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Going Back Over Well-Trod Territory

By Kevin Allman, a novelist and frequent reviewer of mysteries Thursday, December 13, 2007; C13

T IS FOR TRESPASS

By Sue Grafton

Marian Wood/Putnam. 387 pp. \$26.95

In 1982, when Sue Grafton published her first Kinsey Millhone mystery, "A Is for Alibi," Millhone was a 32-year-old private investigator, a woman in a field still dominated by men. The same was true of Grafton, who, along with Marcia Muller and Sara Paretsky, moved the female-PI genre from niche market to mainstream acceptance in the 1980s.

In the 25 years since "Alibi," Grafton has chosen to keep her sleuth in her mid-30s, aging her a few months between books. Now each new alphabet mystery (there are 20 so far) occurs in what is becoming the distant past. "T Is for Trespass" takes place during Christmas 1987, a time just recent enough to feel like a vaguely alternate universe: a recognizably contemporary America, but one without Google searches, e-mail and omnipresent cellphones. The particulars of "T Is for Trespass" are current ones -- child sexual abuse, the failure of the elder-care system, and identity theft -- but the motivations for murder and Kinsey's shoe-leather deductive methods are timeless.

Throughout the series, Grafton returns again and again to three types of characters. The first is the moneyed set of fictional Santa Teresa, <u>Calif.</u> (her stand-in for <u>Santa Barbara</u>). The second is wayward young women in all their guises; Kinsey Millhone and her creator are fascinated by women who break rules large and small. Most significant of all, though, are the elderly, people in plain sight whose lives are often overlooked, and it's no coincidence that Kinsey's most constant relationship in all the books is her platonic one with her octogenarian landlord, Henry Pitts. In "Trespass," Henry's unpleasant next-door neighbor, Gus Vronsky, serves as the catalyst for Kinsey's latest adventure.

After a fall in his home, Gus is no longer able to care for himself, so his niece Melanie Oberlin arrives from New York and stays long enough to hire Solana Rojas, a 60-ish home-care provider. Melanie also engages Kinsey to do a perfunctory background check on Rojas, and flies home without waiting for the results. Everything checks out fine, and soon Kinsey is back to her usual work diet of skip traces and process servings. But what no one knows -- and what Grafton establishes in a series of chapters written from the caregiver's point of view -- is that the woman who calls herself Solana Rojas is an identity thief whose MO is isolating elderly patients from their families and then taking them for all they're worth. And Gus's beach-adjacent cottage, purchased on the cheap during World War II, is a tempting tear-down in the condo-heavy 1987 real estate market.

Soon "Rojas" is living in the old man's house, medicating him heavily and controlling his access to

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visitors, which alarms Kinsey, who decides to investigate further. This puts her at odds with Melanie, who clearly doesn't want to know any more about the seemingly capable nurse, and just as Kinsey tumbles to Rojas's motives, the sociopath tumbles to the detective's.

As in her previous adventures, most of the people Kinsey encounters and investigates are everyday folks: bank tellers, apartment managers and hospital aides. Kinsey's beat is the banality of criminality, and Grafton's gift is making the minutiae of detective work and everyday life into something both sociological and suspenseful -- which makes the bizarre, contrived double ending of "Trespass" doubly disappointing, involving as it does a Hitchcockian fall from a balcony and an arm separated from its body by a speeding car (don't ask). Stronger is the subplot involving an itinerant child molester, whom Grafton draws as Solana Rojas's flip side: a man who preys on society's most vulnerable at the other end of life's spectrum.

At her current rate of writing, Grafton will finally reach the end of the alphabet in 2019, but Kinsey will never see the Clinton administration; unlike her most obvious precursor, John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee, who aged subtly but definitely in his 20 years of adventures, Kinsey has barely evolved in her 25 years on the scene. What has changed in the past two decades is the number of female PIs on bookshelves, from hard-boiled women to cutesy shoe-shopping gumshoes. Few of them can match up to durable Kinsey Millhone, eternally on stakeout in the front seat of her latest beater, with a thermos of bad coffee, a revolver and her ubiquitous Quarter Pounder With Cheese all riding shotgun.

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