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Identity thief targets elderly neighbor

BY KEVIN ALLMAN
T IS FOR TRESPASS.

Sue Grafton. Marian Wood/Putnam. 387 pages. \$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. In the 25 years since, Grafton has kept her sleuth in her mid-30s, aging her a few months between books. Now each new alphabet mystery 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 cellphones. The particulars of *T Is for Trespass* are current -- child abuse, the failure of the elder-care system, identity theft -- but the motivations for murder and Kinsey's shoe-leather deductive methods are timeless.

Grafton returns again and again to three types of characters. The first is the moneyed set of fictional Santa Teresa, Calif. (her stand-in for Santa Barbara). The others are wayward young women in all their guises and, most significant of all, 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 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 hires Solana Rojas, a 60-ish home-care provider, and engages Kinsey to do a perfunctory background check on Rojas. 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. Kinsey's beat is the banality of criminality, and Grafton's gift is making the minutiae of detective work and everyday life into something sociological and suspenseful, which makes the bizarre, contrived double ending of *Trespass* doubly disappointing. Stronger is the subplot involving an itinerant child molester, whom Grafton draws as Rojas' flip side: a man who preys on society's most vulnerable at the other end of life's spectrum.

Grafton will finally reach the end of the alphabet in 2019. 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 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.

Kevin Allman reviewed this book for The Washington Post.

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