



Hart, Ellen (b. 1949)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2005, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Ellen Hart.
Courtesy Ellen Hart.

Prolific mystery writer Ellen Hart has two extremely successful series of novels. She has garnered five Lambda Literary Awards for lesbian mystery fiction.

Hart was born Patricia Ellen Boehnhardt on August 10, 1949 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She recalls a happy childhood filled with good music and good food. Her grandmother loved opera, and her mother had once hoped to become a concert pianist. Hart also studied piano and achieved a considerable degree of accomplishment.

The love of food that Hart's mother and grandmother inspired would prove a lifelong influence, as did the gift from her parents of the entire set of Sherlock Holmes stories.

After graduating from high school Hart enrolled in Ambassador College, an institution in Pasadena, California that was affiliated with the Worldwide Church of God. She earned a bachelor's degree in theology in 1971.

Her disillusionment with the church began when she learned that a friend and fellow student had become pregnant by the Vice Chancellor of the college, who then sent her away to have the baby.

Hart remained in the employ of the college in the Home Economics/Interior Design department until 1975, when she quit and moved back to her native state.

Hart's best friend from college, Kathleen Kruger, had also returned to Minnesota. When she divorced her husband in the late 1970s, she and her two daughters relocated to Minneapolis and moved into an apartment with Hart.

It was the beginning of a wonderful family. Hart and Kruger have been devoted partners for decades. Hart has legally adopted Kruger's daughters, Shawna and Bethany, whom she describes, along with Shawna's husband, Tom, as "truly the light of our lives." Hart and Kruger also have two grandsons.

Becoming a novelist was not a career path that Hart envisioned early on. After leaving Ambassador College she studied to become a chef. She spent over a decade as the kitchen manager at a sorority house and also plied her culinary skills in a Vietnamese restaurant.

Both of Hart's fictional sleuths, Jane Lawless and Sophie Greenway, share her passion for good food: Lawless owns a restaurant, and Greenway is a food critic.

A lifelong love of reading led Hart to try her hand at writing fiction in 1987. She was about two hundred pages into her first attempt at a mystery novel when, she has stated, "I realized that I didn't have a clue what I was doing." As a consequence, she began reading mysteries "voraciously" and studying their structure in order to understand the "very specific architecture" of the genre.

Hart's first published novel, *Hallowed Murder* (1989), was enthusiastically received and won her nominations for both a Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Mystery and a Minnesota Book Award for Best Crime Fiction.

Hallowed Murder introduced readers to restaurateur, amateur sleuth, and out lesbian Jane Lawless. She and her best friend, theater director Cordelia Thorne, have teamed to solve more than a dozen crimes, most recently in *Sweet Poison* (2008). Some of the books focus specifically on gay issues, but others do not.

Hart's second detective series debuted in 1994 with *This Little Piggy Went to Murder*. Her sleuth in these novels--now numbering eight--is Sophie Greenway, a married heterosexual woman.

Hart's writing has been compared to that of P. D. James, the mystery author whom she has said that she most admires, as well as to Ruth Rendell and Agatha Christie.

Hart sees a similarity between her work and Christie's in that her "books don't have a lot of blood and gore in them." She adds that "sex may be present, but it's mostly handled off the page."

Hart differs significantly from Christie, however, in her perception of society. Whereas Christie sees "the village as a bastion of good, wholesome values" in which something evil occasionally occurs, Hart views the criminal as "a symptom, a reflection of a sick village/society." Because of her concern with characters and their motivation, she considers her mystery novels "whydunits" rather than "whodunits."

When Hart invented the Jane Lawless character she made her an out but celibate lesbian still mourning the death of her lover. Although Hart eventually worked in a couple of romances for Lawless (one a long-distance relationship), she points out that in the "cozy" style of mystery novels--be they gay or straight--one tends not to find sex scenes. She further notes that because of the necessity for tightly-paced writing in mysteries it is essential that every character and relationship--including love stories--must have a role integral to the plot. Adding recurring characters complicates the task.

Hart sees social value in gay and lesbian mystery fiction. She has stated that "our community has been starved to see itself reflected in popular culture." Contemporary gay and lesbian detective characters offer a positive image instead of the pernicious stereotype of the "twisted souls" of earlier crime fiction who usually wound up as either the victim or the murderer. Hart hopes that modern gay and lesbian "mystery novels will become some of the most important bridges over which straight society will walk toward a more complex and mature understanding of who we are."

Although the Jane Lawless series was initially niche-marketed as lesbian fiction, the novels now attract a large crossover readership as well. Hart welcomes her growing audience, opining that "anyone, as long as they aren't homophobic, can read and enjoy my books."

Nevertheless, she has a special bond with her glbtq readers. "I'm always so incredibly moved when a gay person comes up to me at a book signing and tells me that they've given one of my mysteries to a parent (or a sister, or a brother) to read, and that it helped them open up a discussion about who they are," she has said. "It makes a simple piece of commercial fiction very powerful indeed."

The appreciation of glbtq readers for Hart's writing is evidenced by the accolades bestowed upon her. A frequent nominee for the annual Lambda Literary Awards, she has earned top honors for Best Lesbian Mystery an impressive five times--and Jane Lawless shows no signs of retiring.

Bibliography

Forrest, Katherine V. "Wire Tap: A Conversation between LBR's editor, Katherine V. Forrest, and Ellen Hart." *Lambda Book Report* 8 (November 1999): 10

Habich, John. "A Way with Murder." *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis) (August 25, 2002): 1E.

Keehnen, Owen. "Ellen Hart Sheds Light on Her Mystery Writing." (2003). www.glbtq.com/sfeatures/interviewehart.html.

www.ellenhart.com.

Zimmerman, R. D. "Hart Goes Hollywood." *Lambda Book Report* (March 2001): 11.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.