

SUE GRAFTON



W Is for Writer

Five books from the end of her alphabet series, Sue Grafton says it doesn't get any easier—and there's always another lesson to learn about the ABCs of writing.

BY DIANA PAGE JORDAN

“What was I thinking? I ask myself that to this day,” says Sue Grafton, her Southern lilt wrapped inside a laugh, of her 26-book alpha-murder mystery series-in-progress. Having begun with *A Is for Alibi* in 1982 and averaged a book every two years, she’s now five letters away from the culmination, likely to be titled *Z Is for Zero*.

Born in Louisville, Ky., Grafton is the daughter of attorney and novelist C.W. Grafton. She began her professional life as a screenwriter for TV movies—until somebody told her agent she knew how to write character but not plot. Grafton was furious. “I said to myself, ‘Oh, you want *plot*? I will *teach* myself how to plot.’” She decided the mystery novel was the best avenue.

The birth of the series was further fueled by the contentious divorce in which she was embroiled for six years. She’s famously said that during the process, she kept imagining ways to murder her husband—and suddenly found herself with no shortage of premises.

Nearly 30 successful years later, December marked the release of the latest installment, *U Is for Undertow*. The book centers on a young man known to have a loose relationship with the truth who tells Grafton’s iconic series protagonist, private investigator Kinsey Millhone, that he witnessed two men burying an abducted child.

Grafton’s conversation with *Writer’s Digest* proves the dry wit that helped begin it all is still intact today.

Many years ago, you predicted you’d reach the letter Z when you were 109 and crossing the country in a paramedic van. How does it feel to be nearing the end of the series now?

The books are getting harder, to my great dismay ... and I’m thinking I do not want to write if the juice is gone. I’ve seen writers who go on when they should have been put out to pasture. So, when I start a new book and I’m dismayed and distressed and can’t find the story line, I’m always thinking, “Uh-oh—maybe the juice is gone, and that’s why this is so hard.”

Now, I went through this with *S Is for Silence* and *T Is for Trespass*, and I should know by now that it’s going to be harder than I thought, but I just can’t learn the lesson. One

of my sayings is *trust the process*, and I just can’t do that, because I keep thinking it’s over, and nobody’s told me. These books are a real struggle for me, and the universe owes me an easy one. I’m waiting for it.

You’ve also said you’ll always write, so what does that mean about possible retirement?

I can’t wait to retire! Everybody I know is retired, and they go on these lovely trips, and I have to sit here struggling with the next book. When I get to *Z Is for Zero*, I’m just going to see what needs to be done. ... It’ll be a good adventure to see what comes next. It’s been taking me two years per book, so two times five books, and I am currently 69, so add 10 years, and I’m going to be 80. Now that’s ridiculous.

Do you have a sense of what’s going to happen to Kinsey when you hit Z?

No. You have to understand, this is a form of mental illness. I fully own it. In my mind, I am only privileged to know what she chooses to share, and she assures me that some things are just not my business, thank you. I don’t tell her. She tells me. I discover things about her in the process of writing. I don’t have a great scheme afoot. I try to keep honest, I try not to repeat myself. I try to let her evolve as she will, not according to my dictates. It’s a very odd process.

What have you learned in writing the series?

I’m learning the same lesson every single time. I’m learning to trust the process. I’m trying to remember that writing should be a form of play. I keep saying the fate of the free world does not hang in the balance. Even if I write a book that fails, nothing will happen. I’ll be mortified and embarrassed, but lives will not be lost over this. I take writing terribly seriously, and sometimes that just gets in my way. Writing is about the Shadow, which is about play. I just have to learn that again. And, in my own life, it’s like I can’t learn that I’ll rise to the occasion. I *do* rise to the occasion, but I’m never sure that’s going to happen. I keep thinking, *Uh-oh, this is going to be the book that does me in*. So that frightens me so desperately that I get into a panic when I should shut my mouth and get on with it.

Your readers would never expect that you struggle so much with the writing.

I know. I read other writers [and] I think, she does it the easy way, or he does it. It couldn't be hard for him, for her. And I just think it's good for people to know it's always hard, at least for me, partly because I've never figured out how to do it quicker. I'm slow and I'm meticulous, and that's just my nature. I don't know how I'll get through the next five books, but I'm not going to worry about it. I'm like Scarlett O'Hara: I'll just worry about that tomorrow.

What's your process?

I write or create a journal for each of the novels. I usually keep the journals about 50 pages long, and create as many as I need. So with *S Is for Silence*, I think the journals were 300–400 single-spaced pages, and the manuscript itself was only 500 and some. I call it a long, whiney conversation I have with myself about what I'm doing. It's just self-talk—what have I done, what am I thinking about doing, what do

I imagine will work, what can I do, what can I not do—and I just chase myself from page to page, hoping inspiration will strike. It takes forever. I throw away so many ideas, you would not believe it. And they're never workable.

What about this voice you talk about, the Shadow?

My problem is I can't get out of my own way. Shadow knows how to write books. Ego does not. So when I'm trying to put together a book, Ego is the one saying, "I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll do it." And I'm going, "No you won't. You don't know what you're doing." Shadow is just that still, quiet voice in your soul that tells you if you're on track or off track.

At which letter did you feel the series really caught on? And when were you sure that Kinsey could carry it for 26 books?

