

# making CRIME PAY



By Eve Sandstrom

A group of OU-trained writers is cashing in on the current murder mystery boom with a succession of prize-winning spine-tinglers.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *With so many Sooners successfully working in the field of fiction, Sooner Magazine is resigned to the possibility of having inadvertently omitted a mystery writer who should have been mentioned in this article. The fine line between the "mystery" and "suspense" genres also necessitated some arbitrary judgments. Victims of such oversight have every right to scream bloody murder.*

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**T**he mystery novel—a literary form growing from roots deep within Western culture—is currently at the top of the American publishing heap, and a group of University of Oklahoma alumni have helped put it there.

Tony Hillerman and Ross Thomas both have seen their novels move from the specialized mystery racks to the shelves reserved for fiction best sellers of all categories—proof that they are appealing to many readers who usually don't choose crime stories. Both also have won Edgars, the top prize given by their peers in the Mystery Writers of America, and are reaping the financial rewards of best seller status.

Carolyn G. Hart in April won the first prize ever presented by Malice Domestic, a new organization devoted to the "cozy" mystery, followed in October by an award for the best original paperback of 1988. Her winning



**“Fiction appeals to the journalist because it offers to free him . . . If he wants it to rain, it rains.”**

novel, *Something Wicked*, was a best seller on mystery paperback lists and is part of a successful series.

OU professional writing professor and alumnus Jack M. Bickham is writing a series of suspense novels which use many elements of the traditional mystery, and writers Jean Hager, D.R. Meredith and M.K. Wren—OU alumnae all— have earned prizes and publishing success by crafting tricky plots and intriguing characters.

The mystery story had its modern beginnings with *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, written by Edgar Allen Poe in 1841, but mystery fans like to point out that the world's first recorded murder tale is found in the fourth chapter of Genesis, when Cain slew Abel and then tried to fake an alibi.

Retired OU professor Dwight Swain, who formerly headed the School of Journalism's professional writing program, wrote many mystery stories for the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as turning out other types of fiction.

“Fundamentally, what we all write when we write a story is the record of how somebody deals with danger,” Swain says. “In the mystery, you have the ultimate danger of death. And this excites people, it grips them, and they think, ‘Oh, gee! There, but for the grace of God, go I.’ The mystery will never disappear, because it's got too solid a root in the human desire for danger and for something which they do not understand.”

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Tony Hillerman says he made his first book, *The Blessing Way*, a mystery because he pictured the genre's strict form as a way to learn plotting and character development.

“I wanted to be an ‘author,’ eventu-

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ally write the great American novel,” he says. This first book was to be practice.

But instead of moving on to another literary form, Hillerman stayed with mysteries through seven more books, all but one of them centering on the land, culture and religion of the Navajo.

The high literary quality of his writing, the expert craftsmanship displayed in his plots, his vivid characterizations and his respect for Navajo culture have won him a long series of honors—an Edgar for Best Mystery Novel of 1973 from the Mystery Writers of America, designation as Oklahoma Writer of the Year at the OU Short Course on Professional Writing, weeks on the *New York Times* and other best seller lists and a singular designation, “Special Friend to the Dinee.” As any Hillerman fan knows, “Dinee” is the name the Navajo call themselves, and Hillerman was the first person—Indian or non-Indian—ever to be honored in this way.

Hillerman was born in 1925 in Sacred Heart, near Konawa. He served in France during World War II and came home with a Silver Star, Bronze Star and Purple Heart. He enrolled in OU, he says, because he wanted to major in journalism and because his brother, Barney Hillerman, was going to study geology there.

“The campus was overrun with veterans whose only desire was to hurry up, make a C average, get a degree and get on with life,” he recalls.

He credits journalism professor Grace Ray with teaching him “to say precisely and exactly what one intended to say with no wasted words.”

At OU Hillerman also met his wife, Marie Unzner of Shawnee, who was majoring in bacteriology. They have six children and have lived in Albuquerque for some 25 years.

After receiving his journalism degree in 1946, Hillerman became a reporter in Borger, Texas, then was city editor of the *Lawton Morning Press*. He was a political reporter with

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United Press International, then reporter and later editor of the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. In 1963 he entered the University of New Mexico to earn a master's in English, at the same time taking a job as special assistant to the president. His thesis, a series of non-fiction essays on life in New Mexico, was published as *The Great Taos Bank Robbery* by the University of New Mexico Press. He then joined the UNM faculty and taught at the university for 22 years, serving as chairman of the department of journalism until his retirement. He recently completed a year as president of the Mystery Writers of America.

