

BALTIMORE'S A MYSTERY FOR LAURA LIPPMAN

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Laura Lippman says her decision to be a novelist was spurred on when her boss told her she couldn't write. As a journalist, those words naturally struck fear in her heart.

Now, three mystery novels and an Edgar Award later, Lippman gets to have the last laugh.

Lippman signed her latest Tess Monaghan mystery, *Butchers Hill*, at Barnes and Noble in Ellicott City recently. The series, set in Baltimore, has been acclaimed for its strong sense of place.

Lippman said her boss's remark may not have been kind, but was just the thing to get her fiction-writing career started. "Sometimes that kind of jolt really helps," she said.

Lippman read the introduction for the upcoming fourth book, which will be out sometime in 1999, before a gathering of 15 or 20 fans. She spent time afterward answering questions and talking about writing.

Lippman says the incident at her job started a "bad patch" in her life. She didn't think she'd actually be fired, but realized how potentially insecure her position was.

That incident, plus a run-in with a mean lawyer who yelled at her, fired the creative spark for her first book, *Baltimore Blues*. In that book, Tess, an unemployed reporter, ends up working as an unlicensed investigator on a Baltimore attorney's murder.

Lippman's second book, *Charm City*, recently won the Edgar Award, named for Edgar Allan Poe and considered among the most prestigious awards in the mystery writing field.

Butchers Hill finds Tess a legitimate P.I.-for-hire. And she should have plenty of work, because Lippman has reached a preliminary agreement with her publisher to do three more books, making seven books in all. As a further mark of her success, her fifth book would come out in hardcover. To date, they have all been published as paperbacks.

Lippman's writing style is probably best described as "soft-boiled" — somewhere between the "hard-boiled" style of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett and the warm and fuzzy "cozy" popularized by Agatha Christie.

Lippman says she likes the hard-boiled approach, but her

attempts at writing that way in the traditional first-person came off like "bad Sue Grafton" with "a really bad case of the 'cutes.'"

She found success writing in the more detached third person. She also enjoys injecting humor into her work.

"Tess has a smart-alecky voice. I don't know where it came from. But she will have her joke," she says.

The fourth book, as yet untitled, sends Tess in a new direction — south to San Antonio, Texas. Lippman worked in Waco and San Antonio before being hired as a reporter with *The Baltimore Sun*, her current employer.

She lives in Baltimore and considers it an "endlessly fascinating" city, but says she loves San

Antonio almost as much.

Lippman admits there was some "nervousness" about having Tess leave Baltimore, since the city is such a trademark of her writing.

"Well, I've been out of state," she said, and she thought Tess should also have that opportunity.

Lippman, who is married to former journalist John Roll, lives in north Baltimore, but has ties to Howard County. She attended Wilde Lake High School, graduating in 1977. She works full-time at the Sun and says she doesn't plan to leave her job soon.

Roll, who took early retirement and is now a "house husband," has been supportive of Lippman's efforts, not only in taking care of things at home, but in reading and critiquing her work.

Lippman is a member of Sisters in Crime, a group devoted to promoting women in mystery writing. She believes the genre has evolved quite a bit from the days when all detectives were

male and had no personal life.

Some of her favorite crime fiction authors include Peter Robinson, Elmore Leonard, Carl Hiaasen, Julie Smith, Margaret Maron, Walter Mosley, and Sparkle Hayter.

She singled out Robert Crais and S.J. Rozan as authors who are doing "what I want to do, at the level I want to do it" — writing on serious subjects, but with a lightness of tone.

What does the future hold for Tess? "She's getting happier. She's getting better with her job," Lippman says.

Each book has focused on a different aspect of life, according to Lippman. The first was on "vocation" and changes in career; the second on "friendship," particularly female friendship. *Butchers Hill* revolves around the issue of race. Future books will explore the subjects of love, identity, and (apropos for Baltimore) Edgar Allan Poe.

How much of Lippman is in

Tess? "She has a lot of me in her," Lippman says. "She's not me, but there are big overlaps."

Lippman is amused by people's assumptions about who her characters are in real life. One woman Lippman works out with is convinced she is the basis for one of Tess's friends, despite Lippman's protestations to the contrary.

Her first book even prompted a call from Stephen L. Miles, who apparently thought he was the inspiration for the murdered attorney. Not so, Lippman says.

She is also intrigued by the different ways that people get turned on to her books. Tess has a greyhound, which has created interest among people who own those dogs. Another woman told her she picked up her book because "it was turquoise."

Whatever the reasons, it looks like Laura Lippman will be enjoying the last laugh on her nay-saying boss into the new millennium.

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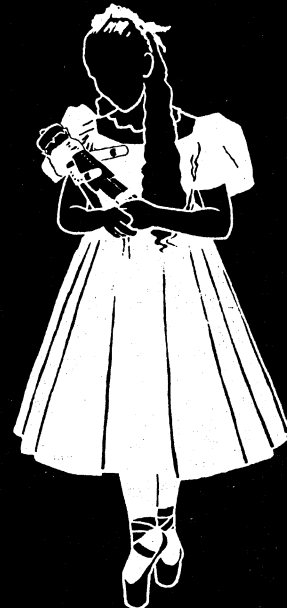
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