I sold *A Is for Alibi* on the basis of the first 65 pages. My advance was \$10,000, which, by Hollywood standards, was paltry. The good news was that I was writing solo instead

Sue Grafton's Bookshelf



Double Indemnity and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* BY JAMES M. CAIN:

I love the James M. Cain.

The Speed Queen BY STEWART O'NAN:

That's a book [that makes me] think, *Dammit—why didn't I think of that?* It's just a wonderful book, very odd. Cracks me up. Here's the premise: There's a woman on death row for some hideous crime, you know not what, and she has sold the rights to her

story about this murder to [an unnamed version of] Stephen King, who has sent her questions, and she is waiting to be executed. It's told from her point of view. And you don't know what the questions are. It's just hysterical. He never breaks strike. He never misses a beat.

Void Moon BY MICHAEL CONNELLY:

I like just about anything by Michael Connelly. [*Void Moon* is] some kind of caper. It's a

strong female character, and he just pulls it off. You never quite know why you get taken with a book.

My favorite writer is ELMORE LEONARD.

I love his work. I think he has such a sense of the way criminals think and the way they behave, and he has a fabulous ear for the way they talk. He himself is probably in his 80s, but his novels are just as fresh and clear. And that's just good. You want people who have

their own voice, and who just go about their business doing a fabulous job, and paying no attention to the rest of us.

Demolition Angel BY ROBERT CRAIS:

It's got a strong woman character, and he's writing about the L.A. bomb squad, so it's nitty-gritty. It's tough. It's a good character and a good story. It's one that just carries you along. I thought he did a fabulous job.

of by committee, and that felt great. *A* sold maybe 4,000 or 5,000 copies. I've never seen the early numbers. But I did write and sell *B Is for Burglar*, and then *C*. By the time *F Is for Fugitive* came out in paperback and *G Is for Gumshoe* came out in hardback, both books hit the bestsellers list in the same season. That was heady stuff.

Early in the series, I'd lose track of Kinsey's "voice," and I'd have to go back and read the earlier books to remind myself what she sounded like and how her mind worked. I'd have to guess that by *G*, I felt connected to her in an easy and natural way. *A* is still in print and still selling, by the way—as are all the other books up and down the line. I don't take anything for granted. The next book—each new book—always feels like the first.

Where did Kinsey come from?

I am Kinsey Millhone. But she is my unlived life. I got married for the first time when I was 18, the second time when I was 23. Then, I married for good and for all to my beloved Steven Humphrey when I was 37. So, she is the adventures I've never had. Since she only knows what I know, it means I have to learn many, many things so she can be an expert, and that's very odd. I've taken classes in self-defense, learned to shoot a handgun, I've taken classes in law—not that I would ever be a lawyer—but just so I know enough to fake it out here. Without her, there are many things I never would have done.

U Is for Undertow is essentially about a boy who cries wolf.

Part of the story is about credibility—what happens if your credibility is gone and you know something. Who's going to believe you? It just interested me to play with the issue of believability.

What is your best hope for your body of work?

I would hope that the books survive time. Early in the series, I tried to make no time references, because I didn't want them attached to world events or politics or movies or anything of this sort. Now I use some cultural references to help orient the reader. Obviously, I'm writing in 1988 in [*U Is for Undertow*]. Some readers don't get that, so I try to lay in some indication so that they know where they are in time and space.

My prime interest is in the psychology of crime, not the economics of it, or whatever else people consider relevant. I have no ax to grind. I am not trying to persuade anybody of anything. What I'm looking at is the dark side of human

nature, and that exists regardless of your standards or your values or your economic status.

In *T Is for Trespass*, Kinsey says she believes in the good in people, even though the headlines are full of evildoers. What's your belief?

I believe in the good in people, and I am dismayed on a daily basis to discover the skunks among us. However, most of the people I know are just wonderful. I do trust that the good will prevail.

What has made you so successful?

I hope it is because I try to be honest, and I try not to sell anything. I just try to let the work take care of itself. I try to keep it fresh. I will not cheat. I will not take the lazy way out. I just won't. That isn't going to be fun for any of us if I get lazy. Maybe that's part of why it's so hard for me.

But you get joy out of being an author?

I do when it's going well. Now, [my husband] Steve is a better observer of this than I am. He said there were months in writing *U Is for Undertow* where I was just happy. This is his favorite book. He's always my first reader, and he loves this book.

I don't think of myself as an author. I think of myself as a writer, because writing is what I do. I'm always taken aback when others refer to me as "famous," or a "celebrity." What a weird idea. The concept has no real application. It doesn't serve a writer to start thinking of herself in those terms because it interferes with the work. Writing is an internal process. Success is external and not something we can control in any event. I foster that disconnect because it keeps me grounded. Also humble, loveable and grateful. I am blessed.

What advice do you have for newer writers?

My big gripe about newer writers is they're not willing to put the time in. Somebody'll write one book and they're asking me who my agent and my editor are, and I'm thinking, *Don't you worry, sweetheart, you're not any good yet. Give yourself time to get better.* Writing is really hard to master. You learn by failing over and over, but a lot of people don't care for that, thanks. I always wish new writers the greatest good fortune. It's a helluva journey—I'll tell you that. **WD**

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