

Oklahoma Private Investigations

The best crime and mystery novels are situated in “place.” Not that a place explains a crime, nor is the crime necessarily unique to the place. Whether one considers classic, intellectual mysteries of the Golden Age or hard-boiled and noir titles from the mid-twentieth-century and later, certain characters and authors are connected to certain places. Sherlock Holmes, the famed “consulting detective” created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, is indelibly associated with London. Author Raymond Chandler’s hard-boiled private eye, Philip Marlowe, does his drinking and chess playing in Los Angeles. Sam Spade, created by crime novel master Dashiell Hammett, uses his keen eye for detail in San Francisco. Readers may be drawn to a certain writer because of their familiarity with the key city or affection for the fictionalized city and characters created through several novels. Smart cities capitalize on this fandom to encourage local tours of a novel’s key locations.

Authors of small-town mysteries usually create fictional place names, so as not to rile their actual or former neighbors. One thinks of Maggody, Arkansas, the fictional setting for author Joan Hess’s “Maggody Mysteries,” or Carolyn Hart’s “Murder on Demand” series set in the fictional community of Broward Rock, somewhere off the coast of South Carolina. In these novels, people in a small town know and see each other on a regular basis, so a crime is a disruption of community. Like an Agatha Christie novel, solving the puzzle of who-how-why becomes more important than hard-boiled justice. Authors of small-town mystery series tend to return again and again to the scene, until fans wonder whether there’s anyone left to murder or convict. Then the author may have to move the action to another town and begin a different series, as Eve K. Sandstrom has done in moving from a series set in cattle country east of Lawton to a series set in a college town in northeast Oklahoma.

Three of the books in this series are situated in small communities and two center the action in a large city (Tulsa). As you will see from their varied plots, mystery and investigation stories find a ready home in Oklahoma and provide a window on the character of the state. Though mainstream novels may evoke only scant physical description, crime stories and mysteries continue to include realistic location details, precisely because such details may help unravel the crime. In reading these novels, we can rediscover the joys of hearing and seeing people in their natural environment and learn something about how *where* they are may indicate *who* they are. The other common denominator of books in the “Oklahoma Private Investigations” reading series is attention to the social conditions of families and communities that help create the criminals (and the good people). The investigators are involved—sometimes closely—with the victims, suspects, and criminals. It is not unusual for them to take things personally, or to be victimized themselves.

This series begins and ends with somewhat classical mysteries in which the reader sorts through the population of a small community, attempting to finger the culprit before the solution is announced. While author Donis Casey delivers a realistic sense of the land and people who settle the farms and towns of early statehood, Hoklotubbe's *The American Café* deals candidly with contemporary attitudes and past relations—racial and generational—which work against community, even while community is upheld as necessary for the benefit and moral health of everyone. *Letter from Home*, Carolyn Hart's first Oklahoma-based novel, is as much about attempting to make amends as it is about setting the record straight on a cold case, again emphasizing the relationships of community.

The two big-city novels in the series focus more on individual motivations rather than family or community. *Capitol Offense* explores a crime from the viewpoint of an attorney working within the ethics of the law. *Twisted Perception* shows us the reasoning of a hard-boiled detective alongside the mind of a killer.

Do common features emerge that mark these novels as distinctly "Oklahoma"? Yes, in the sense that (with one exception) all the novels pay close attention to how "family"—an important value among Oklahomans—shapes behavior and how individual behaviors strengthen or divide whole communities. Too, Native American culture is often prominent, particularly as it sustains itself in an Anglo environment.

The primary criteria in choosing these novels were three-fold: a well-plotted mystery with believable characters, a balance of different styles of mystery or crime writing, and a serious use of recognizably Oklahoma physical and social settings—whether actual or fictional. Did we succeed? *Let's talk about it.*

The Old Buzzard Had It Coming

by Donis Casey

A housewife and mother of a large family investigates the murder of a neighbor, for good reason: her teen daughter is involved romantically with the boy suspected of killing his father. The setting is historical (early statehood days) and the focus is on two large families: one prospering, the other desperately poor in this novel set in eastern Oklahoma. The winter cold, the routines of a working farm, the work of women (cooking, caring, washing) on such a farm, and the situations of the adjacent folks in town are all carefully detailed. One is brought into the experiences of adults and children, their quirks, and ways of coping.