Why did a successful non-fiction writer turn to novels?

"Fiction appeals to the journalist because it offers to free him from working in the flint of fact and releases him to hunt truth in the plastic of imagination," Hillerman says. "If he wants it to rain, it rains."

Hillerman has created two Navajo detectives, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn,

middle-aged and pragmatic, and Officer Jim Chee, young and more closely tied to the Dinee's culture and religion. Both are college educated and know how to glean clues from the desert landscape, from human nature and from the modern world.

Leaphorn and Chee solved mysteries separately through Hillerman's earlier books, but in *Skinwalkers*, published in 1986, the two unwillingly joined forces. They continued to work together through *A Thief of Time*, in 1988, and 1989's *Talking God*, all published by Harper and Row.

Eventually, Hillerman fans hope, the younger Chee may overcome his wariness of the more experienced Leaphorn, and the two might even become friends. But, they wonder, will Chee and Navajo attorney Janet Pete ever see how right they are for each other romantically?

All that seems certain is that Leaphorn and Chee will continue to battle villains—a cruel, yet pathetic, contract killer eternally seeking the

mother who deserted him, a father who turns grief to revenge, a rootless Navajo who knows his tribe's culture only through books—all as distinctive as Hillerman's heroes.

Hillerman has signed a contract with Robert Redford's production company, and the film of *The Dark Wind* began in August.

He and his brother Barney, a photographer, are working on a book of photographs and essays about the mystique of the desert Southwest. And he is working on two non-mysteries, one about students at a land grant college during the Depression and one set in the Philippines and Cambodia.

"I think virtually all books, even including some of the most exploitative potboilers, have some moral purpose and some moral effect," Hillerman says. "Mine reflect my own philosophies, and in them I grind my own small axes. For example, working as a police reporter, I learned of the scorn real cops feel for the FBI. That is reflected in my books. So is my respect for those people whose faith in something beyond physics affects their lives."

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Ross Thomas began writing fiction after a successful career in political public relations, which took him to Africa and Europe as well as Denver, Oklahoma City and Washington. Today he and his wife Rosalie live in Malibu, California.

His books often are set in exotic locales and are peopled with political animals of one type or another; sometimes it's hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. In his latest, *The Fourth Durango*, published in September by The Mysterious Press, the mayor and police chief of an almost-



broke small city are struggling to keep the service programs of their town afloat financially. Good guys, right? But they're doing it by charging enormous fees to provide hideouts for persons fleeing contract killers, a method not covered by city ordinances.

Thomas' books lean toward the suspense side of that hard-to-define line between the classic mystery and the suspense novel, but his characters rely on quick-witted deductions to survive. His two Edgar-winners as best mystery of the year were *The Cold War Swap*, his first novel, in 1967, and *Briarpatch*, in 1987.

*Briarpatch* could be particularly interesting to Oklahomans. One of its themes is the importance of hometowns, and it is laid in an unnamed city Thomas describes as "the capital of a state located just far enough south and west to make jailhouse chili a revered cultural treasure." He continues, "it was said that the parking meter had been invented there back in the '30s along with the supermarket shopping cart."

And when the main female character, Anna Maude, shares the name of a once-popular downtown Oklahoma City cafeteria—well, most Oklahoma readers past the age of 35 are going to catch on quickly to the physical setting.

Thomas was born in Oklahoma City. He attended Oklahoma City University and worked part-time for *The Daily Oklahoman* in the early 1940s until the U.S. Army sent him to the Philippines. After his discharge, he entered OU on the GI Bill.

"I went to work at *The Farmer-Stockman* in the afternoon and went to OU in the morning," he recalls. "I would say it was handy."

Thomas was not particularly in-

involved in campus life, he admits. "It was just going to school," he recalls. "That's what I did down there. I don't remember many people."

He does remember Victor A. Elconin and Kester Svendsen, two of his English professors. Elconin went on to become chairman of the OU English department, and Svendsen later taught at the University of Washington, Thomas said.

Thomas earned his B.A. in English in 1949 with a minor in French and "a lot of Spanish."

He worked as a reporter in Louisiana, then took a public relations job with the Oklahoma Farmers Union in Oklahoma City. He later joined the National Farmers Union, a move that led him to Denver. There he formed a public relations firm and became involved in running political races. Later he worked in London, Bonn, West Germany, and Lagos, Nigeria. He wound up in Washington, where he was employed in the national offices of two major labor unions.

