

# Freud and cigars

## *Crime novel is what it is*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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by Jim Napier

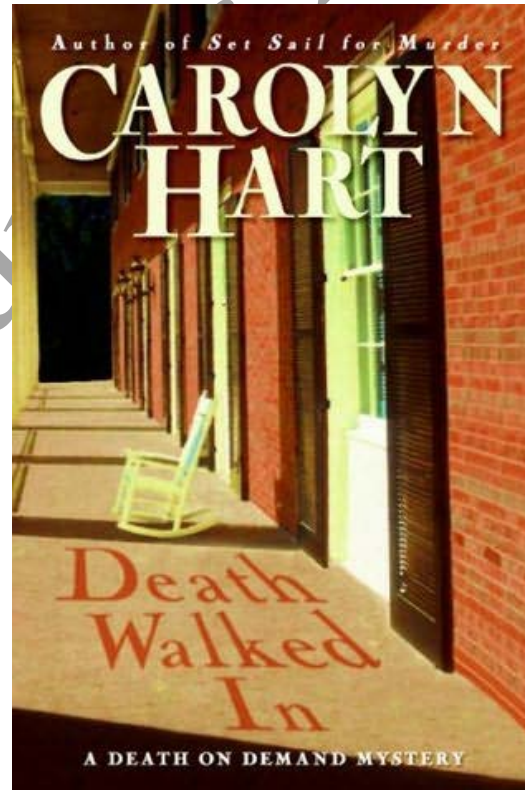
The genre of crime fiction is extremely broad. At one end are the gritty, violent suspense tales about child-abductors, torturers and serial killers, most often set among the mean streets of the big city, and described, if you'll pardon the pun, in excruciating detail; think *Silence of the Lambs*. At the other extreme are the more traditional novels, or cozies, as they are known in the trade: drawing-room puzzles set against a backdrop of such genteel pursuits as afternoon tea and fox-hunting in an otherwise quiet village, Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* mysteries being the best-known example. In between are a wealth of police-procedurals and forensics-based tales, mysteries-with-history, action and spy thrillers, and crime capers. With such a wide range of crime fiction available, there is something for almost everyone. Small wonder, then, that the genre has enjoyed an enduring popularity.

This week's pick is firmly in the cozy tradition, and will appeal to readers seeking a gentle respite from an often violent and incomprehensible world.

#### *Carolyn Hart*

Carolyn Gimpel Hart was born and raised in Oklahoma City. After completing a journalism degree Carolyn went to work at a local newspaper while

her husband attended law school. Following the birth of their first child Hart focused her energies on child-rearing and housekeeping, but she missed writing.



When a magazine announced a contest for a mystery novel she decided to give it a try. She won the contest, and has been writing fiction for the past forty-two years. But success did not come easily. In the late 1970s American publishers believed there were only two kinds of mysteries – the hard-boiled

private eye novel written by American men and the traditional mystery written by dead Englishwomen. Most publishers simply weren't interested in mystery novels written by American women.

Hart wrote seven books, but had little success in finding an interested publisher. On the brink of abandoning her writing, she decided to try one last time. Hart decided to have a little fun with it; she set it in a mystery book store named *Death on Demand*, which gave her the opportunity to allow her characters to talk about mysteries.

Then serendipity stepped in. In 1978 author Marcia Muller had published the first American mystery novel featuring a female private eye. Muller's success was followed closely by Sarah Paretsky and Sue Grafton, both of whom also wrote crime novels featuring female detectives.

The success of these authors made publishers rethink their biases: perhaps American readers were ready for traditional mysteries written by American women. Hart's novel *Death on Demand* was the second book bought by Bantam for its brand new paperback original line for traditional mysteries that had not been written by dead—or living—English ladies, but by American women. Her series resonated with American readers, who enjoyed the many references in her books to other crime writers.

Not quite overnight, Carolyn Hart's career as a mystery novelist was finally off and running, and she has never looked back. To date she has penned more than three dozen mystery novels. Her books have been published in ten languages, garnering numerous awards along the way, including no less than

nine nominations for the coveted Agatha Award for Best Mystery Novel (winning the award three times), two Anthony Awards for Best Paperback Original, and two Macavitys for Best Paperback Original.

A founding member and past president of Sisters in Crime, an organization founded to promote women mystery writers. Hart has a long tradition of supporting other writers, both male and female.

***Death Walked In***  
**(HarperCollins, 2008)**

Broward's Rock, an island off the coast of South Carolina: the tranquility of the small community is shattered when a woman is shot. She tells bookstore proprietor Annie Darling that she has hidden something of great importance in Annie's house, but before she can tell her what it is, or where, the woman dies.

When the woman is linked to a nearby home where a valuable collection of rare gold coins has gone missing, Annie and her husband Max focus on the family living there. There are plenty of grounds for suspicion: the dysfunctional family includes the most-recent, materialistic wife of the coin collector and a shiftless stepson who dropped out of college and is looking forward to his inheritance. There are other assorted ne'er-do-wells in the village as well, including the victim's troubled sons.

Lingering over the case is the question, what was hidden in Annie and Max's home, and where? A search of Annie and Max's home turns up nothing, but when Max surprises an intruder he is shot at for his trouble. There will be other attempts, and another death, capped by the proverbial gathering of

suspects in a library, before more than one villain is unmasked.

***A gentle, entertaining tale***

Definitely at the cozy end of the spectrum, Carolyn Hart is often compared to Agatha Christie, but incorrectly, in my view. In Christie's novels the puzzle element is always front and center, the clues not just cleverly, but fiendishly, concealed; in Hart's novels character and setting are uppermost. A more apt comparison to Carolyn Hart's novels would be the Botswana-based stories of Alexander McCall Smith: in both, the puzzle element is secondary, and the moral setting takes on a life of its own; readers are immersed in a gentle, civilized world of mostly virtuous people where the natural order has been upset. But we can be sure that, in the end, justice will prevail.

Characteristic of Hart's other novels, *Death Walked In* is exactly what it purports to be: a leisurely-paced, gentle tale involving a likeable pair of amateur sleuths up against an equally-amateur criminal in an engaging (if somewhat idealized) setting. When asked about the underlying symbolism latent in everyday objects, Freud is reputed to have said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." With Carolyn Hart's novels the reader in search of a pleasant, entertaining read will not be disappointed. It is what it is; nothing more, nothing less.

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