

# I Hart Of the Mystery



Photo provided

BY JUDITH WALL

With her two popular sleuths already lining the shelves of the nation's bookstores—and another fictional heroine on the way—Carolyn Hart is strengthening her reputation as the American Agatha Christie.

*continued*



**The scene is a book signing** at a quaint and cluttered mystery bookstore in Houston. A long line of people snakes its way through the store and continues out the front door and onto the sidewalk. All are waiting for their turn with mystery writer and OU alumna Carolyn Hart.

Seated in a wingchair behind a table stacked with copies of her latest book, Hart is a relaxed, pleasant-looking woman, her brown hair tinged with silver.

To pass the time, those waiting in line discuss their passion for Hart's books. Some have only recently discovered her mysteries. Others have been reading them for decades. Name a title, and they can describe the plot.

When their turn at the table arrives, fans often tell Hart which of her two series is their favorite. More often they say they have loved all of her books and can hardly wait to read the new one. Some fans have brought along grocery sacks filled with their collections of Carolyn Hart books, and with a gracious smile Hart signs each one.

This particular signing is at Houston's Murder by the Book, but the scene has been repeated numerous times at that bookstore and at others all over the country. With two highly successful series and 2.7 million books in print, a Carolyn Hart signing is an event wherever she goes. Few contemporary mystery authors have received as many honors and as much acclaim as this native Oklahoman.

"Carolyn is at the top of her form as a mystery writer, and her place in the literary firmament is solidly established," says Hart's literary agent, Deborah Schneider. "Many consider her the American Agatha Christie, and she has enjoyed a long and successful career writing—with a gentle wit and a gimlet eye—her clever whodunits."

"In the specialized world of the mystery novel, Carolyn Hart is definitely one of today's top 10 authors, and when it comes to traditional mystery, she is Number One," says longtime friend, OU classmate and fellow mystery writer, Eve Sandstrom, '58 BA journalism, a.k.a. JoAnna Carl.

Carolyn Gimpel Hart was born and raised in Oklahoma City where she attended Cleveland Elementary School, Taft Junior High School and Classen High School.

"It never occurred to me when I was growing up that I would write fiction," Hart recalls during an interview in her north Oklahoma City home. "When I was 11, I decided I was going to be a newspaper reporter."

She explains that she grew up at a time when it was apparent

even to a child that one's link to the outside world was the newspaper. "And the bigger and blacker the headlines, the more important the story. I was completely convinced that being a reporter would be the most exciting and worthwhile life imaginable and was sure I was going to be the next Maggie Higgins."

True to her goal, she worked on school newspapers from grade school through her college years at the University of Oklahoma. While working as a reporter on *The Oklahoma Daily*, she would wear a trench coat and smoke Chesterfields to look the part. She does not remember what happened to the trench coat, but she gave up the cigarettes decades ago.

While on an OU-sponsored trip to Europe during her junior year, she met her future husband, Phil Hart. After completing her journalism degree and graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1958, Carolyn and Phil married, and she went to work at *The Norman Transcript* while he attended law school. When he completed his legal education, the couple moved to Washington, D.C., where their son, Philip, was born. Phil saw military service during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and their daughter, Sarah, was born at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.

Carolyn gave up her childhood dream of following in Maggie Higgins' footsteps and dedicated herself to childrearing and housekeeping. "Back then most mothers stayed home with the children," the now-grandmother of two recalls. "I really didn't want to go back to work, but I desperately missed writing."

When *The Writer* magazine announced a contest for a mystery novel that would appeal to adolescent girls, she decided to give it a try. After all, she loved mysteries and had grown up reading all those Nancy Drew books and was a great fan of several British mystery writers, especially Agatha Christie and Patricia Wentworth.

"I wrote that first book and won the contest the year my daughter, Sarah, was born," Hart recalls, "which means that I've been writing fiction for 42 years." But she hastens to explain that the first decade or so of that 42-year career was a struggle.

The family moved to Oklahoma City in 1965, and spurred on by winning the contest, Hart wrote another teenage mystery and three young adult mysteries. Then she switched to adult mysteries. "But nothing good happened," she says. "Those books all disappeared into publishing's big black hole. No one ever heard of them. No one could find them in book stores. I changed publishers but still nothing happened."

"I didn't know back in the late 1970s that New York publishing believed there were only two kinds of mysteries – the hard-boiled private eye book written by American men and the traditional mystery written by dead English ladies," Hart recalls. "Most publishers weren't interested in mystery novels written by American women."