"I was always writing one thing or

another," Thomas says. "I wrote speeches, brochures, press releases. I ran a UPI bureau in Lagos, Nigeria, for six weeks when the guy who was supposed to run it was in a traffic accident. I was always writing. But I didn't start writing fiction until 1965."

*The Cold War Swap* was the first of 22 novels, five of them under the pseudonym Oliver Bleeck. He also has written screen and television plays, including the pilot of TV's "Casablanca" and 10 episodes of "Tales of the Unexpected."

All of his novels are in the suspense-mystery category.

"I liked to read (that field)," Thomas says, "and I thought I could write it because I had the various backgrounds I could call on—Berlin, Bonn, Africa, London, Washington, Denver, L.A."

Thomas doesn't stint on research. He returned to the Philippines for a month, for example, before writing *Out on the Rim*, a novel set, he says, "just after the so-called Aquino revolution."

"I once wrote a book about growing

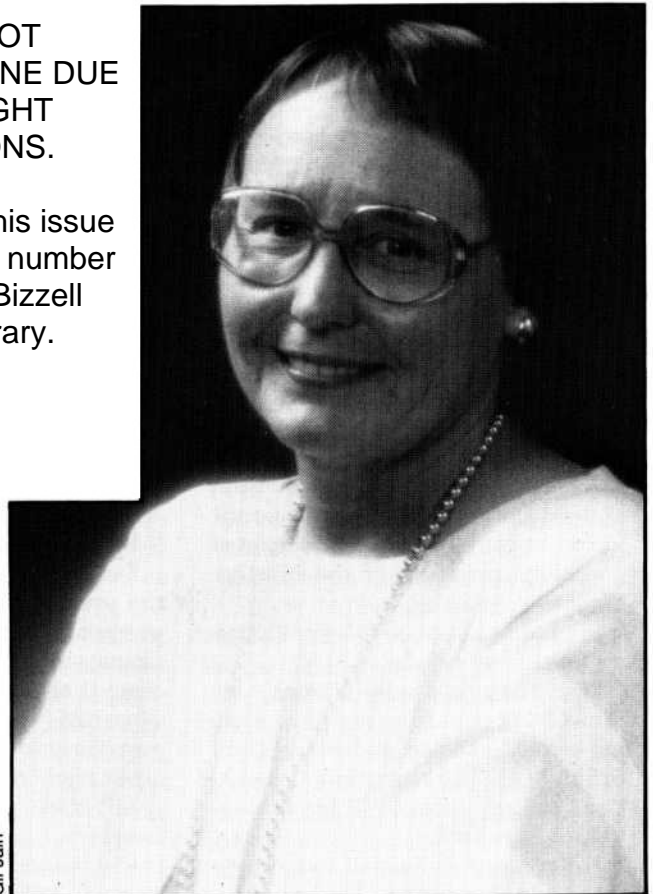
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"If they can figure it out, they will have been as smart as the detective, and that gives them a feeling of self-gratification."



Gil Jain



up in Shanghai in the '30s. Of course, I didn't grow up in Shanghai in the '30s, but I still get occasional letters from old China hands who want to reminisce about Shanghai in the '30s. I researched that one very thoroughly."

Has he ever considered writing any other type of book?

"The straight novel, as they say? No. . . . Anything I want to say I can say in a suspense novel probably more easily than I could in a straight novel—if I ever had any opinions to advance or axes to grind." He chuckles. "Which I don't have too many of anymore."

The mystery must be seen as entertainment, Thomas says. Its readers are attracted by the suspense and by the puzzle.

"They think that if they can figure it out, they will have been as smart as the detective, and that gives them a feeling of self-gratification.

"And I think also it is pure escape and pure entertainment, and they don't have to think too hard." He chuckles again.

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At OU Carolyn Hart was Carolyn Gimpel, journalism major and active staff member of *The Oklahoma Daily*. After graduation in 1958, she worked as a feature writer for *The Norman Transcript*, then edited an OU alumni publication while her husband, Philip D. Hart, '58 B.A., attended the OU College of Law. A few years later, Hart found herself at home with two small children and no outlet for her writing urge. She entered a contest sponsored by the publisher Dodd, Mead & Co. and *Calling All Girls Magazine* for a mystery directed at girls aged 8 to 12. Her first book, *Secret of Cellars*, won.

