

Shifty Shamus Shafts Psycho

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Some readers have asked why I always seem to give such glowing reviews. Surely, they suggest, I must come across books that are poorly plotted, or badly written. Why, then, do I always have such good things to say in my column?

The answer, ironically, is that often I come across bad books. My library at home contains well over six hundred works of mystery and crime fiction, yet the number of living first-rate English-speaking crime writers probably numbers less than two dozen. The truth is that for every book that finds its way into my column I often read three or four others. For today's review I read three novels. The first (by a new author) was frenetically paced, with a death every few pages and an improbable plot that had the protagonist avoiding the police (when she really needed their help) for no good reason. It was clearly (or rather, not-so-clearly) written with an eye on the TV movie-of-the-week market, where action and violence sell. The second (by an established, well-regarded author) avoided such obvious problems, but went to the other extreme: in the first hundred-and-thirty-plus pages, nothing of consequence happened. Reading it was like

watching paint dry. Neither work made it to these pages.

So why always the good news? Simple. Whether the author's aim is merely to entertain, to present the reader with a challenging puzzle, or to provide some insights on how humans react when faced with adversity, readers ultimately enjoy the power of a tale well told, with evocative descriptions of settings and

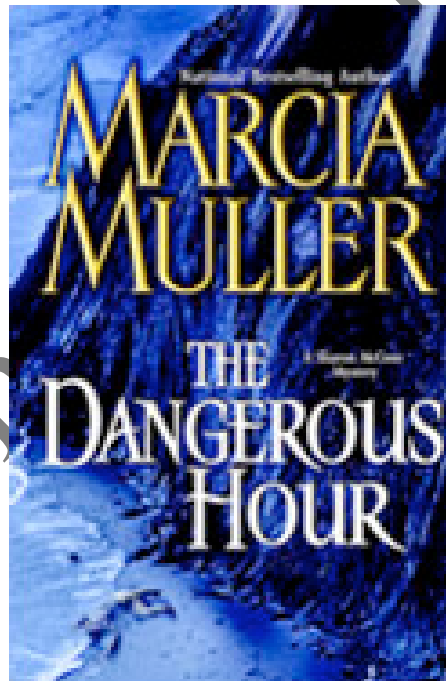
moods, the subtle interplay of interesting characters drawn-together in exceptional yet believable circumstances, and told with a respect for the cadence of language. I try to put readers in touch with such works.

With these thoughts in mind, this week's pick is a private-eye procedural set in the Bay Area of Northern California, which serves as a backdrop for a tale of drugs and murder, blackmail and revenge. It is not particularly complex or

demanding, yet it is clearly plotted and well-written, and will appeal to many readers.

Marcia Muller

Although Sara Paretsky is often credited with inventing the genre of the American female PI with her V.I. Warshawski series in 1982, in fact Marcia Muller



introduced PI Sharon McCone to the world some five years earlier. Since then Muller has penned thirty-two novels and numerous collections of short stories, and, among other prizes, has been accorded the Private Eye Writers of America Lifetime Achievement Award. A native of Detroit, she and her husband Bill Pronzini (also a noted mystery writer) have made their home in Sonoma County, Northern California for more than three decades.

The Dangerous Hour
(Warner Books, 2004)

San Francisco-based PI Sharon McCone is having a bad week. First, one of her employees, ex-juvenile delinquent Julia Rafael, is accused of stealing a client's credit card and making major fraudulent purchases. Then McCone learns that the state licensing authority is launching an investigation into her agency, putting her Private Investigator's license—and livelihood—on the line. The ripped-off client, Alex Aguilar, is an up-and-coming city politician with his eye on the mayor's chair; he is seemingly squeaky-clean, running a job-training program for the Hispanic community, and sitting on the board of a local museum.

Convinced of Julia's honesty, McCone hires a lawyer, playing for time while she looks into Aguilar's past. She learns that his partner, an old college friend,

had taken a fatal fall while hiking in the mountains nearby, and that while he was a student in Southern California, Aguilar had been dealing drugs on campus. Although he seems to have cleaned up his act, Aguilar still hangs out with some shady friends, and McCone probes further. What she discovers puts her, and those around her, in mortal jeopardy. All this while McCone struggles to balance work and love, and deal with her fear of commitment.

Convincing, nicely paced

Told in the first-person, *The Dangerous Hour* has an immediacy that keeps the reader turning the page. The plot is believable, the action is nicely-paced, and Muller paints a convincing atmosphere, whether she is describing the panoply of everyday life or the stark drama of a deadly pursuit in the wilderness.

While Muller's novels do not offer the subtle nuances of a multi-layered work by, say, Ian Rankin or Peter Robinson, they are well-plotted and artfully written, and contain a minimum of graphic violence. *The Dangerous Hour* is an enjoyable read, a good book for the bedside table or a weekend journey.

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