

MARGARET MARON'S DEBORAH KNOTT
Why Critics and Readers Love Her

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Margaret Maron's Deborah Knott: Why Critics and Readers Love Her

So far, Margaret Maron has written a dozen mysteries featuring Judge Deborah Knott. In 1993, *Bootlegger's Daughter*, the first in the series, won the Edgar Allan Poe Award, Anthony Award for best mystery novel, Agatha Award for best novel, and Macavity for best novel—the first time one book has won all four awards. Other titles in the series won Agatha Awards in 1996 and 2000.

Publisher's Weekly has given seven of the twelve books starred reviews, which are reserved for exceptionally noteworthy works. *PW* says, "Maron is one of the most seamless Southern authors since Margaret Mitchell." (15 July 2002). A year earlier, a *PW* reviewer wrote, "Maron's mastery of jurisprudence [. . .] [and] sensitive portrayal of human relationships raise this novel far above the ordinary run of mysteries" (4 Sep. 2001).

The series has received almost unanimous praise from newspaper reviewers. *The New York Times* crime reviewer Marilyn Stasio says, "Knott [. . .] presides over this series with loving eye and stinging wit. It's amazing what Maron manages to pack into the whodunit format" (27 Dec.1998).

In *Independent Weekly* (Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, NC,), Kate Dobbs Ariall says, "Margaret Maron has written another compelling morality tale. It is leavened with finely tuned language and interspersed with comic interludes" (16 May 2001). *The*

Boston Globe says “the pull of the land and the power of a specifically Southern sense of family are among Maron's strongest attractions” (John Koch, 19, May 2001).

Maron's books have been translated into seven languages and are on the reading lists of college courses in contemporary Southern literature.

So why is this series so popular with while other regional series have failed to gain a national audience, not to mention acclaim?

One reason has to be that Deborah Knott is just so darn likeable—and so utterly believable. (After reading all of the series, I feel like I know Deborah better than most of my friends.) She is a complex and fascinating character with one foot in the traditional South and the other in 21st century feminism. “I know how to make biscuits and nobody’s ever choked on them,” she says. But, when she visits her old law firm, she says proudly, “the only people I ever fixed coffee for were my own clients” (*Rituals of the Season*, 95).

Deborah resides in fictitious Colleton County, NC, only a stone’s throw southeast of Raleigh, the state capital. Her hometown Dobbs and the surrounding rural area look like Johnson County, NC, where Margaret Moran grew up, which just happens to be a stone’s throw southeast of Raleigh. For many years, Maron lived in New York City and set her first mystery series featuring Lt. Harald of the NYPD there. When Maron moved to her grandparents’ farm, she decided to write about the south, especially its people, their relationships and changes in the rural way of life.

As Maureen Reddy has noted, many female sleuths—Cordelia Gray (P.D. James), Sharon McCone (Marcia Muller), Kinsey Milhone (Sue Grafton), Anna Lee (Liza Cody) and VI Washawski (Sara Paretsky)—even Maron’s Lt. Harald—are loners, cut off from

their families of origin (*Sisters in Crime*, 104). Deborah, however, has such a large extended family that Maron has yielded to reader requests to include a family tree in her novels.

Deborah's father, Kezzie Knott, married twice and sired twelve children—eleven sons and Deborah, the youngest. Within a year after his first wife died leaving eight young sons, he married Sue Stephenson, Deborah's mother. Nobody could figure out why a middle-class town girl with plenty of possibilities wanted to throw her life away on a dirt farmer, but Kezzie is such a heroic character—the wise, stoic and adoring patriarch—that it's easy for the reader to believe any woman would fall for him, no matter how many children needed raisin'.

One of Kezzie's most enduring moments occurs at the end of *Southern Discomfort* when Deborah, “too wired to sleep,” takes a moonlight “ramble” with him and his hunting dogs. She recalls a night like this when she was child, the night they heard the corn growing. “That was a purty sound, won't it?” Kezzie says when she reminds him (196).

All but four of Deborah's eleven older brothers still live in or around Colleton County, so she can't go far without bumping into nosy sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews. Plus, she has a slew of aunts, uncles and first and second cousins, some once or twice removed. “There are plenty of us that didn't roll far from the tree,” Deborah says (*Up Jumps the Devil*, 60). Far from the lonely hero, she is often sharing Sunday dinner at the home place with a passel of kinfolks. At the family Pig Pickin's, popular on the 4th of July, a hundred or so family members and friends may show up. So many that one pig,

sliced open and plopped on the grill whole, isn't enough. It takes two oversized cookers, two sows, and the world's biggest supply of hushpuppies to feed the Knott clan.

