

Carolyn Hart: Oklahoma's Agatha Christie  
By Amy Dee Stephens

*These days, Agatha Christie is sharing a bookshelf with Oklahoma author, Carolyn Hart. Twice a year, Hart churns out a new, best-selling murder mystery. To her millions of readers, it's no mystery why she's so popular...*

Hart's books always have "intricate plot, appealing characters with rich emotional lives, non-stop action and a gripping climax," said Mary Kennedy with *Crime Fiction Examiner*.

Book reviewers from *Publisher's Weekly* to *The New York Times* agree, calling Hart's writing "masterful" and "fabulous."

"I do try to hide excellent clues in my book," Hart said. "At the end of the book, I hope readers either think 'I was right!' or 'Of course.'"

Hart uses human emotions to drive her storyline, stating that murders are about fractured relationships. To reach a believable murder outcome, she must ask the question: "What causes an ordinary person to succumb to this weakness or anger that then leads them astray?" She often finds the answer by picking up the morning newspaper.

"Human passions are the same in a small village or a city alley," Hart said. "The point is not *who* committed the crime, but *why*."

For this reason, she believes that mystery novels are an important part of our culture and actually reaffirm goodness.

"Mysteries lift the human spirit, because readers care that justice is served and decency is applauded," Hart said.

What caused this petite, green-eyed girl from Oklahoma City to choose a life of crime writing? It goes back to her childhood...

Hart grew up on a steady diet of reading. For fun, she read books like the Nancy Drew series. For news, she and her family relied upon World War II headlines.

"It didn't take long for a child to understand the importance of newspapers," Hart said. "I realized that the bigger the headline, the more important the story. So, I thought that becoming a reporter must be the most important job in the world."

At Classen High School, she worked on the school newspaper and then chose to get a journalism degree from the University of Oklahoma. And to be a journalist, one had to look the part.

"In that era, reporters, both male and female, went around wearing trench coats and smoking Chesterfields. That was cool," Hart said. "It was the 'grey flannel suit' of the reporting world."

She vividly remembers buying her trench coat.

"The coat was tan-colored, and I bought it at John A. Brown's in downtown Oklahoma City," she said. "I loved that store. I remember it so clearly, even the smell."

Hart, who gave up smoking along with journalism, loved writing for the *Oklahoma Daily* newspaper on the OU campus and the *Norman Transcript*. However, she came to realize that in spite of the excitement, she didn't have the aggressive personality needed to be a successful reporter.

“It’s much more fortunate that I became a novelist,” Hart said. “I’m much better suited for it.”

Instead of pounding the pavement for leads, Hart spends most days quietly writing *Death on Demand*, *Henrie O.* and *Ghost* stories in a small room behind her house. The previous owner had used the former shed as a pottery studio, but Hart converted it into a writing studio some thirty years ago.

“It’s quiet, remote, and a little dusty,” Hart said, “but it’s a nice office. I have two computers; one that is linked to the Internet and one that is not, to protect my manuscripts from viruses.”

Hart’s goal is to write five good pages a day. It takes about five months to finish each novel. Despite her success, Hart always enters a new writing project with trepidation. She knows who the main characters are, the victim, and the murderer—but she doesn’t know how the book will end!

“I have the feeling the story is there, and I will find it,” Hart said, “but I’m fairly morose until I get that first draft done. Then I’m happy as can be. I love the revision stage, because I already have a book written, and I can just focus on improving it. That’s the chocolate sundae.”

Chocolate sundae is an apt description for a writer who relies heavily on senses to help tell her stories. She frequently refers to the taste of foods or to the scent of plants. Each of her books set in Oklahoma, refers to the rustling sound of cottonwood trees.

“No other tree makes quite the same sound,” Hart said. “I’m in tune to that every time I walk through a park.”

Such attention to detail may be one reason that Hart’s books are so popular, as evidenced by over 3 million books in print. In 2004, she received the Oklahoma Lifetime Achievement Award, and she’s been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. One of her *Henrie O.* storylines, *Dead Man’s Island*, even made the television screen in 1998, starring Barbara Eden and William Shatner.

