

A World-Wide Phenomenon

By Dean James

Ayame Whitney was born in Yokohama, Japan, in 1903. Her father worked for an export company there, and the family remained in Japan until 1918, when her father died in China. At the age of 15, Phyllis Whitney traveled to America for the first time. She began writing stories as a teenager in the Orient but did not publish her first book until 1941, a juvenile called *A Place for Ann*. Two years later she published her first adult mystery, *Red is for Murder*. Between 1941 and 1997, she published seventy-six books: novels and mysteries for juvenile readers, mysteries and romantic suspense for adults, and three non-fiction books on writing. During her long career she taught writing courses, worked as a librarian, and served as children's book editor for newspapers. She published her final novel in 1997, at the age of ninety-four. She died of pneumonia in 2008, seven months and one day short of her 105th birthday.

In 1961 Whitney received her first of two Edgars for Best Juvenile mystery for *Mystery of the Haunted Pool*. She won again in 1964 for *Mystery of the Hidden Hand*. Three other juvenile mysteries were nominated in addition. She served as President of MWA, and in 1988 was named Grand Master. In 1989 Malice Domestic honored her with a Lifetime Achievement Award, and in 1995 she received a similar accolade from the Society of Midland Authors.

In the mid-1960s Whitney became an international bestseller for her tales of suspense and romance, often set in exotic places, like Hawaii, the Caribbean, Greece, and Scandinavia. She traveled to these locations with her husband to do research, and her feel for place comes through



strongly in her work. She was frequently compared to Mary Stewart and Victoria Holt, also international bestsellers of romantic suspense. Whitney's adult novels often featured heroines with daunting personal problems to resolve, and these problems were timely as well. For example, the heroine of *Emerald* (1983) is desperately trying to protect herself and her child from a violently abusive husband. Whitney did not shy away from tough subjects.

I finally had the chance to meet her, for I was there at the Edgars the night she received her Grand Master Award. I found her table and rather shyly presented one of her books and asked her to sign it. She was delighted, this amazing woman who had sold millions of books around the world, to meet a fan, and it's a moment I've never forgotten.



Dean James, twice nominated for an Edgar, and winner of the Agatha and Macavity Awards, is a medical librarian by day. As Miranda James, he is the *New York Times* bestselling author of two series, the "Cat in the Stacks" and the "Southern Ladies" mysteries. He currently lives in the Jackson, MS, area, and published more than twenty novels and several works of mystery non-fiction.