Maron uses Deborah's family deftly, not only to explore kin relationships but also to complicate the murder plot. In several books, one of Deborah's relatives is a red herring. In *Home Fires*, nephew AK may be involved in burning black churches. In *Southern Discomfort*, her brother Herman may have committed murder in response to an attempted rape of his daughter. And, in *Storm Track*, Reid, Deborah's cousin and former law partner, could have killed a lover. But, of course, the Knott s are never guilty.

In fact, the only criminal in the Knott family is old man Kezzie, who was once a bootlegger with a territory that stretched from Canada to Florida. But, it wasn't really Kezzie's fault that he had to break the law—or so Deborah believes. “My grandfather had been a poor farmer with a houseful of children and when corn dried up in a drought year or boll weevils got all the cotton, he'd run a little white whiskey for enough cash money to put shoes on their feet and clothes on their backs and maybe pay taxes on this forty-three-acres of land” (*Up Jumps the Devil*, 87). When the grandfather was run off the road by revenuers and killed in the crash, young Kezzie, the oldest of his sons, had a no choice but to support the family any way he could.

Deborah believes (hopes) her mother turned Kezzie into a law-abidin' country storeowner. In *Storm Track*, she says “Daddy was once one of the biggest bootleggers on the East Coast and he'd financed a string of illegal moonshine stills over this part of the country before Mother reformed him” (85). But by the end of this book, the reader finds out Kezzie's still financing stills and paying an attorney to defend his people who get caught. When Deborah asks him why, he explains:

Your mama never understood why I couldn't leave it alone. She thought it was the whiskey itself, but it won't [.]. No, it won't the whiskey. And after awhile, it won't even the money [. . .]. I guess you might say it was excitement. Running the risk. Knowing what I could lose if I got caught. That's something your mama never rightly understood. (253)

Deborah's narrative voice is perfectly pitched and diverse. On one page, she's the honey-tongued Southern girl with impeccable manners and on the next the stern judge who's not afraid to deal out harsh punishment where it's due. Through it all, Deborah maintains a good-natured amusement at human foibles. In her head, there's a feisty debate between a preacher and pragmatist, which keeps her from taking herself too seriously. When she contemplates running for judge, she thinks:

If I won, I'd be entrusted with the full power of the State of North Carolina to dissolve marriages, set child support payments, send malefactors to prison and—

Right, said the cynical pragmatist who sits jeering at the back of my brain when the preacher in the forefront starts acting too pious. We're not talking Supreme Court here, you know. More like Judge Wapner. (*Bootlegger's Daughter*, 73)

When Deborah has to tell a teenager girl to get an AIDS test, her preacher rubs her nose in it, "*Why don't you just go on home and pull wings off flies for a while?*" he says (*Southern Discomforts*, 209).

Deborah often bemoans the absence of a life partner and feels odd-woman-out in “a society that still gets a bit uneasy when a halfway attractive woman doesn’t marry and settle into monogamy by the time she’s twenty-five: thirty if she was ever divorced” (*Bootlegger’s Daughter*, 69).

She has, in fact, been married, but not many people know that—and she hopes the ones who do have forgotten that she eloped with a scoundrel. In *Up Jumps The Devil* (her ex-husband is the devil), she explains:

My only excuse was that Mother had just died. I was eighteen and a freshman at UNC-G, away from home for the first time. I was mad at God, mad at Daddy, not talking to at least eight of my brothers, even madder at my mother for dying [. . .]. Running off to a Martinsville magistrate with Allen [Stancil} seemed like a way of getting some of my own back. Of course, we hadn’t been married twenty minutes when I knew it was a mistake, but by then I was so high on pot and tequila, I didn’t really give a damn. (42)

Knott’s father paid to have the marriage annulled, only, when Stancil returns to town, Deborah finds out their union wasn’t legal because he was married to someone else.

Through choosing the right man isn’t her long suit, Deborah keeps on trying: She says:

I’m independent enough to know that no man is better than the wrong man [. . .] but dammit, I like men. I like kissing and touching and waking up with at stubbly face on the pillow next to mine [. . .]. I want someone who’ll share my

life and let me share his, someone who'll be through PMS and bad hair days and who'll get me a chance to do the same for him. (*Slow Dollar*, 29)

In the third book in the series, she meets Kidd Chapin, a game warden, when he hides outside her cottage trying to catch a neighbor shooting loons, a protected species. Two nights later, Kidd is in her bed and, before you know it, Deborah has marriage on her mind. But, as Deborah's luck goes, there's a problem—Kidd's teenage daughter. When he doesn't show up for Labor Day weekend as promised, Deborah says, “[. . .] let Amber crook her little finger and he drops everything—including me—to run see what she wants” (*Storm Track*, 27).

Five books later, Deborah surprises Kidd by arriving early for a weekend tryst. At midnight, she tiptoes through his dark house, strips off her clothes and climbs into his bed. When she reaches for him, her hand lands on a woman's breast.

