



Redmann, J. M. (b. 1955)

by George Koschel

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J. M. Redmann is the Lambda Literary Award-winning creator of the New Orleans private detective, Michele "Micky" Knight. Author of six novels featuring her protagonist, Redmann presents a richly textured series focused on issues of power and family set against the backdrop of a compellingly evoked, colorful but utterly unromanticized city.

The daughter of two college-educated journalists, Jean Redmann was born on June 9, 1955 in Mississippi. Reading was part of her growing-up process, and writing followed shortly thereafter. She began writing short stories in third grade.

That Redmann was reared by college-educated parents may startle readers of her novels who identify her with her protagonist. While Micky Knight is wedded to her working-class consciousness and her "bayou trash" ethos, the author grew up in a middle-class family on the Mississippi Gulf coast in Ocean Springs.

What Redmann does have in common with her creation is a similar educational background and a love of books. Whereas Redmann graduated from Vassar with a degree in theater, Knight graduated from Barnard with a degree in philosophy. Redmann has acknowledged that she is an admirer of Hannah Arendt, and Knight refers to Arendt's famous description of Nazi atrocities as the "banality of evil" in *The Intersection of Law and Desire* (1995).

A self-described "reading slut," Redmann has read widely. Her favorite novel is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Among mystery writers she particularly admires Dorothy Sayers, Amanda Cross, Barbara Wilson, Katherine Forrest, Greg Herren, Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, Patricia Cornwall, P. D. James, and Val McDermid, among others.

She strongly identifies with her fellow gay and lesbian mystery writers, commenting to Ellen Hart: "I'm writing to change the world, not in a great flash, but like water wearing away stone. I think we all are. By we, I mean all the writers who are telling our stories, especially those of us only now being allowed a voice, women, gays, blacks--all those 'others' who have so long been silent."

Redmann created Micky Knight because she wanted to read hard-boiled lesbian detective fiction. Prior to Knight's debut in *Death by the Riverside* in 1990, lesbian mystery fiction was primarily limited to the police procedurals of Katherine Forrest and what Redmann refers to as "cozy murder room mysteries." Knight may not have been the first hard-boiled lesbian detective but she was among the pioneers.

What elevates good mystery fiction above the norms of the genre is that something more goes on in the story than the solution to the case. Redmann's novels are made compelling because she regularly tackles difficult topics, such as abortion rights in *Deaths of Jocasta* (1992) and child prostitution and pornography in *The Intersection of Law and Desire*.

Two significant themes recur in Redmann's novels and unify her work. The first is the empowerment of the

once powerless. In Redmann's oeuvre she has created a matriarchal society peopled by lesbian physicians, psychiatrists, police officers, assistant district attorneys, and philanthropists. While they all have a certain level of professional success, they have to deal with the problems of homophobia, misogyny, alcoholism, racism, sexual abuse, and physical handicaps.

Ironically, one of the least powerful characters in her novels is the straight woman who reared Micky, her Aunt Greta. She lives in a loveless marriage, cannot cook (she makes an especially bad potato salad), and has been less than adept at rearing her children. While she embraces the tenets of Roman Catholicism, she demonstrates no Christian charity for Micky and seems to exude patronizing contempt when dealing with her niece. Her only power is the negative emotional impact she wields against Micky. In *Lost Daughters* (1999), however, she emerges as a complex character when her negativity is given a fuller explanation.

The other (and related) theme that runs through Redmann's novels is the intrinsic mystery of familial relationships. This theme is fully embodied in Micky Knight herself. Her mother abandoned her when she was a small child, and she was reared by the man who had agreed to marry her mother. He was killed and she was then adopted by her Aunt Greta and Uncle Claude.

Throughout the series Micky is haunted by questions about her abandonment by her mother and the true identity of her father. While she loves the man who married her mother, she knows he is not her biological father.

The mystery of Micky's parentage may be solved, or at least seems to be, in *Lost Daughters*.

More often than not, the cases that Micky investigates intersect with her family heritage. This connection seems a bit contrived in her first novel, *Death by the Riverside*, but operates seamlessly in *Lost Daughters*. While the interaction of a detective's family life with the cases under investigation is not necessarily a prerequisite of the mystery genre, the relationship of family with the protagonist, for better or worse, is definitely a hallmark of Southern literature.

The setting of the series in New Orleans is also intrinsic to its character and ambience. When asked why she set her series there, Redmann told an interviewer: "I lived in New York for a number of years, but I never considered setting my series anywhere other than New Orleans. This is a city where anything is possible (and sometimes all too probable) From voodoo to drag queen prostitutes to uptown opulence to snakes in your car, it's all here. Also, I grew up down here and everything from the smell of flowers to the slant of the light in the evening to the taste of crawfish or raw oysters lives in a very deep place in my memory."

