

Criminal Intent

Featuring: Catherine Dunphy

Interviewed by Arlene McCarthy



Early in her career, Catherine Dunphy exercised her journalistic muscles at The Toronto Star where she worked for 25 years. There she wrote feature articles, reviewed movies, wrote lifestyle pieces as well as obituaries. Her biography Morgentaler, A Difficult Hero, was nominated for the Governor General's Award in 1997. She has also authored Caitlin and BLT, two young adult novels featuring characters from the Degrassi television show, and has contributed to the Degrassi Talks series. In addition, she and Eve Crawford collaborated on a four-part CBC radio mystery series called Fallaway Ridge, as well as on two episodes of Riverdale, a CBC television series. Catherine has also had many articles published in magazines such as Chatelaine, Reader's Digest, and Toronto Life. She continues to write for magazines and is an instructor in print journalism at Ryerson University in Toronto. She says she is a sheepish contributor to Thirteen, an anthology of crime by the [Mesdames of Mayhem](#).

Q: Your career includes successfully writing for print, television, and radio media, as well as teaching ó you must use some amazingly effective time management techniques to do it all. Will you share them?

A: Catherine said to tell you she laughed loudly and bitterly at this question before responding as follows: In everything I've read [it says] that real authors get up in the morning and write. I don't. I do too many other things, to the detriment of my writing. Without a deadline, I wouldn't finish anything. But once I commit to a writing project and get started, I'm totally immersed in it and can't do anything else, so I often work late into the night. There were times when I was working at *The Toronto Star* that I would put my daughter to bed and literally crawl up the stairs to our third floor study to write. I'd sit there in exhaustion, thinking "I can't do this." But once I began entered the world I was creating, the joy of being with the character revitalized me and both time and words flew. So my time management method is ó just sit down and do it.

Q: Do you have time for outside interests? Have any of these found their way into your writing?

A: I'm a tennis fanatic and love to watch matches on TV, but there's so much tennis on now I've had to cut back on it. I play two or three times a week. And I read everything. If I don't have six books by my bed, I feel nervous and if I don't have a book on a plane, I panic. I also belong to two book clubs. I think it's a joy to talk about a book when everyone's read it and we're all talking about it at the same time. I think it's important for people to talk about what a book means to them. I belong to Echo Women's Choir. I usually go to the evening rehearsals exhausted and wondering if I should have stayed home but half way through the practice, the energy comes back along with joy and a wonderful feeling of intangible connectedness ó it's the same energy that happens when I'm immersed in writing.

Q: In your books, magazine articles, screenplays, radio, and television you have explored not only most of the media of our age, but also most of the significant issues of our time such as: abortion, sexuality, alcohol, and depression. What prompts you to tackle issues that many writers avoid dealing with?

A: I've written about every social issue you can imagine and interviewed hundreds of people. I'm always so impressed with people's need to change and their desire to make things better. For example, in Romania, **Nicolae Ceausescu** had outlawed abortion and birth control and dictated that every woman would bear a minimum of five children. There was a deliberate policy of forcing poor pregnant women to give up their children to the state. The dictator seemed to think he could use orphanages to raise children who would be loyal to the state, not the family. And after he was overthrown in 1989 I travelled to Romania to research the plight of the tens of thousands of abandoned children living in cramped and filthy orphanages; people all over the world adopted these children and raised them as their own.

Eight or nine years after I wrote about adult children of alcoholics, I was on a skiing holiday and met someone who remembered the article and pulled it out of his pocket. He had carried it with him for all that time. That kind of reaction reminds me that I'm doing something important as a journalist ó something that deeply touches people's lives.

Q: How did you come to write about Henry Morgentaler?

A: I had written on social issues for a long time at *The Star* but the one thing I hadn't written about was abortion. A colleague who had just finished a biography of **Ed Broadbent** recommended me to her publisher who asked if I could do a biography of **Henry Morgentaler**. So I banged out a half-assed proposal and they contracted me to write the book. Later I figured out it was probably

because no one else wanted to tackle writing about Morgentaler, but at the time I was thrilled.