The jerk has forgotten to mention he and his ex-wife have gotten back together--for Amber's sake, of course. Deborah grabs her CDs, screams for Kidd to UPS the rest of her stuff and runs. She says:

I still felt a hot flush of mortification every time I thought about crawling into that bed, snuggling up to his wife. That I could have been so stupid. Left myself open to such humiliation. Allowed a game warden to trifle with my emotions just because he was good in bed. When was I going to quit letting my hormones rule my head? (*Uncommon Clay*, 6)

Poor Deborah! To make matters worse, in the same book she's disappointed again by Will Blackstone, a handsome judge she meets at a Bar Association event. Their

first kiss is very good. “*Nine-point-six, said her* slightly breathless pragmatist, holding up a scorecard. *Here we go again, sighed her preacher*” (271).

When Blackstone disappears into the next room and returns naked with his condom -clad penis poking through the front of his judge’s robe, this exchange ensues:

“I love playing judge,” he murmured, nibbling on my ear.

“Really?” I [Deborah} purred. I let him nibble for another moment, then said, “You know something? My robe’s in my car. Why don’t I go get it?”

“Oh, God! Would you?” He was holding me so tightly, I could feel his need become even more urgent. “Judge to judge would be such an incredible turn-on.”

I reached for my purse, where my car keys were, and slipped out of his arms. “Why don’t you pour me a gin and tonic while you’re waiting?”

He gave a happy smile and headed for the wet bar.

I went out, got in my car, and headed back to Seagrove. (273)

Eventually, in the eleventh book, Deborah does find her man. Deputy Sheriff Dwight Bryant has been there all along, growing up with her brothers, which is how she’s always thought of him. Both single, they’ve often passed evenings together watching old movies. But there’s never been any romance, not until Dwight suggests a marriage of convenience. He asks:

“Did you mean it when you said you were tired of channel surfing?”

“Oh, God, yes . . . I’m always clicking on the wrong guys. And now Minnie’s after me about my image. She thinks Paul Archdale may be planning to

run against me next time and that I'm vulnerable to a whispering campaign [. . .]. She keeps saying I need to just pick somebody respectable and settle down."

"How about me?" said Dwight.

"Oh, I don't think Minnie worries about your reputation. Men still get cut more slack these days. Even sheriff's deputies."

"No, I mean how about you and me get married?" (*Slow Dollar*, 147)

Dwight slips his mother's engagement ring on her finger. They start sleeping together (Your place or mine?) and discover passion. But Deborah, who's charmingly naïve about men, doesn't figure out she's actually in love with him until the next book and then it's earth shattering. With convoluted logic, she decides it would be deceitful to marry Dwight for convenience when she's really in love. But, of course, Dwight confesses that he is in love too—has been since they were kids. Once she figures it out, Deborah's love is old-fashioned, true-blue—and endearing:

Our eyes met and my heart turned a somersault. I still wasn't used to it. How could a man I've known forever, a man I'd taken as much for granted as air and water, suddenly turn into someone whose smile could make my knees go weak. His smile was as familiar as my own face in the mirror, so why should it now flush me with hot desire? (*Rituals of the Season*, 87)

Dwight and Deborah are united in a Christmas wedding with a bevy of sisters-in-laws worrying about a bridal dress they've never seen (She's not a virgin; surely she won't wear white) and a reception held in a potato house because the country club burned down.

In the next book, *Winter's Child*, Dwight's ex-wife is murdered so Deborah acquires a full-time eight-year-old stepson, even though earlier she said, "I'm probably not cut out to be anybody's step mom" (*Storm Track*, 345). Presumably, in future books, she'll develop a relationship with Cal—or maybe not. Maron's relationships often take unexpected twists.

Deborah begins the series as an attorney in private practice with two cousins. Appalled by a smug white judge, who dispenses justice more severely to blacks than whites, she decides to put her name on the ballot for district judge. Her father is not a supporter. Deborah says:

He wasn't real thrilled when I went to law school and he's sat on his hands ever since I announced for judge. Being the only girl, I was supposed to wear frilly dressed and patent leather Mary Janes till I grew up and married somebody who'd worship at the foot of my pedestal the rest of my natural life. (*Bootlegger's Daughter*, 22)

But the rest of the clan gets behind her and sister-in-law Minnie, who's been active in the Democratic Party for years, manages her campaign.

Deborah defeats two white males only to lose in the run-off to a moderate black man. Soon after, though, Kezzie wrangles her an appointment from a Republican governor to finish the term of a deceased judge. The deal is that Kezzie and Deborah keep quiet about the judge's son's greenhouse full of marijuana until he's had time to destroy the evidence. Getting on the bench takes an illegal act, which creates a moral dilemma for Judge Knott. She's always reminding herself that as "an officer of the

court” she’s duty-bound to report any crime, but, of course, allegiance to her father is stronger than to the law, so she accepts the appointment and keeps her mouth shut. At heart, her pragmatist is stronger than her preacher.

