

Not a Lot of Blood but Plenty of Guts

By Elaine Viets

Margaret Maron writes cozies. Foursquare, forthright cozies that aren't afraid to speak out. Margaret's mysteries are set in her native North Carolina, but Margaret doesn't write sentimental moonlight and magnolia fantasies.

Consider *Designated Daughters*, her latest Judge Deborah Knott.

In true cozy tradition, we see little blood when sweet Aunt Rachel is murdered. But Margaret—and Deborah Knott—show real guts.

The judge skims the newspaper to “see what rollbacks our current legislature had enacted in its determination to undo all the progress the state’s made in the last fifty years...Now we seem to be competing with Alabama and Mississippi to see who can dive to the bottom first.”

Margaret paints a true picture of her region, tackling hard issues: race relations, corrupt developers, mistreated migrant workers. The novels don't preach, but they do make their point.

I got to know Margaret while on a 2010 book tour in the North Carolina Research Triangle, led by Raven-Award-winning reviewer and author escort Molly Weston. I toured with writers Donna Andrews, Rosemary Harris and Meredith Cole. Margaret invited us to dinner at her home, and it felt like a Knott family dinner.

Margaret and her artist husband, Joe Maron, built their home on the site of the original homeplace—and homeplace is one word in North Carolina—of Margaret's grandparents. Their house burned in the 1950s. They built their house as a vacation home, then expanded it when they returned to North Carolina full-time. Like Judge Knott, Margaret is no fan (pardon the pun) of air-conditioning. When North



Carolina warms up, Margaret works in a “screened and wired gazebo. I do love to write there, away from phones and the Internet. I don't mind the heat as long as I'm not doing stoop labor. Prefer the natural noises to being shut up in an air-conditioned house.”

Margaret also has a cedar “room,” a 50-foot diameter circle of cedar trees commemorating her editor, Sara Ann Freed, who nurtured top mystery writers. One bench has this brass plaque: “In memory of Sara Ann (‘Where's the damn manuscript?') Freed.”

Air-conditioning has deprived us of the old-fashioned pleasure of porch chats. At Margaret and Joe's, we had a lively writers' conversation about books and editors, old friends and future plans. I don't remember exactly what we said, but I know we laughed a lot. I definitely remember dinner—shrimp and grits.

We signed a wall in the Maron house, “a growth chart where guests have to stand and be measured,” Margaret said. “Then I label and date the marks. I can

never remember to bring out the official guest book, so this is the unofficial version."

Margaret lives in what used to be farm country that's being swallowed by suburbs and big box stores. The residents voted to name their once rural road Two Claude Road. "It's named for my grandfather and the grandfather of another neighbor."

Margaret lives "a few miles south of Raleigh."



I'm not telling y'all exactly where Two Claude Road is. And that y'all means everyone. In North Carolina, y'all is always plural.

Elaine Viets is the author of twenty-eight mysteries, including her May Dead-End Job hardcover, *Cbecked Out*. Her bestselling mysteries are taught in colleges in the United States and Japan. In January, Viets took the MedicoLegal Death Investigators Training Course for forensic professionals given by St. Louis University's Department of Pathology and started a new Death Investigator series. *Brain Storm* is the first novel in that series.