Hart’s latest book, *Merry, Merry Ghost*, has arrived in book stores, just in time for the holidays. Her unlikely crime-solver is Bailey Ruth, an impetuous ghost with good intentions, sent down from heaven—quite different from Hart’s usual down-to-earth characters. *Romantic Times* calls the book “heaven-sent.”

And maybe it was, because Hart hadn’t intended to write a ghost series about Bailey Ruth at all—until the “sassy, red-headed character” sprang to life at her computer. Now, the spontaneous spirit has become Hart’s favorite leading lady.

“I laugh as I write, which is definitely not the usual demeanor of authors hunched over a keyboard,” Hart said.

Bailey Ruth starred in her first book, *Ghost at Work*, last year, and *Ghost in Trouble* is already written and slated for release next fall. In all three books, Bailey Ruth descends to the small town of Adelaide, Okla., (based on Ada, Okla. where Hart has relatives) to assist police in solving various murders. And in all three, she makes unauthorized appearances wearing fashionable clothing and colorful shoes.

Hart is quick to point out that this penchant for a flashy wardrobe doesn’t reflect her own style choices.

“No! I’ve never been interested in clothes,” Hart said. “I’m one of the most boringly-dressed people ever. I wear black pants and a blouse, oh, and a black sweater when I’m traveling to speaking engagements. But my mother loved beautiful clothes.”

I'm sure she wondered how she created this creature who had no interest in appearances. So, my mother comes out in Bailey Ruth's personality."

Don't be fooled by Hart's reserved style—she's the creator of murder and mayhem. Next spring, fans of her best-known series, *Death on Demand*, will flock to buy the 20th book, *Laughed 'Til He Died*. The main characters are a married couple, Annie and Max Darling, who own a bookstore off the Carolina coast. Between stocking the shelves and hosting author signings, the Darlings also manage to "ferret out the murder going on next door."

When Hart wrote the first *Death on Demand* book in 1987, she had little hope that it would ever be published or read, so she broke a cardinal writing rule. Instead of having main characters that were completely dysfunctional, she made Annie and Max (gasp) a happily married couple!

It resonated with readers.

"Annie and Max represent the millions of people who *do* treat their spouses with respect and affection and laughter," Hart said.

Hart is no stranger to charting new territory. Her very entrance into the writing scene was an anomaly, because at the time, American women didn't write mysteries and certainly didn't get them published!

"You had your hardboiled private detectives, written by males, and your traditional mysteries written by dead English ladies," Hart said, referring to the mystery-writing industry.

However, three American women writers in the mid-1980s were about to prove to New York publishing houses that readers were interested in tough women solving tough crimes. Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky burst upon the scene, and Carolyn Hart was right on their heels. She'd already written several suspense books that had "disappeared into the black hole of publishing," but finally, the timing was right. Now, Hart is hailed as the American Agatha Christie--although Oklahoman's have a more personal claim to her fame. Not only is she an okie herself, she's now sharing her Oklahoma roots with readers of her *Ghost* series.

"Bailey Ruth is down home, genuine, and unpretentious—qualities I always associate with Oklahomans," Hart said.

Hart has even picked out a red-headed Oklahoman to play Bailey Ruth if the *Ghost* books ever make it to film.

"I'd love to see Reba McEntire star as Bailey Ruth!" Hart said. "Wouldn't she be perfect? Reba's staff read *Merry, Merry Ghost* last December and seemed excited, but I haven't heard any more from them."

This month, Hart begins writing her 46<sup>th</sup> book. Of course, she doesn't know what the story will be yet, but somehow, she'll find it.

For Hart's readers, it's no mystery why this talented author has such a following. Her novels reaffirm goodness, have likeable characters, and, oh yes, wear fashionable clothing.

Oklahoma's Carolyn Hart once wore a trench coat and dreamed of writing important headlines, but these days, the headlines are about her; Oklahoma's Agatha Christie.