In the courtroom, Deborah struggles to judge fairly. When she has to decide between a father and mother in a child custody case where there doesn’t seem to be much difference, she says in frustration, “I’m not Solomon, full of God-inspired wisdom. I’m just [. . .] paid by the State of North Carolina to make Solomonic decisions. Some days I earn my pay; others—like today—I’m not so sure” (*Killer Market*, 2).

Deborah compares her job to shoveling smoke:

That’s exactly what it seems like sometimes—the same petty offenses over and over [. . .]. Your Honor, I was just going with the flow; my speedometer was off; somebody was tailgating me and I had to keep out of their way; that stop sign I run was hid behind some bushes/too far off the shoulder/ won’t there the last time I come through that crossing: if that lady didn’t slam on her brakes, I wouldn’t have rear-ended her: the only reason the officer stopped me is because I’m black/a teenager/ a senior citizen/driving a red sports car. (*Up Jumps The Devil*, 52)

But, as Maron says, the scenes where Deborah sits in judgment are not the focus of the books—and do nothing to advance the mystery plot. “I use her courtroom sessions either to reveal more about her character and/or mindset or to counterpoint the main plot. Sometimes they’re just there for comic relief since so many funny things do come before a district court judge” (Kahn & White, 497).

Later, when Deborah has to stand for election, she has no opposition--"one of the few with a D after her name to ride in unopposed" (*Up Jumps The Devil*, 128). But after losing her first time out, she's insecure about her political future. In *Storm Track* she says, "Election day was still two months away [. . .]. Nevertheless I continued to hit as many churches as I could every Sunday I was free"(65). When a photographer for the local newspaper wants a shot of a softball team on which she's a substitute player, Deborah hurries to line up. "I never push, but I do make sure I'm always on the front row. Every bit of public notice, no matter how tiny, has to help subliminally at the polling booth" (*Storm Track*, 122).

Deborah's campaigning provides ample opportunity for Maron to take readers out among gatherings of locals--to barbecues, church picnics and club meetings, all of which show that she's been there before—not for a "research" visit or two, but often enough that she understands the nuances of small town southern society.

Maron gets the details of Deborah's swearing in ceremony exactly right. Readers who've lived in a small Southern town will recognize the people, the ceremony, even the "slushy sweet" lime punch served by the Martha Circle of the First Methodist Church. Deborah describes it this way:

We clapped for two preachers, the head of the Democratic Women, the head of the Democratic Men, the leader of the county's Black Caucus, the president of the local Jaycees, a fire chief, the dean of our local community college, and somebody from the state auditor's office who had innocently

wandered over from Raleigh on other business and now had to wait till I was sworn in before courthouse routine would return to normal. (*Southern Discomfort*, 11)

Deborah is the star of the series, but, on a marquee, she'd have to share billing with a scene-stealing co-star—North Carolina. “Every Margaret Maron mystery is a celebration of something remarkable about her beloved state of North Carolina, from its colorful bootlegging history to its rampaging coastal storms,” says Marilyn Statsio in *The New York Times* (10 June 2001).

Maron sends Deborah to various counties to fill in for sick or vacationing judges and, through meticulous research, gives the reader an accurate rundown on local issues, people and politics. In *High Country Fall*, she visits the Blue Ridge Mountains at the height of leaf season when winding mountain roads are crowded with tourists viewing colors. This book is set in a fictitious town named Cedar Gap (which, as anybody who lives in the mountains can tell, is a lot like Spruce Pine). Maron takes the reader inside of Cedar Gap's struggles with the soaring price of real estate as Floridians buy million-dollar second homes in gated communities. The land has become so valuable that families who've lived in the mountains for generations are being forced out.

Cedar Gap has banned all chain stores--no Wal-Mart, Kmart, movie theater, Office Max or Home Depot (21). Deborah decides, “Cedar Gap has come down with what some of us down east call the Cary [NC] syndrome”(23). In the center of the NC Research Triangle, Cary is a predominantly white community with an average annual income of almost \$100,000 and a highly-educated citizenry—a Yuppie town that

frequently turns up in *Money Magazine*'s "Best Places to Live in America." Deborah, however, isn't an admirer:

Cary used to be a charming, if somewhat scruffy little village a few miles west of Raleigh. Then high-end developers moved in, the town was 'revitalized,' and gradually the town board filled up with such fierce zoning zealots that houses and storefronts are now forced to conform to a limited range of bland colors and architectural styles, signs are discreet and almost invisible, and every laws is groomed and manicured into such prettiness that all individuality has been tidied away—the Stepford wife of North Carolina towns.