Working with him was difficult. He had succeeded in his life by always being positive. So he didn't want to talk about the challenges, setbacks, or problems he faced, all of which are the meat of journalism. I had to focus instead on his complicated personality and on the abortion movement itself. The pressure to decriminalize abortion was truly grassroots and he emerged at the right time to lead it. In the course of researching the issue I interviewed 200 to 300 women. This was a women's movement and I wanted to tell their story.

Q: Has writing about such issues created any problems for you?

A: A few writers and friends warned me against writing about Morgentaler. They thought I might be in danger from anti-abortionists. Once when I was doing publicity for the book at an Indigo store in Toronto they even posted an armed guard. But there was never any need for protection. I got some angry reviews about the book but I'd had many of those before in my career. In fact, there were more nasty phone calls and letters protesting my movie reviews than there were on my articles about social issues.

Q: As one of the Mesdames of Mayhem, you contributed to *Thirteen*, an anthology of crime stories published in 2013. Why are you interested in crime and mystery as a genre?

A: For years, mystery has been my secret place. But 20 years ago there was a stigma attached to writing and reading mystery novels, so much so that people like me would put the mystery novel inside a copy of **Margaret Atwood** when riding the subway. When researching Henry Morgentaler, I interviewed many lawyers. Initially, they were wary of talking to a journalist. But when I started to chat to them about mystery writers they would lighten up. Of course they read them. There has been a marvellous stretching of the genre and mystery writing has become literary so the stigma has disappeared. I think women are particularly good mystery writers because it gives us a chance to comment on the morals and ethics of society. I think women are attracted to mysteries because we have a huge capacity for moral outrage and it's satisfying to see that the bad guy gets it. In mysteries you read about your world, your village, and your community, all peopled with characters that possess the same strong moral outrage you do. As writers and readers we get the wonderful sense of righting things from mysteries.

Working with the Mesdames of Mayhem has been the most positive writing experience of my 35-year career. Patiently they'd send me prodding email reminders of deadlines and when I finally did bang something out they

were so gentle in telling me I didn't have much of a plot. And I didn't. Lots of other stuff, but no great plot. There still wouldn't be a plot in my story if they hadn't helped me. I am thrilled by the book. I feel so grateful that I was a part of such a community of writers. It is so well written and edited. Promoting it together has been a wonderful experience too. We've gone to talk at libraries and book clubs and have sold out books at community theatre (when they're mounting a mystery). We have many promotional gigs still to come and **Joan O'Callaghan** is a wonderful organizer. The experience was one of true, honest, collegiality and the biggest bonus is that we are all great friends now.

Q: What or how has your experience as a journalist contributed to your subject matter and/or style when you are writing a mystery or crime story?

A: Many of my students studying journalism at Ryerson are already into the idea of journalism as a fallback position, in case they don't make it as a writer, musician, TV star or generally famous person. I always say to them that I know how to write well, understand structure, and do dialogue because I learned it from journalism and every single skill comes from listening, hearing people talk, having people open themselves up to me with raw emotion, and hearing real stories. Journalism teaches you to be honest, clear, and to understand the other person. It's about making yourself invisible and somehow creating the person you're interviewing. One fictional story I've been working on started with something I know as true and I know it won't make the final copy of my book but I needed that kernel of reality as a starting point to get me going.

Q: What kinds of books did you read as a child? Did they have an influence on your writing as an adult?