Redmann's series made a critical leap in 1995 with the publication of *The Intersection of Law and Desire*, which won a Lambda Literary Award. Her first two novels are more than workmanlike, but seem sloppily edited and somewhat indulgent. In her most recent novels, the writing is sharper, the pacing more suspenseful, and the characters deeper.

Redmann has acknowledged the help of her editor at Norton--which published her most recent novels--in improving her books, but also feels that she has simply grown as a writer over the course of the series.

Some fans of Micky may decry what they might see as a loss of toughness in Redmann's latter books. Certainly Micky is more physical in the earlier novels and more vulnerable in the latter ones. But in becoming more vulnerable, she also evolves into a more realistic, three-dimensional character. Even in the more recent works, however, Redmann does not skimp on action.

Redmann bristles at the idea that she should be pigeonholed as a genre writer. To her literature is

literature, be it murder mysteries, science fiction, romance, or drama.

As a writer of lesbian mystery novels, however, Redmann is to some degree marginalized even within genre fiction. As Ellen McGarrah complained in a review of *Lost Daughters*, which she characterized as "a sophisticated, funny, plot-driven, character-laden murder mystery," Redmann "is not anywhere near as well-known as she deserves to be, particularly for a very readable mystery writer published by a major publishing house, and perhaps that's because her detective, Micky Knight, is a lesbian. The genre and its readers still have traditional notions of who and what fictional detectives should be and, by and large, that means lesbians need not apply."

Redmann is also the author of lesbian erotic stories, which have appeared in various anthologies. Eroticism is also prominent in the first three Micky Knight novels. In *Lost Daughters*, there are no erotic passages because Redmann thought that eroticism would be incompatible with the theme and tone of the novel.

Redmann was working on her latest novel, *Death of a Dying Man* (2009), when Mother Nature in the form of Hurricane Katrina forced its author back to the drawing boards after she had completed ten chapters of her book. In the acknowledgments she writes: "The book I had been writing was no longer possible"

In *Death of a Dying Man*, Micky Knight's client is one Damon LaChance, whose name seems better suited to a Barbara Cartland romance than hard boiled detective fiction. Be that as it may, in his prime her client was an A-list gay man but too much partying has left him with six months to live. He has gotten a one-two punch in the form of AIDS and hepatitis C.

Seven years earlier, before he became ill, LaChance fathered a child by a carefree woman who was visiting New Orleans. The mother of his child let him know he had a child, but he made no effort to contact her, and both mother and daughter have now fallen off the radar screen.

In the last months of his life, LaChance wants to make amends for his neglect. He hires Knight to find his child so the child can inherit the money to which she is entitled.

At the beginning of Knight's investigation, someone tries to kill LaChance. The suspects are a varied group of people who can lose too much in the way of an inheritance if LaChance leaves his money to his child. Fighting for his life, LaChance is hospitalized in the ill-fated Baptist Memorial Hospital, which was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

Helping Knight in her investigation is a journalist, Shannon Wild. She is visiting New Orleans with her lover, Dr. Lauren Calder, who is working temporarily in New Orleans with Knight's lover, Dr. Cordelia James. At first Wild and Knight do not get along. However, circumstances throw them together in ways Knight could never have imagined.

As is common with mystery fiction with a continuous protagonist, the vicissitudes of personal relationships can be as important, if not more so, than the case at hand. Although Cordelia James is on the sidelines throughout much of this novel, her relationship with Micky Knight is nevertheless at its core.

And then there is Katrina. Knight's evacuation from New Orleans with Shannon Wild and then dealing with the aftermath of Katrina as she relocates takes up the last third of the novel. She does solve the mystery of who tried to murder LaChance and finds his child, but the real interest of *Death of a Dying Man* is how Knight deals with her relationship to Cordelia James amidst the debris Katrina has left in her wake.

Katrina also features in *Water Mark* (2010), Redmann's sixth novel. As this book opens, Knight has returned to New Orleans two months after Hurricane Katrina has destroyed much of the city. She is struggling with a serious depression brought on by the devastation of Katrina wrought on the city and by the discovery of

Cordelia James's betrayal.

As she deals with the external and internal difficulties wrought by these two disasters, Knight discovers that a woman thought killed by Katrina was actually murdered more recently.

In 2003, Redmann co-founded Bywater Books. She soon decided, however, that she preferred to be a writer rather than a publisher. Although Redmann is no longer a principal in the publishing house, Bywater Books has reprinted all her books.

Redmann's "day job" is as Director of Education for New Orleans's largest AIDS organization, NO/AIDS Task Force.

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