Like Cary, Cedar Gap looked to be well on its way to becoming picture perfect, too. [. . .]Huge old sycamore and oak trees almost met overhead and Main street consisted of boutiques, upscale souvenir shops, real estate agencies and restored Victorian houses had had been turned into B & B's or pricey restaurants that catered to the tourist trade. (23)

In *Killer Market*, Deborah visits the Piedmont area, which used to be the center of American furniture industry until much of it moved offshore and to Mexico. High Point, though, still hosts the international furniture market every spring and fall. Deborah is stunned by the clogged traffic and dismayed there's not a motel room to be had within a 50-mile radius because 70,000 buyers and sellers have descended on the little town. With a phony ID, she attends several of the parties and takes readers on a tour of the sprawling market center and photography studios.

Uncommon Clay takes her to central North Carolina's Seagrove area, one of the largest communities of potters with the longest continual history of pottery making in the

U.S. Readers get the lay of the land as Deborah travels the back roads, visiting some of the 100 studios to shop for Christmas gifts. The murder plot revolves around one extended pottery family and, as Marilyn Stasio says, “shows how deeply these homespun crafts are rooted in the collective artistry of individual families -- and what a devastating loss it is when these families die out” (*The New York Times*, 10 June 2001).

In *Shooting the Loons*, Deborah stays in a cousin’s seaside cottage while she conducts court “Down East” on Hackers Island along North Carolina’s Crystal Coast. According to Marilyn Stasio, “Ms. Maron writes in a quietly ecstatic manner about the natural beauty of her sea-swept setting and the eccentricities of its insular residents, whom she calls ‘prickly as sea urchins and suspicious as hermit crabs’” (*The New York Times*, 3 July 1994).

The first local Deborah encounters is a disappearing breed—a native teenager who still speaks with the “High Tider” accent. She explains:

The most distinctive feature of “Down East” speech is that every long i sound is replaced by oi. In the accent of Guthrie’s seafaring ancestors, the words came out. “Oi he’p Carl ahl th’ toime.”

Some say that “hoi toider” (high tider) speech is a survival of pure Elizabethan: others say it’s a natural product of two hundred years’ isolation here near the southern end of the Outer Banks. Until a causeway and bridge were built in the forties, boats were all that connected Harkers Island to the mainland. (3)

Deborah describes herself as a “yellow dog Democrat.” When a reader asks what this means, Maron replies on her website: “A sorry old yellow dog is about the most worthless kind of dog imaginable, but a ‘yellow dog Democrat’ would go ahead and vote

for one before pulling a Republican lever. My grandfather was such a man”

(<http://www.margaretmaron.com/#letter>).

On her website, Maron also acknowledges that her upbringing was very much like Deborah’s. “[We] both grew up right here in ‘Colleton County,’ going to a rural school, chopping corn and cotton after school in the spring, working in tobacco all summer, attending a small country church.” Most likely, Deborah’s politics is Maron’s, which places both of them squarely in the liberal camp and at odds with the conservative right-wing majority that has ruled North Carolina for a hundred years.

Deborah (and Maron) clearly has no use for Republican Jesse Helms, NC’s ultra-conservative, five-term former Senator, as well as the state’s many NASCAR wannabes. In *Strom Track*, she says:

Polls showed Jesse Helms with his usual slim lead over Harvey Gantt in the senate race—what else was new? —and NASCAR champion Richard Petty was several points ahead of Elaine Marshall for Secretary of State, though that gap had closed a little since the last poll. Nothing to get our hopes up about though. (120)

Deborah is also critical of the “family values” Congressmen “who washed in on the ultra-conservative tidal wave last year.” She tells this story about one:

When his car passed another in a no-passing zone and caused an oncoming van to flip over, he wore to the patrolman that his wife was driving, even though five witnesses had him behind the wheel and two more said they saw him exchanging places with her immediately after the accident. The DA kindly offered to let him plead *nolo contendere* and he took the deal because, and I quote, “I

didn't want to spend the next six months proving that my wife was guilty," which, I suppose, says something about family values? (*Up Jumps the Devil*, 53-54)

Even though some Carolinians consider Maron a "state treasure," (Dobbs, *The Independent Weekly*, 16 May 2001) her accounts are not all polite and beautiful. She takes on the controversial social issues, including race and religion, without wincing. In fact, each of her books, as if there weren't already enough going on, takes up a cause.

Home Fires is an exhortation against the racism that continues to plague America and, in particular, the south. Deborah says bluntly:

Desegregation's been a real mixed bad down here. Took away some of the old sore spots, brought in a bunch of new ones. No more separate drinking fountains as when my brothers were little. No more separate entrances to movie theaters or separate seating at bus and train stations, no more "No Coloreds" signs on restaurant doors. We go to school together, we swim at the same public pools and beaches, we work side by side on assembly lines or in offices now as frequently as we have always worked side by side in the fields.

