

Honesty in Life and in Her Literature

By Margaret Maron

In an interview with the Associated Press, this is how Barbara Mertz described her youthful self: "I was mealy mouthed, timid, never spoke up, let people push me around." By the time I met her in the mid-1980s, she was outrageously funny, opinionated, and outspoken.

And nobody pushed her around.

When she wrote *Crocodile on the Sandbank*, the first Amelia Peabody mystery, the publisher wanted to capitalize on her wildly popular romantic suspense novels by printing covers that read "by Barbara Michaels, writing as Elizabeth Peters." She refused. (And years later, when those earlier books were reprinted, they were "by Elizabeth Peters, writing as Barbara Michaels.")

Asked to serve on the infamous "Committee of Ten" to examine whether or not the Edgars were biased in favor of hard-boiled noir, she was the one dissenting vote. "Look at the record. No American woman has won since 1957. Coincidence? I think not." Her well-publicized remarks helped lead to the restructuring of Edgar committees so that each panel of judges now represents a balanced mix of the three G's: Gender (male and female), Genre (both noir and traditional), Geography (east coast, west coast, mid-country).

Counting the Barbara Michaels books, she wrote more than fifty novels and three scholarly non-fiction books, but her heart belonged to the traditional mystery, so much so that she became the founding mother of *Malice Domestic*, a convention that celebrates the less violent side of our chosen genre.



With a Ph.D. in Egyptology, she could describe Amelia Peabody's world with meticulous accuracy. Amelia is a Victorian gentlewoman and archaeologist whose adventures gave Barbara wide scope. As she once wrote to me, "They have allowed me to poke genteel fun at archeologists, feminists, prudish Victorians, and at the mystery novel itself. How could I have had so much fun with any other form of fiction?" She was quite unapologetic about it. "Although I am proud to call my books 'mysteries,' it delights my soul when people complain that they don't know how to classify some of them. That proves to me, not that I am so original and clever (though I wouldn't argue the point!), but that the mystery itself is so broad as to defy rigid categories. And when people ask, 'When are you going to write a serious

book?' my response is 'Every book I have written is a serious book. *Especially* the mysteries.'

Generous with her time and encouragement, she had a talent for friendship, and her friends know how unbelievably lucky they were. I can still hear her raucous laughter, smell her cigarettes, feel the warmth of one of her cats asleep on my lap.

Dominick Abel, her agent of thirty-five years, expressed it best: "A skilled novelist with an acute sense of character and humor, she prized honesty above all, in life



as well as literature. Barbara was passionate about many things — Egypt, literature, gardening, cats, politics, family, gin. She was one of the most interesting people I have ever known. I will miss her."

And so say all of us.

Margaret Maron has written thirty novels and two collections of short stories. Winner of the Edgar, Agatha, Anthony, and Macavity, she also has garnered lifetime achievement awards from Malice 2014 and Bouchercon 2015 (Are they trying to tell her something?) She has served as national president of Sisters in Crime and of MWA, which named her Grand Master in 2013. In 2008, she received the North Carolina Award, her state's highest civilian honor.