Since then Hart has published five juvenile and young adult mysteries, 12 adult mysteries and suspense novels and one mainstream novel. She also co-authored *The Sooner Story*, a glimpse at the first 90 years of the University of Oklahoma, published by the OU Foundation, and taught in the OU professional writing program for three and a half years. The Harts live in Oklahoma City, her hometown.

Louise B. Moore, retired faculty sponsor of *The Oklahoma Daily*, had tremendous impact on Hart's writing of both fact and fiction.

"I admired her so much, both as a

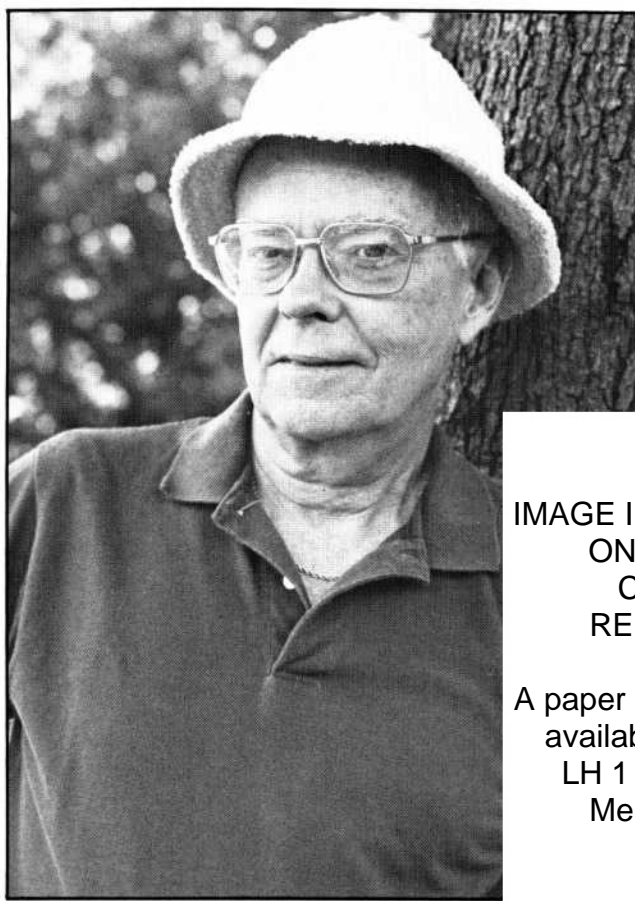


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person and as a professional. She always gave us the sense that we had to do it just as well as we possibly could. And that's something that's made a difference in my work, because I do try very hard to be accurate, to be correct and to be fair."

The second big effect of OU, Hart says, was intensifying her love of newspapers. "I have been an insatiable newspaper reader ever since I went to school there. I read about three different newspapers every day, and I find a lot of interesting little facts that will stick with me. Then they just pop up in some unexpected context, and I use them in a book."

Her series of Max and Annie novels, laid on a resort island off the coast of South Carolina, began with *Death on Demand*, published by Bantam in 1987. The series heroine, Annie Laurance, owns a mystery bookstore, and the plots are rife with references to the classic mysteries stocked on Annie's shelves.

*Death on Demand*, nominated for

two top mystery awards, an Anthony and a Macavity, was followed by *Design for Murder*, *Something Wicked* and *Honeymoon with Murder*, which opens with the wedding of Annie and her suave swain and fellow detective, Max Darling. Hart was named Oklahoma Writer of the Year in 1983.

*Something Wicked*, in which Annie and Max become embroiled in a murder investigation during an amateur production of the play "Arsenic and Old Lace," won the Anthony as the best original paperback mystery published in 1988. Earlier, *Something Wicked* received the new Agatha award established for the "cozy" mystery. Prominent among Hart's competition was D.R. Meredith.

The cozy is generally understood to be a mystery emphasizing a puzzle, using a small cast of suspects and keeping most violence off-stage. The term contrasts with the "hard-boiled" mystery, the type of story that traditionally centers on a tough private eye or policeman. *continued*



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Hart says cozy is a misleading term. "In effect," she says, "the cozy mystery is anything but. It's focusing on very strong human emotions within a very intimate circle. You're talking about the twisted and poisoned relationships between people who are very closely associated.

"The hard-boiled book more often is concerned with the reaction of the protagonist to an immoral world as he seeks to unravel a puzzle of people with whom he's not closely associated. So they're really entirely different kinds of books. And each has its own place in the mystery world."

Hart had been a mystery fan since her Nancy Drew days.

"Of course, growing up and going on to school, I read a lot of other kinds of books, too, but about the time I reached so-called adulthood, I found that all I ever read were mysteries and suspense novels.

