

REVIEW: SUE GRAFTON'S *R IS FOR RICOCHET*

Ricochet's Hard-Boiled Bounce

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R Is for Ricochet, Sue Grafton's latest alphabetically titled crime novel, borrows its initial plot impetus from Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. Resonant with California wealth, decadence, and indulgent, aging fathers trying to rescue wayward daughters, Grafton's novel features everywoman Kinsey Milhone, who tells us, "my office is small, and as a rule, I'm ignored by the wealthy, who seem to prefer doing business through their attorneys in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles."¹ But not this time. Grafton's private eye is hired by Nord Lafferty, a wealthy, elderly man, whose whispering voice, extensive surgical scars, and oxygen tank imply the urgency of his request.

Grafton's private investigator Kinsey Milhone steps out of the shadows of the hard-boiled detective tradition of the 1920s and 30s, the Sam Spades and Philip Marlowes who live not only in the pages of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, but also in the celluloid images of Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, and Dick Powell.² These are, metaphorically speaking, big pants to fill, especially in a literary tradition so exclusively figured as masculine. Philip Marlowe calls a minor player in *The Big Sleep* "a small man in a big man's world,"³ and both Chandler and Hammett made it clear that being hard-boiled was a masculine prerogative in their eras. But Grafton has imbued the androgynously named Kinsey Milhone with a toughness all her own, and relocated the menace of Chandler

and Hammett's "mean streets"—the alleys, piers, and rain-slicked streets of Los Angeles and San Francisco—to the contemporary California Kinsey inhabits, the "small Southern California town of Santa Teresa."⁴ Kinsey's assignment in *R Is for Ricochet* is to pick up Lafferty's daughter Reba from prison, and "supervise" her for a few days to make sure she meets with her parole officer, and avoids gambling, drinking, and other highly enjoyable bad habits from her past. Reba, despite her high-risk behavior, becomes a catalyst for Kinsey's awareness that taking chances can make her feel more alive, even though it can bring new dangers. Reba, rejoicing in the excesses granted to her as Grafton's updated femme fatale, is more truly the inheritor of the hard-boiled legacy than Kinsey.

The "mean streets" of the hard-boiled genre have been most eloquently described by Raymond Chandler in his essay *The Simple Art of Murder*.

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg whiskey can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of our town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony . . .⁵

Chandler's "mean streets" have been updated and re-imagined by Grafton for a more affluent and less exclusively male audience. Grafton's "mean streets," corrupted by bookkeeping fraud, corporate money laundering, and large-scale scams,

have lost some mythic grandeur, and appear in these sites: a posh, suspiciously redesigned downtown office building; Rosie's neighborhood restaurant (home of Krumpli Paprikas with rye bread and sour pickles); a Reno casino; Kinsey's garage apartment; the local parole offices, and an "Art Deco wonder" of an L.A. hotel. Off the mean streets, bucolic settings are included also, as Kinsey goes out to meet a wealthy client on his estate, named Bella Serra, "lined with olive and pepper trees":

The pungent scent of the ocean faded with my ascent, replaced by the smell of sage and the bay laurels. The hillsides were thick with yarrow, wild mustard, and California poppies. The afternoon sun had baked the boulders to a golden turn. . . . The two-story house, with matching one-story wings topped with stone balustrades at each end, dominated my visual field.⁶

This apparent refuge of wealth and privilege is undercut, of course, by Kinsey's encounter with its aged and ill owner, worried about his daughter, about to be released from prison, and later, by Kinsey's developing friendship with Reba herself, a "willful and rebellious" only child. Grafton, like Hammett and Chandler, explores the private eye's dilemma of pursuing the truth while avoiding emotional intimacy that can obscure that pursuit. Grafton, though, never follows this dilemma to its most painful consequences as does Hammett, for example, in *The Maltese Falcon*. Instead, Grafton provides her contemporary private eye with a community that makes her much less of a loner than the traditional hard-boiled detective. Kinsey's elderly landlord and neighbor, Henry, a former professional baker who seems always to be taking his trademark cinnamon rolls out of the oven, serves as a shorthand family for Kinsey. Rounding out Kinsey's community is Rosie's restaurant, a safe place to drink and dine, with Rosie, the Hungarian chef and owner, bullying Kinsey into ordering what Rosie thinks she should have. Rosie has a diamond-in-the-rough charm all her own as she serves lemon on the side with her iced tea: "I'm

bring lemon on the side in little diaper so you squeeze in your tea with no seeds come out.”⁷ For romance, Kinsey hooks up with local law enforcement, virtually eliminating the *noir* ambiguity of sexual encounters characteristic of the earlier hard-boiled detective fiction. Nevertheless, Kinsey embodies many of the qualities that underlie the enduring popularity of the hard-boiled detective in American crime fiction: honor, some degree of loneliness, “rude wit,” pride, humility, sexual energy, commonness or an everyman/everywoman quality, relative poverty, and the “search for hidden truth.”⁸ Kinsey’s lack of vanity, so emphatic that the application of lipstick makes her feel like a narcissist, and her feeling of kinship with the often down-on-their-luck characters she encounters in her work make her likeable. Her frequent returns home alone to face her empty apartment, twice-divorced status, and solitary meals of egg-salad sandwiches or popcorn make her loneliness palpable. She takes beatings, bullet wounds in the buttocks (in *I Is for Innocent* [1992]), and setbacks on cases without giving up. She never dodges the truth, however uncomfortable.

