

# The Queen of Suspense

By Alafair Burke

*"I wrote my first poem when I was six. I still have it because Mother saved everything I wrote. She also insisted that I recite everything I wrote for the benefit of anyone who happened to be visiting..."*

*"When I was finished thrilling everyone with my latest gem, my mother led the applause. 'Mary is very gifted,' she would announce. 'Mary is going to be a successful writer when she grows up.'*

*"Looking back, I am sure that the captive audience was ready to strangle me, but I am intensely grateful for that early vote of absolute confidence I received. When I started sending out short stories and getting them back by return mail, I never got discouraged. Mother's voice always rang in my subconscious. Someday I was going to be a successful writer. I was going to make it."*

— Mary Higgins Clark,  
*Kitchen Privileges: A Memoir*

As writers, we learn to ignore reviews—or at least to say that we ignore reviews. But as I searched for ways to describe the unrivaled adoration that Mary Higgins Clark's readers have for her work, I went directly to the source: reader posts on GoodReads. Here are just a few notes of praise for Mary Higgins Clark's groundbreaking *Where Are The Children*, the book that launched a 40-years-and-counting publishing career.

One reviewer says she read *Where Are The Children* when she was in high school, before movies like *The Burning Bed* exposed the general public to the realities of family violence. She was "horrified, chilled,



and appalled" by the book's dark content, but also "thrilled" at the sense of justice delivered in the final pages.

Another says she "can't imagine having your children kidnapped," but "you can see [the main character's] state of mind." Someone else writes that the "pain and loss is so real."

These short reviews tap directly into the common thread that runs through Clark's prolific and diverse body of work: regular people targeted by dark forces seemingly out of their control. Within the first chapter of a Mary Higgins Clark novel, readers not only know that terrible danger portends, they also care deeply about the well-being of the protagonist. They need to know what will happen next.

I'm struck by the number of GoodReads reviewers who say they re-read Clark's books, newly appreciating aspects that they glossed over while burning through the pages the first time. Famed now as the Queen of Suspense, Clark was also one of the first authors in the genre to write about crimes against children or to incorporate material about memory and cognition that we now associate with the "psychological thriller." Though her subject matter can be dark, her work is never prurient.

As Clark's co-author on the *Under Suspicion* series of novels, I have seen her writing wheels turn first-

hand. While one half of her brain contemplates the antagonist's next terrifying move, the other half imagines how the protagonist will react to her child's fears. She can recite quotidian details in the lives of every character, whether those facts make it to the page or not. Her ability to sit at a table and work for several hours straight demonstrates that she is still the same dedicated writer whose typewriter would echo through the house as her five young children woke. I grew up in a house that sounded like that, and working with Mary reminds me that a lifetime career as an author does not come easy, no matter how natural a writer's talent.



As I scroll through more reviews, some words appear over and over again. "Suspenseful." "Addictive." "She is my favorite writer, hands down." Yes, seriously, that *exact* sentence appears repeatedly.

Mary Higgins Clark makes people remember that they love to read, and for that, she deserves to be called the Queen of Suspense, Grand Master, and more.

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Alafair Burke is the *New York Times* bestselling author of eleven novels, including *All Day And A Night*, the fifth entry in the Ellie Hatcher series. A former prosecutor and current professor of law, she lives in New York City with her husband and two dogs. Her most recent novel, *The Cinderella Murder*, was co-authored with Mary Higgins Clark.