"I really think there's a reason for that. In much of modern fiction, there's no resolution in the story. There's no

clear definition of what is right and what is wrong—because that's not what modern fiction is often concerned with.

"I think the mystery serves as a modern-day parable, because it illustrates that if you treat people in a certain way, this is what may happen. Of course, everything is exaggerated in a mystery. Unhappy situations don't always result in murder, but you can certainly see parallels in people's lives."

Jack Bickham, a native of Columbus, Ohio, received his degree in English from Ohio State University in 1952, then pursued graduate work in English at OU before switching to the School of Journalism, where he received his M.A. in 1960. He was a reporter and editor for *The Norman Transcript*, *The Oklahoma City Times*, *The Daily Oklahoman*, *The Oklahoma Courier* and *The Oklahoma Journal*—taking time to work at OU as a graduate assistant in English and journal-

ism and as an adjunct professor of journalism—before becoming a full-time faculty member in 1969. He has directed the OU Professional Writing Program and the Short Course on Professional Writing since 1972.

Bickham's first book, published in 1958, was a western, and he sold his first mystery in 1961. Since then he's published 63 novels—western, suspense, science fiction, mystery and mainstream. His three latest, *Miracleworker*, *Day Seven* and *Tiebreaker*, all published by Tor Books, can be categorized as mysteries. A sequel to *Tiebreaker*, titled *Dropshot*, will be out in 1990, also from Tor.

Bickham has been named Oklahoma Writer of the Year three times and was a finalist for the Spur Award of the Western Writers of America in 1970.

"If I hadn't come to OU and studied under Dwight Swain, I don't think I would ever have sold a book," Bickham says. "He and the OU way of writing made all the difference for me."

The mystery's combination of emotional and intellectual appeals make the genre popular with readers, he says. He thinks this mix of the intellectual puzzle with emotional tension means the form will stick around.

"The classic mystery will always be with us, but like any 'classic' genre, it is limiting."

M.K. Wren is the pen name of OU graduate Martha Kay Renfroe, who received her degree from OU in 1961 in art—specifically in sculpture. As an undergraduate, she took 11 hours in the professional writing program, working with Swain and William Foster-Harris, Swain's predecessor as head of the program.

Born in Amarillo, Texas, she lived in numerous cities as a child as her family followed her petroleum geologist father to new oilfields. After graduation from OU, she worked in Kansas City briefly, then wound up in the Pacific Northwest, where, she says, "I almost made a living as an artist."

She has published six mysteries featuring Conan Flagg—owner of a bookstore, authority on books and Oriental art, licensed private eye, former agent for a U.S. security agency, heir to a ranching fortune and

half Nez Perce Indian. The books, nearly all set on the Oregon coast, where Wren has had a beach house for more than 20 years, originally were published by Doubleday and currently are being reissued in paperback by Ballantine. A brand-new Flagg adventure will be published within the next year. She also has written science fiction, and a mainstream novel, *A Gift upon the Shore*, is coming out this winter.

Wren became a fan of the mystery novel in her mid-20s, she says. Although Conan Flagg is a private detec-

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tive, Wren describes her books as “soft-boiled.”

“The mystery novel gives some value to a human life,” she says. “It also suggests that there is a sense of order, a sense of justice, in the world—which there probably isn’t. The basic theme of every mystery is that justice will be done.

“It may not be legal justice, but justice is done. This is very satisfying.

“And I love the puzzle aspect. The kind of mysteries I write are basically puzzle mysteries. You play a game with the reader—‘I’m going to give you all the clues, but I’m going to give them to you in such a way that you won’t really know who did it until my detective tells you.’ And the reader is saying all the time, ‘Wanta bet?’”

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Doris Meredith, a native of Cushing, who writes as D.R. Meredith and attended OU as Doris Moser, received her degree in English in 1965. She lives in Amarillo, Texas, where her husband, OU grad Michael Meredith, is a prosecuting attorney.

Meredith has published seven mysteries, all set in the Texas Panhandle. The first three featured a west Texas

sheriff and were published in hardcover by Walker and Company and by Avon in paperback. Protagonist of the next two was John Lloyd Branson, an attorney. The John Lloyd Branson books were published by Ballantine Books in both hardback and paperback with the second, *Murder by Deception*, coming out in 1989. A third in the series, *Murder by Masquerade*, will be in bookstores in 1990. Under the name Max Lockhart, Meredith also wrote *Private Eye, Number 4*, a novelization of the television series.