The title sets up a classic mystery situation: a man who was often drunk, feuded with neighbors, and abused his wife is discovered dead. No one in his family or the community really mourns his passing and suspicion falls on the oldest son, John Lee, who fought with his father the last evening he was alive. The problem for Alafair Tucker

is that her daughter, Phoebe, is seeing the boy and was present when he and his father fought. Desperately hopeful that John Lee is innocent, Alafair is drawn into her own investigation of his family and members of the community who would have had motive for shooting the man. Since the sheriff has settled on the most obvious suspect, John Lee, it is up to Alafair to pry more out of people. She has to find occasions to interview people and the finger of suspicion wavers over one after another character.

The richness of this novel comes from the individualized portraits of families and their daily lives, which continue on while a mother seizes what time she can to learn more, ever mindful that she too must continue to live with the folks of this community after her sleuthing is concluded.

As of late 2012, Donis Casey has extended Alafair Tucker's investigations into six novels, all highly praised.

Letter from Home
by Carolyn Hart

Letter from Home is Carolyn Hart's favorite novel. It is her "book about home," involving the apprenticeship of a young girl who becomes personally involved in a murder investigation. Fans of Hart's "Henri O" series will recognize a familiar situation: the reporter who becomes an investigator, driven by professional and personal motives to uncover the truth after officials have closed the case.

Set in the late 1990s, *Letter from Home* brings an elderly Gretchen Gilman back to her childhood home, a small northeastern Oklahoma town she hasn't visited in over fifty years. She muses on relatives and acquaintances past, and rereads passages from a letter that brought her there—a letter dealing with the murder of her best friend's mother in the summer of 1944. The story unfolds as a series of flashbacks, each stimulated by a passage from her friend's letter. As Gretchen remembers the events of the past, she looks forward to meeting her friend, who will finally divulge the full truth about the crime.

Though only fourteen at the time of the murder, Gretchen was a reporter for the town paper, discovering her talent as a writer in the context of a small Oklahoma town in time of war. The crime reveals fractures in what seemed an intact, unified society from a child's point of view. Young Gretchen learns the limits of tolerance and the power of emotion in grown-ups' lives. Solving the crime is subsumed into the testing and initiation of Gretchen into adulthood. Her involvement shapes her life, turning her towards a distinguished career as a journalist.

The story combines two levels of tension: a young girl's sudden passage into the adult world through her exposure to a crime of passion, and a reporter's conflict of interest as she discovers information that would aid the police and give her a scoop but could incriminate or endanger those for whom she cares.

Letter from Home was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and received the Agatha Award for Best Mystery Novel of 2003. *Publisher's Weekly* named it one of the best books of 2003.

Capitol Offense

by William Bernhardt

Tulsa is the site for most of William Bernhardt's lawyer series featuring Ben Kincaid. In the previous nine-novel "Justice" series, Ben is idealistic and green. Although he has the assistance of a good private detective named Loving, Ben can't stay out of the investigations and is often directly threatened. By the "Capitol" series, Ben has become more the lawyer. He takes on seemingly hopeless cases, but is newly married to his attractive assistant, Christina, and becomes a confident defense attorney and a U.S. Senator.

In *Capitol Offense*, Ben Kincaid attempts to defend a college professor who has all the known facts stacked against him. After losing his wife to what he concludes is official negligence or worse, the professor assaults the officer responsible, who is later found dead. Worse, the professor is found unconscious at the scene of the crime, gun in hand. The prosecution finds out that the professor visited Ben just before the murder occurred. Ben has misgivings of his own since, during their visit, the professor had asked him whether a character in a novel might get away with the murder of a policeman if his lawyer could convince the jury that he was temporarily insane. Against his better instincts, Ben takes the case, knowing that the best chance of getting his client off is, indeed, to plead temporary insanity.

The problematic aspects of a temporary insanity plea are complicated by the fact that the professor strikes his attorney as cool and logical, especially as he suggests defense tactics for his upcoming case. Loving seems to be getting nowhere in his questioning of unsympathetic police officers, the media are playing up the questionable relationship of the professor and Ben, and Ben is getting ready to stand for re-election.

While *Capitol Offense* presents legal questions and a criminal conspiracy that could erupt in any large city, it makes good use of the Tulsa cityscape and includes shrewd insights into Oklahoma laws and attitudes.

