

Sue Grafton

The author and her work



Corbis/Freibert Jeanne/Sygma

Sue Grafton was born on April 24th 1940, in Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A. Her father was a lawyer, but he wrote crime novels in his leisure time. Her mother was a teacher.

Sue studied English Literature at the University of Louisville. When she left college, she worked first as a secretary, but—like her father—she began writing novels in her leisure time. Several of these novels were published. The first was *Keziah Dane* in 1967. And soon Sue was writing scripts for television and for movies. She worked in Hollywood for many years. But she did not enjoy working in the film industry—she felt that her life was boring, so she also began to write mystery novels.

In 1982, the first book in the series of “alphabet” novels was published. This series made her one of America’s most famous writers. “A” is for *Alibi* introduced Kinsey Millhone, the female detective who has since appeared in all the books in this series. “B” is for *Burglar* was published in 1985, and “C” is for *Corpse* was published in the following year. As the books moved on through the alphabet, Sue was able to give up writing for the film industry, and spend all her time writing novels.

Sue Grafton has been happily married for more than twenty years to her third husband. But as a young woman she had two marriages which were not very happy. Sue says that the first ideas for the Kinsey Millhone novels came to her at the time when she was divorcing her first husband. The law case about the divorce, and about who the children should live with, continued for several years. At this time, Sue says, she often lay awake at nights and thought about killing her husband. She thought about how she could do this and not get sent to jail! But she knew that she would get sent to jail if she tried to do it, so she decided to put her ideas into a mystery story instead.

Female detectives in fiction

By the 1980s, there were many series of novels about tough private detectives (private investigators) in the U.S.

These PIs —“private eyes” as they were often called—solved cases by doing things that the police could not do. Private eyes in stories often worked in ways which were illegal. But they did this for good reasons, and they always solved their clients’ problems. The private eyes carried guns, and they sometimes shot bad people when their own lives were in danger. But they themselves were good, and they worked to get justice for clients who were in trouble. Although early detective stories were nearly always about male investigators, Sue Grafton started writing her series at a time when women in America were becoming more independent. Many women wanted to be as tough and independent as men. They wanted to control their own lives. So it is not surprising that authors began to write mystery stories about professional female private detectives.

In the 1930s, there had been a number of famous British stories about female private detectives—Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple stories are the most famous ones. But these characters were always amateurs—they didn’t get paid for investigating crimes. They usually had plenty of money of their own, and they investigated crimes in their leisure time. In America in the 1980s, things were very different. People wanted to read stories about tough, clever, young female

investigators who earned money in the same way as the male investigators.

Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone is exactly this kind of person. Kinsey was once a police officer, but she didn't like the way the police treated their female colleagues. So she left the police and became a private detective. In the novel *"A" is for Alibi*, we learn that Kinsey has been married and divorced twice. Her personal life has often been unhappy, but doing her job well makes her happy.

At the end of *"A" is for Alibi*, Kinsey has to kill a man who she has become friendly with. She finds out that this man is a murderer. He has tried to stop her finding out about this by becoming her lover. But Kinsey believes that justice is more important than personal feelings. When the man understands this, he tries to kill her. Instead, she kills *him*. In later books in the series, Kinsey often trusts people who want to harm her. But her belief in justice and her pleasure in her work, help her to stay happy and go on to the next job.

In Sue Grafton's stories Kinsey lives, and often works, in a southern Californian town called Santa Teresa. This is a fictional place, although in some ways it is like the real town of Santa Barbara. Most of the other places that Kinsey visits in the novels are real places, however.

Present and future

In 2003, Sue Grafton's series of "alphabet" novels reached the letter "Q" (*"Q" is for Quarry*). She wants to go on writing until she reaches the end

of the alphabet. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Sue Grafton often published a new novel every year. Since then, her work has slowed down a little. But Kinsey the detective is not getting older at the same speed as her author. In *"A" is for Alibi*, Kinsey is thirty-two years old. The novel is set in the year when it was written—1982. The story takes place in May. The next novel is set in June 1982, although it was published three years later. The third novel, published in 1986, is set in August 1982. Sue wants the last novel (*"Z" is for Zero*) to take place when Kinsey becomes forty years old. So in Sue Grafton's novels, Kinsey is working in a world that has no cell phones, no Internet, and few of the things which would make an investigator's life easier. But Sue Grafton wants to keep Kinsey young. She doesn't think her detective will be so tough and strong if she reaches seventy! She would have to retire from her work before she reached a case named "Z"!

Sue Grafton has two daughters and a son. She has a home in Santa Barbara, California, and another one in Kentucky. She writes every day. When she isn't writing, she enjoys cooking and gardening. Her books have been translated into twenty-six languages, and people all over the world enjoy reading them. But Sue has never allowed anyone to make a film of any of the "alphabet" books and she never will. Her children have also promised that they won't allow it after Sue's death. Sue Grafton worked for a long time in the film industry, writing scripts for movies. She knows what would happen to her stories if she sold them to Hollywood.

A selection of works by Sue Grafton

1967 *Keziah Dane*
 1969 *The Lolly-Madonna War*
 1982 *"A" is for Alibi*
 1985 *"B" is for Burglar*
 1986 *"C" is for Corpse*
 1987 *"D" is for Deadbeat*
 1988 *"E" is for Evidence*
 1989 *"F" is for Fugitive*
 1990 *"G" is for Gumshoe*
 1991 *"H" is for Homicide*

1992 *"I" is for Innocent*
 1993 *"J" is for Judgment*
 1994 *"K" is for Killer*
 1995 *"L" is for Lawless*
 1996 *"M" is for Malice*
 1998 *"N" is for Noose*
 1999 *"O" is for Outlaw*
 2001 *"P" is for Peril*
 2003 *"Q" is for Quarry*

(For a list of Sue Grafton's stories that have been simplified for the Macmillan Guided Readers Series, see a copy of the current Readers catalogue.)