

Book Review

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Trouble in Santa Teresa

"G" IS FOR GUMSHOE

By Sue Grafton.

261 pp. New York:

Henry Holt & Company, \$16.95.

By Alex Kozinski

IT'S May again, which means it's time for another of Sue Grafton's alphamysteries starring that trendy Southern California detective, Kinsey Millhone. This is, of course, the seventh in the series; for the Millhone-maniacs out there who might worry that Ms. Grafton will stop with G, a publisher's note reassures us that, even as we speak, she is "hurtling her way through an alphabet of hunches, hazards, and homicides as she works on 'H'." The selfsame note also tells us that "G" is for guilt and guile, for greed and grief and the Grim Reaper."

I could hardly wait to get started: It's not every day of the week, after all, that you find guilt, guile, greed and grief all in one place, unless, of course, it's Thursday and you're watching "L.A. Law." And, sure enough, what Ms. Grafton has come up with in "G" Is for Gumshoe" has all the markings of an "L.A. Law" episode. It's slick and fast-paced, colorful and contemporary; it's also devoid of intellectual challenge and completely forgettable. Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers it ain't.

Like prior Grafton mysteries, this one starts out in Santa Teresa, a mythical town north of Los Angeles that sounds suspiciously like Santa Barbara, Ms. Grafton's home. Kinsey Millhone, the ex-cop turned private

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eye, ekes out a living (a meager one, judging from her spending habits) investigating odd cases. At the beginning of the novel, Millhone has just moved back into her apartment, newly renovated after having been blown up during an attempt on her life. The landlord, an avuncular type, has dutifully poured all the insurance money into the remodeling. We are treated to a minute description of the improvements in Millhone's apartment, along with her oohs and aahs of pleasure and gratitude. You know you are deep in the land of fiction

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when you find a landlord in Southern California willing to rent a newly renovated apartment for \$200 a month, particularly to a tenant known to be a target for bombers.

No sooner has Millhone moved into her spiffy new place than she is caught up in two adventures: she is the target of an assassin hired by someone she helped put away in an earlier book, and she is herself hired to find the whereabouts of the octogenarian mother of a Santa Teresa resident. As these plot lines wend their way through the rest of the novel, one strains in vain to find a common thread. Is the missing mother really the killer in disguise? Has Millhone been sent on a wild goose chase so the landlord can rent the apartment to another tenant? Nothing of the sort. The subplots twist their

way neatly past each other like the strands of a double helix. One gets the feeling Ms. Grafton pulled the two stories off a mix-and-match list she keeps on a floppy disk.

Nor are these first-class plots. The psychopathic killer who gets his jollies doing his job is about as original as tuna casserole; the mystery involving the mother is a bit more innovative, but would hardly have given Hercule Poirot's gray cells a decent workout.

A new character is added to the list of regulars: Dietz, the bodyguard Millhone hires to protect her from the assassin. Aside from his intense (and not exclusively professional) interest in Millhone's body, Dietz is pretty much your standard jock gumshoe — tough, professional, introverted — a real dullard. One kind of hopes he'll get blown away by the killer, just to see if he has blood or Gatorade flowing through his veins.

Ms. Grafton is obviously a gifted writer. She certainly knows how to turn a phrase and has a playful eye for detail. Thus we come face to face with a woman "with breasts as flat as the flaps on an envelope" and join in Kinsey's ruminations about "what maintenance wizard came up with the notion of throwing sawdust on barf." And, like Tom Wolfe, Ms. Grafton subjects the world around her to a continuous series of barbs and observations that ring all too true. Ever been stuck in a cheap motel where the people next door have abandoned themselves to the throes of ecstasy? In one of the book's funniest passages, Ms. Grafton gets back at all those inconsiderate couples who use motel rooms as sexual concert halls for an unwilling audience.

Putting out a novel every 12 months is an ambitious undertaking, and Ms. Grafton has probably done as well with it as anybody could. But what's the rush? Her fans will surely wait for her to craft something more in keeping with her reputation and abilities, and she will be far more likely to pick up new followers if she makes every effort count. □