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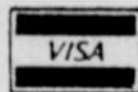


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Wilson's sleuths hunt down ideas

*Author wants her books to be propelled by
questions of why and how as well as whodunit*

The sleuths in Barbara Wilson's mysteries—*Murder in the Collective*, *Sisters of the Road* and her newest, *Gaudi Afternoon*—spend as much time chasing ideas as they do hunting for corpses.

That's the way this author thinks it should be. Wilson, writer of short stories, mysteries and non-mystery novels, translator and a founder of The Seal Press in Seattle, wants her books to be propelled by questions of why and how as well as whodunit.

Her earlier mysteries, featuring feminist sleuth Pam Nilsen, dealt with such issues as teenage prostitution and pornography. Even *Gaudi Afternoon*, a more active and comic thriller, touches on questions of child custody, transsexuality and the politics of gender.

"I don't find that many mysteries politically challenging," Wilson said in an interview last month following a reading from *Gaudi Afternoon* at Murder by the Book in Southeast Portland. "I'm interested in novels of ideas. I'm interested in the idea that you can write something political that is also entertaining."

Wilson began her writing career as a journalist in the mid-1970s; she wrote investigative pieces she hoped would influence readers' hearts and minds. But she grew frustrated with the brisk, superficial treatment that journalism demanded, and turned instead to short stories and novels.

"When writing *Ambitious Women*, I found myself falling into thriller-like ways of describing things," she said. "*Murder in the Collective* was kind of an experiment. After that I started reading a lot more mysteries and thinking about the differences between male and female detectives."

Mystery shelves currently hold a new generation of female detectives stalking bravely through the male worlds of police departments, courtrooms and coroners' offices. At the same time, writers such as Elmore Leonard are creating more thoughtful, sensitive male characters who flout macho stereotypes.

Protagonists such as V.I. Warshawski, the sleuth in Sara Paretsky's thrillers, provide a new pattern for female and male readers, Wilson said.

"V.I. is a woman alone. She's independent of men. That's an appealing thing—it shows women they can be tough and aggressive," she said. "But to me the interesting question is not why are women taking this up [mystery-writing] but whether women are affecting any change in the way mysteries are written. And I think they are."

When Wilson is immersed in a single project,



she writes every day, but her approach varies with the style of the book. With mysteries, she worries over plot and structure; with non-mysteries, the characters occupy her mind.

"For [non-mysteries] I have a deeper interior sense of character," she said. "They start living inside me. In the novel I'm writing now, two old friends who haven't seen each other in 15 years get together for two weeks. That's the plot. The rest is landscape and feeling and conversation."

Wilson's determination to be a writer began early, when she learned to read at age seven. But until she moved to Seattle and became involved in feminist publishing, she had little support for her ambitions.

One source of inspiration was the work of Norwegian writer Cora Sandel, whose short stories Wilson translated and published in 1985. "The spareness of her style influenced *Cows and Horses* a little," Wilson said.

Wilson said she juggles several ideas for books in her head at once, in addition to her work as co-editor and co-publisher of The Seal Press, which will celebrate its 15th anniversary next year.

Currently she is working on a novel, while a new mystery featuring Cassandra Reilly, the heroine of *Gaudi Afternoon*, is percolating in her head. "Cassandra's going to Venice next," Wilson told her audience at Murder by the Book. "I have some ideas about bassoons. Bassoon theft."

Wilson said she recently began experimenting with essays—a form that challenges her accustomed style—and would like someday to write a memoir.

"I'm so used to splitting up parts of myself and giving them to different characters," she explained. "I'm curious about what it would be like to speak about my life. I could see myself doing that in about 10 years."

In the meantime, her work will continue to mine the territory where ideas, emotion, environment and character collide. "A goal for me is to merge the heart and the intellect," she said.

BOOKS

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