spends too much time before the computer and not enough playing fetch.*

I never actually decided to put animals in my writing. They simply wandered into my books and stories, the way real pets have come into my life, bringing their warmth, their wisdom and their exasperating determination to run the show.

When a critter that moseys into my writing has the appearance of one of my departed furry friends, at first I get all gooey inside. But once the nostalgia wears off, I notice the pets in my fiction seem to embody my real pets' least endearing traits.

Such as when a silver-and-white tabby, Harri Houdini, who mirrored my departed cat, Morgan, showed up in my Tracy Eaton mystery, *Dem Bones' Revenge*. Harri, like Morgan, believed she could manipulate anyone into doing anything, most especially her human. But it was only because of Harri's irritating penchant for hiding in obscure places that Tracy discovered critical clues in that book.

Animals enjoy perspectives that we and our sleuths sometimes lack. Cats, from their high perches, understand the big picture as we never will, and dogs, with their noses pressed to the floor, don't underestimate details.

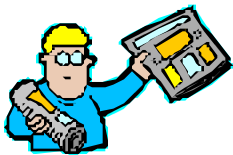
I've learned from animals, and so have my characters. Pets have taught me to live in the moment, that just because something is small doesn't mean it's insignificant, and that any crisis that can be managed with a few chomps on a squeaky toy. Wait—that lesson didn't quite take.*ff*

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## News from the Femmes Fatales

May 2 is the official publication date for *All Together Dead*, **Charlaine Harris's** 2007 Sookie Stackhouse novel. In the fall, she'll be a double-decker with the appearance of *An Ice Cold Grave* and the vampire anthology she co-edited with Toni, *Many Bloody Returns*. Charlaine's very first novel (*Sweet and Deadly*), now twenty-five years old, saw daylight again in March.



**Elaine Viets's** second Josie Marcus Mystery Shopper novel, *High Heels Are Murder*, hit No. 1 on the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association bestseller list. Her next Helen Hawthorne mystery, *Murder with Reservations*, will be out in hardcover in May. Helen worked as a hotel maid for this dead-end job.



**Dana Cameron's** latest, *Ashes and Bones*, was an IMBA bestseller for September. During her trip to L.A. for the SinC Hollywood event (along with Donna and Toni), Dana found herself listed under "Romance" in bookstores with her short story, "The Lords of Misrule" in *Sugarplums and Scandal*. How cool is that! Dana's presently working on her thriller, *Exit Interview*.



**Donna Andrews** was stunned to learn that one of her books appeared on Jeopardy in December 2006. In the

category "Beastly Books," the \$1600 answer in the double jeopardy round was "A mystery by Donna Andrews: 'We'll Always Have' these birds." None of the contestants got it right, but we think Alex Trebek enjoyed his chance to pronounce the pun-laden question: "What is 'We'll Always Have Parrots?'"



**Marlys Millhiser** vows to finish a first draft of a manuscript before she visits the exotic avian creatures abroad but at this writing, heavy snows in Colorado were complicating all endeavors. Authors will conjure any excuse to battle on with story and characters to keep from finishing a book. She claims it's similar to sending a "child" off to college—a terrifying relief.



**Julie Wray Herman** is a frequent speaker at book clubs and writer's groups, detailing how the book business works and how a writer takes a bright idea to full-fledged novel. She recently offered a course on Beginning Mystery Writing at the local community college, which works well with her favorite writing space, cubicle number 13 at the college library.



*Many Bloody Returns*, the anthology **Toni L.P. Kelner** co-edited with Charlaine, will be released in September 2007, and Toni's novel *Without Mercy* will be published in January 2008. She recently sold "Skull and Cross-Examinations," a pirate mystery, to *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. Look for her at Malice Domestic in May, nervously awaiting the Agatha banquet.



**Mary Saums** will be on the road this year promoting her book *Thistle and Twigg*, which comes out in April from St. Martin's Minotaur. Be sure to say hello if you see her at Left Coast Crime, Malice Domestic, or Mayhem in the Midlands, or stop by her website for a visit.



**Kris Neri's** latest publications have been short stories: "Audition for Murder," in the *Map of Murder* anthology from Red Coyote Press ([www.redcoyotepress.com](http://www.redcoyotepress.com)) and "Malibu Dreamin'" in *Gone Coastal* from Seven Sister Press ([www.7sisterspress.com](http://www.7sisterspress.com)).

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