For the most part, the law is followed pretty strictly these days.

The letter of the law; any how.

But the spirit of the law? In the back rooms? Under the table on in one's cups? At private pools and clubs? Forget it. There's still plenty to keep us apart, plenty of cautious mistrust and wary stiffness on both sides.

My brother Ben is convinced that his tenants quit working the minute he turns his back, yet he can come dragging in from the fields, all tired and sweaty, and declare that he's been "working like a nigger," without seeing the irony of his

words. Till the day they die, he and Robert and Haywood will always notice a stranger's skin color first.

God knows life would be a lot simpler if we could all wake up one morning color-blind, but we're nowhere close to it on either side. (32-33)

Maron gives racism an expected twist with a black preacher's wife who is as prejudiced as any white Klansman and by denouncing skin tone comparisons among blacks. "Maidie (her father's black housekeeper) speaks of skin tones as casually as I talk about the color of someone's hair or eyes," she says (103).

When Deborah asks her, Maidie explains the brown paper bag test: "Take an ordinary paper bag from any grocery store [. . .]. Is your skin lighter or darker?" A racist rhyme goes with it: 'Light, bright—all right. /Honey brown-stick around/ Jet black—get back'" (161).

When she's in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Deborah notices that no one in her court is black. Nor are any of the people on the streets. She says:

The population is still mostly white, still mostly protestant, and the perception, deserved or not, is that bigotry is alive and well up in the hollows. The mountains have a history of harboring white supremacists and paramilitary separatists—look how bomber Eric Rudolph hid himself from FBI agents and bounty hunters alike for years down in Cherokee County. (*High Country Fall*, 52) [Eric Rudolph confessed to bombings at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, abortion clinics and a gay nightclub. Before his capture, he lived as a recluse in the NC mountains for several years.]

In *Bootlegger's Daughter*, Maron takes on homosexuality in a region, “where males are men and females are supposed to be their comfort and pleasure.” While her character, Michael Vickery, lived openly for many years with a male lover, he once murdered to protect his secret. Deborah blames conservative preachers. “God also knows (indeed His spokesmen still thunder that message from every evangelical pulpit) that this state’s never been all tolerant of open homosexuality” (105).

She also recognizes that many people, including several of her brothers, still don’t approve. She says:

Oprah, Phil and Dr. Ruth are on every television screen, so we even know that one doesn’t willfully chose to be a homosexual. That doesn’t mean that we don’t feel enormous sympathy for a neighbor if that neighbor’s child comes out of the closet, and it doesn’t mean there’s not a lifted eyebrow or salacious derision behind the same neighbor’s back.” (105)

In *Winter's Child*, the issue is a prickly one--ancestral snobbery. Dwight Bryant’s ex-wife Joanna and her friends are so wrapped up in social pretensions that they’d consider it a badge of honor to be shot in the head with an authentic Civil War-era revolver.

In *Southern Discomforts*, the cause is feminism as a group of women build a house for a homeless woman and her children. (Yeah, women can be expert carpenters, electricians and plumbers.) But some of these competent women are also victims of sexual abuse. One was molested by her father. In a third-person prologue, Maron recounts this incest. While nothing—absolutely nothing—is explicit or graphic, she manages to write a harrowing account:

Boxer Shorts.

That's how she always thinks of him.

The old-fashioned kind made of striped cotton. With snap fasteners.

Except that half the time they'll be unsnapped, with a little circle of damp where he's gotten up to use the bathroom and has been careless about the last drop or two before tucking his thing back inside the striped cotton. (3)

In *Killer Market*, Savannah is a brilliant stylist who suffers from bipolar disease. Since her father died, no one makes sure she takes her medications and realizes when they're out-of-balance. Maron uses Savannah's plight to argue for more services for the mentally challenged:

[. . .] when Reaganites emptied out our federally funded institutions, they sent federal patients home with compensatory federal funding. I've seen a lot of their families, who've been pushed to the end of their financial and emotional limits. When I say that I'll ask to have a relative put on a waiting list, we both know that our county facilities can't begin to service the number of seriously disturbed people who need help. (71)

In *Shooting at Loons*, the cause is the preservation of a way of life for the island's commercial fisherman families who are being squeezed out by upstate sportsmen, land developers and conservationists. As Deborah sees it, "Everybody wants a slice of the resources and everybody thinks his wants are more justified than anyone else's"(42).