*The Sheriff and the Panhandle Murders* and *The Sheriff and the Branding Iron Murders* both were named best mystery novel of the year in a Texas competition. Meredith also has been nominated for a Spur Award by the Western Writers of America.

Meredith had worked as a teacher, librarian, bookkeeper and bookstore owner before she turned to writing mysteries during one long Panhandle winter.

Both her infant daughter and 2-year-old son were sick, she recalls, and

it snowed for months. She kept her sanity by reading dozens of mysteries. Finally, her husband asked her why she didn’t try writing one.

“I told him they had to be set on the East Coast or in Los Angeles. Or in England. And he said, ‘Why don’t you set one in the Panhandle?’ I answered, ‘Nobody cares about the Panhandle, but if I do (write one), I’ll use a Texas county sheriff as a detective, and I’ll bury the body in a barbecue pit.’”

Inspired by what she had meant as a wisecrack, Meredith wrote the book during the hours between 10 p.m. and 2:30 a.m. that winter, she says, “waiting for one kid or the other to wake me up.” And it sold.

Meredith particularly credits Bruce Ingham Granger, of the OU English department, with teaching her how to understand the structure of a story.

“At OU I was taught how to tear apart a work of fiction and look for the underlying themes and to see how the whole thing was structured and how the very, very best writers do it.

“I also got a good vaccination on

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Ruth Dennis Grover



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symbolism and how to use it skillfully, without letting it overpower your story. Of course, the reason anyone reads you, whatever you write, is for the story. But the very best storytellers use all kinds of symbolism, and they always have some underlying theme about which the whole thing is based.

"Subject matter does matter. If you use a trivial subject, you cannot have a deep theme. I think that the light-dark, good-evil you find in the mystery novel is a worthy subject."

Jean Hager, who has lived in Tulsa most of her life, earned her degree from Central State University and attended OU as a graduate student in English. She has been a regular at the annual OU short course for approximately 20 years. She was named Oklahoma Writer of the Year in 1982 and four times has won the Oklahoma Writers Federation award for best novel of the year by an Oklahoma writer. Her husband Kenneth is a hospital

administrator, and they have three grown children and one grandchild.

Hager's first books were children's mysteries, the first published in 1970. She then turned to romantic suspense, she says, just in time for sales of that form of the mystery novel to dry up. So she switched her storytelling skills to books that could find a market and sold 33 romance novels.

"But mysteries were always my reading of choice," Hager says. About two years ago, she decided she wanted to write something besides romance, and she turned back to her original writing field.

She analyzed the market and concluded that most successful writers were using backgrounds which made their work stand out—"Tony Hillerman and the Navajo or Dick Francis and the racetrack.

"So I asked myself, 'What do I know about?' Well, I have a lot of Cherokee blood. I've read a lot about the Cherokee, I've visited the historic sites connected with the Oklahoma Chero-

kee, and I've always been interested in them."

The next step was Mitchell Bushyhead, police chief of Buckskin, Oklahoma, and hero of *The Grandfather Medicine*, published by St. Martin's Press in 1989. Bushyhead is half Cherokee but grew up without knowing his Cherokee father. This gives him a logical reason for learning about the rituals and customs of his tribe—a learning process the reader can share while Bushyhead uncovers the clues that solve the mystery. In September Hager sold a second novel featuring Chief Bushyhead.

Hager succinctly sums up the appeal of the mystery novel.

"It's good against evil," she said.

Then she adds, "I've always liked books that have a satisfactory conclusion."


This desire for a poetically complete, emotionally satisfying ending may be the key to the continued popularity of the mystery story, from its beginnings with Edgar Allen Poe to the popular novels of the 1990s.

The mystery offers related rewards to the writer.

Says Tony Hillerman: "Mystery appeals to the fiction writer because it offers him a form, a shape—a center or focus for his plot. If he has a yen to be a storyteller (and many fiction writers have no such yen), it covers that, too."

And, says Ross Thomas, today's writers are doing a good job with the mystery novel.

"They're much better written in the 1980s than they were in the 1960s, the 1950s or the 1940s. I'll lay it all at the feet of better writers. I think anything that is well-written will probably find a wider audience than something that is poorly written."

A good yarn, skillfully spun: What more could a reader—or a writer—ask? 

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Had this article been written some months hence, Eve K. Sandstrom, '58 B.A., might have included her own achievements in the mystery field. Death Down Home, her second novel, will be published in hardback by Scribner in fall 1990.*