Twisted Perception

by Bob Avey

Bob Avey's novel is the second big-city mystery in this series, with all the elements of the contemporary hard-boiled style: graphic descriptions of victims and the sleazy side of town; a police detective who doesn't mesh with the rest of the department, in part because of his own dark past; chapters which feature the mind of a crazed serial killer; and close encounters between the protagonist and the killer. The novel is unusually detailed on the motivations and minute-by-minute thoughts of the killer, as well as those of his haunted pursuer.

Detective Kenny Elliot has a rerun of bad dreams related to the mysterious death of his high school friends, Jonathan and Marcia, after a night in which he fought with Jonathan and became drunk. Elliot discovered their mutilated bodies and was a suspect, but the deaths were ruled a murder/suicide. Later killings and blood messages—in Stillwater while he was a student and now in Tulsa—point to a serial or copycat killer. It seems the killer is setting up Kenny through a young colleague who wants to rise in the department. Kenny finally has to go rogue to discover the truth back in his hometown of Porter before he can solve the latest string of killings in Tulsa.

Avey's title refers equally to the main characters' states of mind, the wavering finger of suspicion on different characters, the seeming changes of identity of the killer, and, finally, the confusion of the reader trying to solve the murders before the detective does.

As an Oklahoma detective novel, *Twisted Perceptions* has recognizable Tulsa and small-town locations, embodying a sense of present-day Oklahoma as a state of people on the move. With this novel, Bob Avey places Oklahoma in the violent, unstable, and insecure world so characteristic of contemporary hard-boiled or neo-noir fiction.

As of late 2012, Bob Avey has added two more acclaimed titles to the "Detective Elliot" mystery series.

The American Café

by Sara Sue Hoklotubbe

Sara Sue Hoklotubbe locates her mysteries in and around the Cherokee Nation in northeastern Oklahoma. Her heroine, Sadie Walela, inhabits both her Native culture and that of the larger society, encountering all-too-familiar stereotypes of Indians, while trying to accommodate her own aspirations for success with a very real desire to have a husband and family. Her one attempt at marriage ended badly and her budding career in banking was marred by robbery and male skullduggery (see Hoklotubbe's *Deception on All Accounts*, 2003). Sadie seems to attract crime rather than seek it out, but she is underestimated by criminals and, once roused, has a way of getting to the bottom of

things without becoming a public nuisance. She is capably assisted by her wolf-dog, Sonny, relatives, friends, and small town acquaintances, including the law.

In this novel, Sadie has left the banking profession and purchased a small café in the town of Liberty. She renames it “The American Café” in memory of a restaurant her great aunt had once owned. The previous owner is brutally murdered and a local crazy woman levels an unloaded shotgun at Sadie shortly afterward. Sadie is then confronted by the former owner’s sister who knows the unique recipes of the café and takes over as cook. Helping out an old friend at the local bank leads her into more trouble, as she uncovers embezzlement by trusted townspeople. As one might expect, the murderer becomes dangerous once Sadie’s questioning comes uncomfortably close to the truth.

Hoklotubbe has a fine sense of the Oklahoma landscape and an equally sensitive eye for the rhythms of small-town life. People talk, take care of themselves, and do for others as one might expect in such an environment. Her generally positive view of rural Oklahomans, however, does not ignore the problems created by broken families, drugs, and military veterans’ experiences. The novel is enriched by the protagonist’s Cherokee culture, its history, the various adaptations of individuals to Anglo culture, and the community prejudices that continue to bubble up, particularly from the older generation.

For Further Reading:

Other Mysteries Set in Oklahoma

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Sandstrom, Eve K. *The Smoking Gun*. New York: Signet, 2000.

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About Mystery and P.I. Fiction

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Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

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Keating, H.R.F. *Crime and Mystery: The 100 Best Books*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1987.

Murder Ink: The Mystery Reader's Companion. Ed. Dilys Winn. New York: Workman Publishing, 1977.

The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction & Literary Theory. Ed. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America. Ed. Sue Grafton. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2002.

Online Resources

www.stopyoure Killingme.com. Ed. Lucinda Surber and Stan Ulrich. Guide to mystery authors, sortable by state.

The "Oklahoma Private Investigations" theme was developed by Dr. William M. Hagen, retired professor of English. Hagen's work includes 38 years of teaching at Oklahoma Baptist University, writing book reviews for *World Literature Today*, and long, distinguished service as a scholar for the *Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma* reading and discussion series, a program of Oklahoma Humanities. He also helped develop the "The Oklahoma Experience: Re-Visions" theme for LTAIO.



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