Deborah is continually dismayed by changes taking place quickly in the rural south. She says:

Intellectually, I know that people (and their cars) have to live somewhere, but selfishly I can't help feeling that way too many houses are sprouting up on our fields and in our woods. All these new people looking for the good life—crowing up against us—taking up the empty spaces—they're changing the quality of our lives. (*Up Jumps the Devil*, 40)

Deborah bemoans the new gated communities, tucked behind berms and named something exotic like Horse Run Meadows or Dogwood Ridge. She can't imagine where all these newcomers to Colleton County are coming from. "Sometimes I wonder how places like Iowa or Ohio or upstate New York still have enough people to make it worthwhile keeping the lights on up there" (*Up Jumps the Devil*, 73).

She notices change even in the food: "Colleton County church picnics are no longer just home-fried chicken and ham biscuits. These days the chicken's likely to come out of a fast-food bucket that'll be plopped down alongside a bowl of guacamole or eggplant parmigiana" (*Storm Track*, 67).

Maron believes North Carolina suffers from an evangelical Protestantism so ingrained that "neighbors discuss Jesus every day as if he had stopped by for coffee that morning" (*The Charlotte Observer*, 18 Oct. 2006). Everyone, elected officials in particular, is expected to attend church. Deborah shows up as often as she can because it's good for her election campaign not because she particularly enjoys the worship service. She says:

On Sunday I did my duty by Nadine and Herman and went to church with them even though New Deliverance is my least favorite of all the houses of worship in the area. The minister's one of those borderline control freaks who preaches

from the Old Testament more often than the new, more shalt-not than shall.

There's not a single window in the sanctuary and nothing on the walls, not even a cross, to distract the congregation's attention from his joyless sermons. He manages to make heaven and salvation sound so dreadful that I always leave more depressed. (*Uncommon Clay*, 125)

Deborah is well-mannered enough that she doesn't argue with her family about religion, but she makes it clear to the reader she doesn't agree with the fundamentalists. When one of her brothers becomes regular on junkets to Atlantic City casinos, she says:

Some of my churchier brothers and sister-in-law think this is all vaguely sinful, but Haywood just shrugs. "Sin is in the eye of the belittler," he says. "We gamble on the weather, we gamble on tobacco prices and the price of beef. Don't you reckon it's all mute to God?" (*Up Jumps the Devil*, 95)

As befitting a book about the south, the series has plenty of good home cookin', so much that readers have asked Maron for a Knott Family cookbook. The meals prepared by Maidie at the home place sound mouth-watering:

It was a summer supper right out of the garden [. . .] sweet bell peppers stuffed with a moist hamburger and sausage mixture, tender new butter beans sprinkled with diced onions, fried okra, meaty tomatoes that really had ripened on the vines, and thin wedges of crispy cornbread. (*Home Fires*, 31)

During a hurricane, when a crowd has taken refuge at the home place, Maidie's cooks a midnight supper. "She had the meaty parts of at least four chickens bubbling

away in three large black iron frying pans. There was a bowl of potato salad in the refrigerator, a big pot of newly picked butter beans on the spare burner” (*Storm Track*, 289).

After helping herself to a plateful, Deborah says, “The biscuits were hot and flaky. The chicken was crisp on the outside, tender and juicy on the inside—ambrosia from the southern part of heaven”(291).

Deborah is constantly on guard against temptation. “It’s taken constant vigilance to keep my weight the same as it’s been since I was twenty,” she says (*Storm Track*, 47). When she watches the tape of her swearing in ceremony, she laments, “Every time I see myself on tape, I vow to quit eating for a week. Much as I love that splashy red print dress, it certainly does emphasize every extra ounce” (*Southern Discomfort*, 209). She thinks Krispy Kremes are “the most delicately delicious donut in the whole world,” (*Killer Market*, 165) so it’s a victory when she can limit herself to just one. But at the ball field, she can’t pass up a hot dog all the way—just can’t:

Here in Colleton County, that’s still a dog on a bun with chili, mustard, coleslaw and onions. Enough Yankees have moved in that some of us’ve heard about sauerkraut on hot dogs, but Tater Ennis, who runs the concession stand, doesn’t believe it’s true and he certainly doesn’t sell it. (*Storm Track*,40)

While Maron’s reviews are overwhelmingly positive, she does have a few critics—or, at least, criticisms. Science fiction writer Orson Scott Card, also a North Carolinian, raves about her delightful “wow-she-lives-here moments,” but is bothered that Deborah’s sections are in first person and, when she’s not present, everybody else's are in third-person. In an online column, Card says:

[. . .] the implication is that Knott's character is *also* narrating the parts that she's not in, which means we get the distinct idea that she thinks she can get inside the head of her husband, Dwight -- and, more ridiculously, the young cop with a crush on him. Surely that's not what Maron intends us to think. But when you have a character narrating some sections of a novel, it's automatic to assume that unless we're told otherwise, she's narrating the whole thing.