Yet Grafton softens Kinsey’s demeanor and her solitude, keenly aware of her broad readership. In the seemingly meandering excursions into the sibling rivalry between octogenarian brothers Henry and Lewis, used chiefly by Grafton to show that even eighty-seven year old Henry has a love-interest, while business-like Kinsey has none, Grafton may also be grafting onto this genre, with its expanding demographic market, a quest for truth beyond the solving of the crime’s puzzle. By including Henry and Lewis’s sparring over artist-in-residence Mattie, Grafton portrays another version of a search for personal meaning, an end to a solipsistic existence, for persons of any age, a quest that drives Kinsey, and presumably, Grafton’s readers. In *R Is for Ricochet*, Kinsey’s relationship with Reba Lafferty begins as one of a paid baby-sitter/surrogate parole officer to Reba’s bad girl, and evolves into a more complicated relationship. When Reba distinguishes between revenge and getting even in this way, “Revenge is you hurt me and I grind you underfoot until you wish you were dead. Getting even

restores the balance in the Universe,” Kinsey tries to reason with her, suggesting a more law-abiding alternative.⁹ Grafton writes Reba the way she’d like to write Kinsey, but can’t if she wants to keep her series going and Kinsey out of trouble with the law.

Kinsey’s (and Grafton’s) identification with the reckless, law-breaking Reba serves to highlight Kinsey’s characteristic emotional insulation and isolation, making it unbearable for Kinsey. Grafton chooses to break her own rules for the hard-boiled private eye, when Kinsey does fall for romantic interest Cheney Phillips, an undercover vice cop. They fall in lust over food:

I’m not sure how we made it though the meal. We ate a salad that was cold and crisp, pungent with vinaigrette. He fed me macaroni and cheese, hot and soft, laced with prosciutto, and then he kissed the taste of salt from my mouth. How had we arrived at this place?¹⁰

These are treacherous waters for the private eye to navigate, endangering the clear-eyed objectivity her loner status gives her. In an interview in 1995, Grafton discussed this potential quagmire for such characters in crime fiction:

Kinsey has the same problem with love interests [as Tony Hillerman’s detective Joe Leaphorn]. What do you do with the guy at the end of the book? He can get killed, but I hate to invent a good character just to dispose of him. If not, he has to leave her or she has to leave him. But why would he? Or she? So unless you can think of some way to get him offstage, it’s better not to start.¹¹

But Grafton is aware that many of her readers want more romance in their crime fiction than readers of the traditional hard-boiled genre did back in the days of Hammett and Chandler. Grafton says: “Mine [my readers] are split. Some say, ‘Poor thing, can’t she [Kinsey] have more sex?’ The other half say, ‘Thank goodness you don’t stoop to lowly graphic sex.’ So you don’t know which way to go.”¹² In *R Is for Ricochet*, Grafton nudges Kinsey towards a more balanced life through Reba’s

edgy example of irresponsible *joie de vivre*, making the most interesting dynamic the interplay of Kinsey and Reba and the ways they diverge as female characters in Grafton's update of the hard-boiled genre.

NOTES

¹ Sue Grafton, *R Is for Ricochet*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2004: 3. In Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), a wealthy invalid father enlists the services of Los Angeles detective Philip Marlowe to solve a case that may involve his two wayward daughters.

² See John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) starring Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade; *Murder, My Sweet*, dir. Edward Dmytryk, starring Dick Powell as Philip Marlowe; *Farewell, My Lovely*, dir. Dick Richards, starring Robert Mitchum as Philip Marlowe (1975).

³ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*. New York: Vintage Crime, 1939, 1992, 168.

⁴ *R Is for Ricochet*, 2.

⁵ Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* in *Detective Fiction: Crime and Compromise*. Eds. Dick Allen and David Chacko. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974, 397–398.

⁶ *R Is for Ricochet*, 3–4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸ Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*, 398.

⁹ *R Is for Ricochet*, 327.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹ Sue Goodman, "Sue Grafton and Tony Hillerman," *Modern Maturity* July-August, 1995: 74–76; 78–82.

¹² *Ibid.*, 76.