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REVIEW

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We talk to: Sue Grafton

Best-selling crime-writer on the perfect murder and why sleuthing was better before the internet.



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Sue Grafton, who is 75, published her first novel in 1967 and spent much of the 70s writing for American TV - including adapting Agatha Christie stories for the screen. But it is her Alphabet series of mystery novels, started in 1982 and featuring the female PI Kinsey Millhone, that has made her name. Translated into 26 languages, sales of her books now run into the tens of millions. But Grafton, disillusioned by her experiences in Hollywood, has always refused to sell TV and film rights for them: she has even made her children promise to keep her vow on that score. The 24th in the series - X - is published on 24 August

Q Club Life: You've always been a writer, but what attracted you to crime/detective writing?

Sue Grafton: My father was a municipal bond attorney in Louisville, Kentucky. His great passion was crime fiction, which everyone in the family read. He wrote and published three mystery novels in the course of his career: *The Rat Began to Gnaw the Rope*, *The Rope Began to Hang the Butcher* and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*.

Q Was your interest also really inspired by your divorce?

Sue Grafton: Absolutely. At the time, I had no money, I couldn't afford a fancy-pants attorney, and I didn't know how to fight so I used to lie in bed at night and fantasise about ways to kill the sucker. Finally I arrived at a plan I thought would work, but I knew I'd get caught. Instead, I put the murder in a crime novel and ended up getting paid for it. Perfect revenge. It launched my career.

Q I've read you embrace writers' block! Why?

Sue Grafton: I believe *Writer's Block* is the Unconscious (or Shadow as I call her) trying to alert us that we've erred in some way. Maybe we've misunderstood a character or maybe we've made a false move in terms of the plot. Shadow simply refuses to let us advance until we do as she tells us. My method is to back up and back up and back up until I find where I've taken the wrong path.

Q What's your first rule of writing?

Sue Grafton: Don't fake. Don't cheat. And don't take shortcuts.

Q You've been going round with the Rugby World Cup Trophy tour in the build-up to the tournament. Does it feel that rugby is a bigger deal now than before you won the World Cup in 2003?

Sue Grafton: Yes, after 2003 there were so many more people interested; so many kids wanting to play. It just lifted the nation. There was the London parade, where there were almost a million people on the streets. It made a huge impact and it's great now, going round on the Trophy tour and seeing how excited lots of people are to see the trophy up close, getting photographs with previous World Cup winners... We've been auditioning mascots for the games. That's been good. It'll be interesting to see how England perform in this World Cup. People naturally gravitate towards success and if England can be successful in this tournament on home soil that will take it to a new level.

Q The series is written from the perspective of a female PI, Kinsey Millhone. Can you briefly describe her for those who don't know her?

Sue Grafton: When I introduced Kinsey Millhone in *A IS FOR ALIBI*, I allowed her to speak for herself. She says, "My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I'm 32 years old, twice divorced, no kids. The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind... 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 quite sorted it through..."

In the 33 years that I've been writing the series, she's aged six years and I've aged, well, 33 if you want to know the truth. She's 38 years old and I'm 75. That doesn't seem fair to me. Does it seem fair to you? As for her personal qualities, she's still single, owns one dress, and cuts her hair with a pair of nail scissors every six weeks or so. She jogs three miles a day and eats too much junk food. She's independent, self-sufficient, and vulnerable all at the same time. She's also sassy and cusses like a sailor. What's not to love?

Q Why did you choose to make your PI female?

Sue Grafton: At the time I began work on *A IS FOR ALIBI*, I knew nothing about police procedure, nothing about private-eye procedure, nothing about California criminal law or toxicology or ballistics or women's self-defense. I made Kinsey female because being female was my only wee small area of expertise.

Q You've said she's an alter ego, in some ways. Is this true?

Sue Grafton: Since I write from my private investigator's point of view, I find myself in effect playing the part myself. All of her observations are in my mind and many of her opinions I share. As I've said before, she'll always be younger, thinner, and braver than I. Aside from that, I consider us one soul in two bodies and she got the good one.

Q Have you put Kinsey in any uncompromising situations you were reluctant to, but had to for the sake of the story?

Sue Grafton: In *L IS FOR LAWLESS*, Kinsey's being pursued through the back of a hotel by a very bad man, who sets the place on fire both as a diversion and as a means of forcing her out of hiding. In the course of this sequence, she ends up putting her wallet, identification, and other precious items in her jacket pocket, leaving her big leather handbag behind. Personally, I would never do such a thing. In her case, at the end of the book she realises she forgot to save her plane ticket home so she's forced to call a family member she dislikes and beg for a loan. Neither of us were happy about that, but it made the story work.

Q Kinsey isn't one for dressing up but she pulls out this fabulous sounding wrinkle-resistant 'little black dress' from the boot of her car when there's an event to attend. It sounds like the ultimate dress every woman should own! Does it exist?

Sue Grafton: I bought exactly that dress in Columbus, Ohio in 1978. I paid \$98 for it, which seemed outrageous at the time. I've now owned it for close to 40 years so if you pro-rata the expense over the years, it turns out to be a bargain. The dress is as I describe it: impossible to wrinkle and washable in a bathroom sink. Kinsey thinks it's the perfect garment for weddings, funerals, and other social occasions. For years, I wore the dress myself until my children begged me to cease and desist. Now I keep it at the back of the closet 'just in case.'

Q Why did you decide to keep Kinsey in the 80s, without a cell phone or internet?

Sue Grafton: *A IS FOR ALIBI* takes place in May of 1982, the same year it was published. *B IS FOR BURGLAR* takes place in June of 1982 and *C IS FOR CORPSE* takes place in August of that year. I didn't realize I'd painted myself into a corner, but there you have it. Actually, it suits my purposes because without cell phones, the internet, or computer skills, she's forced to do her sleuthing the old-fashioned way, using her intelligence, intuition, legwork, and her ability to reconcile the facts with human nature.

X by Sue Grafton is out now, published by Mantle.

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Ellie Seymour