A: As a child I read every book I could get my hands on and the usual and **Nancy Drew**, **Trixie Belden**. As I got older I read *Catcher in the Rye* and *Franny and Zoey*. I was very much of my time. As a kid I loved the Famous Five [series of children's books by **Enid Blyton**] and envied their independence and exciting lives and their complete freedom and loyalty to their friends. I loved that they had a total world in which they knew their place. When I was nine, my parents moved to Quebec City where we lived for five or six years and I died because there was no English library. I was so desperate for books in English and so excited to get a book that I would read it too fast and I still do. In my first year in school there I won a lot [of contests] for which the prizes were books. But the principal said I had won too many and I had to let other students win. I think I'm still pissed about that. I wanted those books and any books and so badly.

I yearned to get into the adult library but the librarian was a gate keeper who kept out anyone under 12 years of age. Today libraries have changed so much and they should be

the heart of a community ó not under the watchful eye of the kind of librarian who has Kleenex tucked up her sleeve. My story in *Thirteen* is about a very hip librarian who has hired a goth girl as her assistant and tech wiz.

Q: If you could travel anywhere in the world to do research for a crime or mystery story where would it be and why?

A: I love to travel. For the story I'm writing now I need to go back to Namibia ó my husband is South African and we've been there many times but only once in Namibia. Just to be truly selfish, I've always wanted to do the cliché-ridden cottage in Ireland or Scotland where at night after a hard day's writing you would walk down to the local pub where people would be singing when they weren't paying for your beer.

Another place where I've felt such an affinity, and where people have opened up something in me is Newfoundland. I've been there four times doing research for the Morgentaler book and it was so welcoming. There are only two places in the world ó Ireland and Newfoundland ó where they know how to spell my surname. I feel so at home there, as if I lived there in another life or something. And I love the humour of it. Perhaps that's why I like reading **Michael Crummey's** books, *Galore* and *Sweetland*. In *Galore*, he captures the frolicking magic realism of Newfoundland.

Q: How has being a member of Sisters in Crime affected you?

A: I was among the founding members of the Toronto Sisters in Crime. It started because I read a small squib at the end of a long mystery book review in *The Star*, where I worked at the time, mentioning that a big mystery conference was coming to Toronto on the next Thanksgiving weekend. I had never heard of Bouchercon ó it was the first time it had been in Toronto ó but I called

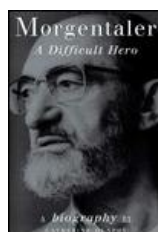
a friend and we went down and discovered the American branch of Sisters in Crime was hosting a breakfast. **Sara Paretsky** gave a barn burner of a speech; we met a whack of name women mystery writers and thought this can't end. So the Canadians who were at the breakfast started to meet regularly. It was a great feeling to be among my tribe. The women were funny, smart, well-read and amazing writers.

Sisters in Crime started because women writers were not being reviewed, and the feeling of sisterhood that developed enabled us to promote ourselves and our books. For a while book publicists would invite us to have lunch or attend special events with them. One time it was high tea at the Royal York and some of the Sisters in Crime got together and created the most outrageous hats which they wore to the tea with aplomb and enormous smiles on their faces. I remember we hosted an event at a subsequent Bouchercon in Toronto where we rented a real Mountie (who knew?) and hired a local character ó the owner of a British Pub in Cabbagetown ó who specialized in dressing up as Queen Elizabeth II. The American Sisters talked about it for years. We are not just readers and writers ó we have such a great sense of fun.

Q: Do you have any books on the way?

A: The Mesdames will be publishing a sequel to *Thirteen* and I plan to be in that. And I am determined to finish this other book I've been writing since there were typewriters ó or so it seems some days. I really need more discipline. There is that tension between keeping one's bum in chair and having a life.

For more information about **Catherine Dunphy** and the Mesdames of Mayhem, visit:
<http://mesdamesofmayhem.com/about/catherine-dunphy/>



Crime Scene, the newsletter of the Toronto Chapter of Sisters in Crime, is published every two months.

We encourage reprints, but only with credit to the article's writer(s) and the Toronto chapter, and after notifying the Newsletter Editor at newsletter@torontosistersincrime.ca

© 2014 Sisters in Crime ó Toronto Chapter. All rights reserved.