<http://www.hatrack.com>

Other negatives most often are targeted at Maron's use of plot. Marilyn Stasio says the plot of *Southern Discomfort* is too thin (20 June 1993). *Publisher's Weekly*, after a long run of starred reviews, found *Killer Market* a "disappointing entry in a robust series," mostly because of an overly complicated plot where everybody in the world—or at least in High Point, NC,—could be a suspect.

In plot, Maron is the antithesis of Agatha Christie who is known for clever and complex murder mysteries. In a *New York Times* review of a Christie biography by Gillian Gill, John Mortimer, an English barrister and writer, notes:

Ms. Gill [. . .] says that Christie evolved her plots to satisfy the "crossword-puzzle or bridge fanatic," those fashionable interests of 1930's Britain [. . . }. In Christie's world, a character becomes a murderer simply because he or she is the most unlikely suspect and the person best calculated to give the reader a few hours of enjoyable puzzle solving. (14 Oct. 1990)

Readers note the "lightness" of plots in Judge Knott novels, but usually find other reasons to keep reading. Dindy Robinson of Arlington, TX, writes in a customer review,

“*Rituals of the Season* is more of a ‘slice of life’ novel about family and about Deborah Knott's upcoming wedding to Dwight Bryant than it is a mystery novel. Nevertheless it is a comfortable read” (amazon.com). Carol Peterson Hennekens of Colorado Springs, CO, writes in her customer review of *Up Jumps The Devil*:

It won an Agatha so you're expecting lots of sleuthing. Think again. The mystery component is, at best, about one-fourth of the book [. . .] Normally this would totally sour me on the book but I enjoyed the other three-fourths of the book enough to forgive her. (amazon.com)

In an online interview, Maron admits she made a conscientious decision to spend more time exploring Deborah's life than developing the mystery plot:

I know that some people wish I would concentrate more on the classic murder mystery and forget about all the other ramifications, but I just can't seem to do it. *Killer Market* is probably in this series my ‘purest’ murder mystery because it had no big social side issues; yet people liked that book the least. I got all kind of grumbles face-to-face and in the mail about ‘Well this is all very well, but send her back to Colleton County. Show us her father, show us her brothers.’ (mysterynet.com)

In her *New York Times* review of *Slow Dollar*, Marilyn Stasio says the Knott family is idealized—“scenes of big, happy families strolling the midway, gathering for picnics (pass the ham biscuits, please) and wakes (more ham biscuits, please), and circling the wagons when one of their own is in trouble” (18 Aug. 2002).

Many readers, however, don't agree. In her review of *Southern Discomfort*, Maddy van Hertbruggen of Houston, TX, says Maron's "characters stay with you because they are so real" (www.amazon.com). Writing about *High Country Fall*, Corrine H. Smith of Athol, MA, says, "All of the characters here are believable and likable [. . .] and they talk like people do in real life." (www.amazon.com). April J. Brown of Albuquerque, NM, in comments about *Bootlegger's Daughterr*, says she "enjoyed Maron's skill in developing three-dimensional characters and evoking a setting so real I could smell the dogwood and barbecue sauce" (www.amazon.com). Bill Ott, reviewing *Rituals of the Season* in *Booklist*, writes it's all "enticing enough to make Woody Allen consider moving to North Carolina" (www.amazon.com).

A native southerner and a transplanted North Carolinian, I, also, find Maron's characters credible. It's true she focuses on the best of the state and ignores our generous supply of racists, rednecks, wife beaters, child molesters and other undesirables. Because she chooses to write about the nice ones, Maron will probably always be considered "idealized" by readers and critics who prefer more grit, just as "Raymond Chandler in 'The Simple Art of Murder,' criticized [Christie] for the lack realism in her 'typical laburnum-and-lodge-gate English country house' mysteries" (Mortimer).

Obviously, Maron has many strengths: her likeable leading character, the sense of place North Carolina brings to her work, and her familiarity with the manners and mores of the South at the beginning of the 21st century. Rural North Carolina won't stay as it is for long, but thank goodness she is documenting it, much as Eudora Welty captured the post-depression in the Mid-South.

According to Maron, readers can look forward to at least four more Deborah Knott books. The next one, due out in 2007, will feature cameo appearances by several real North Carolinians who donated \$2500 to the Johnson County (NC) Heritage Center, a local history clearing house where Maron's mother was a volunteer. These include a Durham couple whose dog has a nose for trouble, a goat-raising bed-and-breakfast owner in Fuquay-Varina and an activist for people with disabilities from Greenville (*The News & Observer*, 10 July 2006). No doubt, these folks decided the donation was a small price to pay for an opportunity to hang out with the Knott clan—if only in their fantasies. In fact, the real charm of this series may be that secretly everyone would like to be a Knott. Watch out Walton's, America's has a new beloved family.

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