She had seven books that she had been unable to sell until an



Robert Taylor

Award-winning author Carolyn Hart, shown here in the Oklahoma City home she shares with her attorney husband, Phil, and two very spoiled cats, makes notes on the galleys for the latest in her *Death on Demand* series. The skull-adorned teapot fronting a stack of her books is one of three she has received symbolizing the Agatha Award for the Best Mystery Novel of the Year.

English publisher bought them for a paltry \$300 a book. “I was ready to give up on writing altogether and dedicate myself to improving my tennis game,” Hart admits. “But I decided to try one last time, and this time I was going to write the kind of book I would love to read. That was when I created Annie Laurance and Max Darling.

“And since no one was going to buy the book anyway,” she adds, “I decided to have a little fun with it and set it in a mystery book store named *Death on Demand*, which gave me license to allow my characters to talk about mysteries.

“Then something wonderful happened,” Hart says with a big smile.

The “something wonderful” requires a little background. Hart explains that in 1978 author Marcia Muller published the first American mystery novel featuring a female private eye. Muller’s success was followed closely by Sarah Paretsky and Sue Grafton, both of whom also wrote hard-boiled detective stories featuring a female detective.

“The response from American women was huge,” Hart says, adding that the success of these three authors made publishers decide that American readers also were ready for traditional mysteries written by American women.

“And by golly,” Hart says, “*Death on Demand* was the second book bought by Bantam for its brand new paperback original

line for traditional mysteries that had *not* been written by dead—or living—English ladies but by *American* women.

“That book made all the difference in world for me,” she says.

*Death on Demand* was published in 1987. *Dead Days of Summer*, the 17th book in what is known as the *Death on Demand* series, was recently released.

Making *Death on Demand*’s Annie Laurance—who later married Max and became Annie Darling—the proprietor of a mystery book store is considered a stroke of genius throughout the mystery world. It allows Hart to name drop. And avid mystery fans absolutely love the sense of insiderism they experience when mysteries they know and love are being discussed by the store’s customers—or recommended by the store’s faithful clerk, Ingrid—or for Annie, as she tracks down the murderer, to be reminded of the plot from this or that mystery and even ponder what that book’s sleuth might have done in similar circumstances.

Hart’s fellow mystery authors are understandably pleased when one of their books—along with their name, of course—is mentioned in a *Death on Demand* book. Often one of these authors will reciprocate by placing a Carolyn Hart mystery on their protagonist’s bedside table or having their protagonist select one of Hart’s books to read on an airplane.

In keeping with the insider theme, the *Death on Demand*



bookstore always has a contest under way in which the store customers are given a list of clues from a well-known mystery and challenged to come up with the book's title.

In between solving murders with Annie and Max in the *Death on Demand* books, Hart began a second series featuring retired newspaper reporter Henrietta O'Dwyer Collins, known to all as "Henrie O." The Henrie O series evolved from a short story Hart wrote for an anthology. When her then-editor read the story, she encouraged Hart to launch a second series using the Henrie O character.

The Henrie O books have been extremely popular among readers of all ages but most especially among women of a certain age who admire Henrie O's grit and tenacity and sensible shoes. Although Hart admits that friends and family see more than a bit of her in the Henrie O character, she insists that Henrie O is taller, thinner, smarter and braver but admits that their "attitudes are very much the same."

Similarly, *Death on Demand's* Annie is patterned after Hart's daughter, Sarah. "Except Sarah doesn't have a temper," Hart adds. "I had to give Annie a temper because it's very useful in moving the story along. Otherwise, she is bubbly and fun and hard-working like Sarah."

Book signings are the stock in trade for successful authors, and Carolyn Hart is no exception. At right she meets fans in Boise, Idaho, where she received the Ridley Pearson Award for Significant Contribution to the Mystery.

"Writing has long provided a framework and gives meaning to my day-to-day life. Quite frankly, I love to work."

Sarah and her husband, Bruce Winchester, live in Tulsa and have two children. Carolyn and Phil's son, Philip, an OU law graduate, died in 1998.

Her husband and children always have been supportive of her writing career, Hart says. She remembers that after the sale of *Death on Demand*, Phil admitted how heartbreaking it had been for him during all those years when Carolyn was having little or no success with her writing career. When the book was published, he had the cover framed, a practice he has continued with the books that followed.

Often there are light moments and even humor in Hart's books. "Murder is never funny, but people often are," she points out. She allows her characters to be happy, sad, sentimental, loving, irritating and, of course, scared out of their wits.



Used by permission, Lony Abu-Husain © 2005



Hart's fans will be happy—or perhaps “thrilled” might be a better word—to know that she is launching a new series in 2008. “It’s quite different,” she says. “An experiment really. I have no idea how it will work out, but I loved writing it.” Then she pauses before adding, “The protagonist is a ghost.”

Yes, a ghost.

The name of the book is *Ghost at Work*. The ghost’s name is Bailey Ruth Raeburn, who resided until her death in the small fictional Oklahoma town of Adelaide, which just might be patterned after Ada, Oklahoma, where Phil Hart grew up.

“Bailey Ruth loves heaven,” Hart explains, “but she feels the need to return to earth when someone is in trouble, and events escalate from there.”

“The ghost series is, in my opinion, the best of Carolyn’s writing,” says Carrie Feron, Hart’s editor at HarperCollins. “It exhibits her great characterization skills combined with a really innovative setting.”

Feron adds, “It’s been an honor to work with such a respected author. Carolyn is a joy.”

*Ghost at Work* will not be the first book Hart has set in Oklahoma. Her non-series, stand-alone book, *Letter from Home*, published in 2003, also was set in a fictional Oklahoma community. The book drew rave reviews and was named a Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year, won the mystery world’s prestigious Agatha Award, and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize by the Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers.

Many might think a famous author like Carolyn Hart lives a glamorous life, but other than trips to promote her books and attend professional meetings, most of Hart’s working life has been spent in a small, free-standing office in her backyard that has changed little in the 36 years she and Phil have lived at that address. One thing is different, however. Where once a typewriter and carbon paper resided, there are now computers—she has two, one for writing and the other for communicating. Her Web site, [www.CarolynHart.com](http://www.CarolynHart.com), allows her to connect with fans all over the world, and she spends a part of most days answering e-mail.

Hart’s books have been published in 10 languages. Her short fiction has been published in more than 20 anthologies. The number of books she has published to date is an astounding 38.

As for honors, few authors have received more than Oklahoma’s own Carolyn Hart, who has reached iconic stature in the mystery world as the following awards and accomplishments illustrate:

- ☛ Nine nominations for the coveted Agatha Award for Best Mystery Novel and winning the award three times.
- ☛ Two Anthony Awards for Best Paperback Original.
- ☛ Two Macavitys for Best Paperback Original.

☛ Ridley Pearson Award for significant contribution to the mystery field.

☛ Guest of Honor at the Malice Domestic annual conference in 1997 and recipient of its Lifetime Achievement Award to be presented in 2007.

☛ 2001 recipient of the Oklahoma Center for the Book award for fiction.

☛ 2004 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Center for the Book.

☛ Distinguished Alumnus of the Gaylord College of Journalism.

☛ One of 10 mystery authors invited to speak at the 2003 Library of Congress National Book Festival on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

While honors are gratifying, it is readers who make a writer’s career, and countless readers have flocked to Hart’s books for three decades. They love her delightful characters, her wit, her plots that never fail to intrigue and her oh-so-satisfying endings. Carolyn Hart is a master of her craft.

Hart is also good friend to her fellow writers. She is a founding member and past president of the Sisters in Crime, an organization founded to promote women mystery writers. She has a well-earned reputation for supporting her fellow writers male and female.

“She’s befriended dozens of writers,” points out Sandstrom, also a past president of Sisters in Crime, “helping us with career advice, critiques of our work and plain old sympathetic listening. She’s an important figure in mystery-suspense, not only for her skill, but for her kindness.”

“On every level—as a writer; as an artist; as a generous, committed, and contributing member of the mystery-writing community; and as a woman of deep humanity and loveliness, she is one of the best people I know,” literary agent Schneider says.

With a Lifetime Achievement Award to Carolyn Hart’s credit and a second one to be presented next spring, some people might wonder if this pioneering mystery writer is considering retirement any time soon. Fortunately for her many fans, she has no such intention. “Writing has long provided a framework and gives meaning to my day-to-day life,” she says. “Quite frankly, I love to work.

“And when my last book has been written, I hope ‘the Master of All Good Workman shall put me to work anew,’” she adds, borrowing from a line from Kipling.

Perhaps Bailey Ruth Raeburn will lend her a helping hand. 🍷

*Judith Wall, '59 bs and '77 ma in journalism, is a successful novelist, living in Norman, Oklahoma. Now in bookstores is The Surrogate, her May 2006 Simon and Schuster release; Family Secrets is due out in June.*