

Women of Noir: **GOthic** gals, **VENGEFUL** victims, & **FEISTY** femmes fatales **PLUS: COLOR COMIX!**

FEMINIST RESPONSE TO POP CULTURE

bitch

the Noir Issue



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the budget of the show to his hair, requiring 15 people to manage it ("Two for fringe, one for feathering, one for height, [one for] circumference..."), his hair knowledge saves the duo's lives when Vince convinces the ruler of Monkey Hell to set him and Howard free by promising to sort out the grumpy monkey's split ends.

No, not so dark; but very, very Noir. *Brian Levit*

S IS FOR THE SPIRIT and the women who populate Will Eisner's most fully realized creation. Take P'Gell: Reclining on a chaise lounge, scarlet robe open to her waist, a cigarette dangling from full lips and the minaret of Istanbul towering behind her, she gazes at the reader with heavy-lidded eyes and announces, "I am P'GELL... and this is NOT a story for little boys!"

Eisner's best characters were his women, vamps whose only weakness was former cop Denny Colt, who faked his death to return as a masked and hunky crime-fighter, *The Spirit*.

Eisner, comicdom's finest storyteller, was inspired by films of his time (his biggest influence was the classic Orson Welles flick, *Citizen Kane*), and his best women characters are obviously based on actresses of the 1940s. P'Gell is Hedy Lamarr, named for Paris's

Place Pigalle, a red-light district frequented by World War II GIs. The story's setting is straight out of the 1938 movie *Algiers*, co-starring Lamarr and Charles Boyer.

Other bad girls include Sand Saref (loosely based on Lauren Bacall), Denny Colt's childhood-sweetheart-turned-shady-lady ("All these years and a mask don't fool me... DENNY COLT!...hold me... tight...Denny...tight.") and Silk Satin (inspired by Ingrid Bergman), ex-jewel thief investigator for the insurance company Croyd's of Glasgow. His current sweetheart, nice-girl Ellen Dolan, has the girl-next-door looks of Doris Day.

It's too soon to judge the upcoming movie, which is scheduled to debut Christmas Day, 2008, but writer-director Frank Miller is not known for his feminist treatment of women, and advance publicity has him demoting brilliant, beautiful surgeon Silken Floss to secretary.

Tina Robbins

S IS FOR SHADOW OF A DOUBT, a 1943 Hitchcock film in which a teenage girl makes the grisly discovery that her charismatic uncle is a serial killer. With its theme of creepy relatives who commit unspeakable crimes, it makes for a letter-perfect allegory for incest survival.

Charlotte (nicknamed Charlie, after her uncle) is just out of high school, still

living with her family, and not looking forward to a dull future of marriage, children, and housework. She depends on a visit from her Uncle Charlie to infuse her life with romance and excitement. But in the course of the visit, she discovers that Charlie is actually the "Merry Widow Murderer," wanted for killing several rich, elderly women. Charlotte hesitates to have him arrested because she wants to protect her family—especially her mother—from emotional devastation, not to mention the aftermath of public humiliation.

Charlotte's struggle becomes one of survival as she foils her uncle's multiple attempts to murder her in such a way that her death looks accidental. Charlotte's feelings toward her uncle progress from adoration to repulsion as she is put in the position of keeping his secret, while stopping him from victimizing more women.

The plot is eerily suggestive: Charlotte and Charlie share an intensely affectionate bond that includes more than a few quasi-romantic moments. Breaking that bond, without help from parents or police, becomes the business of Charlotte's young adulthood. That the film lets her complete this business without blaming her for having once trusted her uncle makes this a remarkably feminist film. *Janet Miller*



P'Gell of *The Spirit*.

T IS FOR MICHAEL TREE, a true dame of modern noir. As hard-boiled as they come, Ms. Michael Tree (her father wanted a son) first appeared in a comic book series and was most recently seen in the pulp paperback novel *Deadly Beloved*.

The tough-talking Ms. Tree was created by Max Allan Collins and Terry Beatty, in a fever dream of EC Comics; Dick Tracy; *Dragnet*; the lone-wolf tough guy characters of Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane; and Peter



(Ms.) Michael Tree.

O'Donnell's Modesty Blaise, a famous spy-fi heroine from across the pond.

Collins based the initial story on the conceit that writer Mickey Spillane's famous PI, Mike Hammer, finally married his secretary, the pistol-packing, tough-as-nails Velda. The sad twist: Hammer is murdered on their wedding night, leaving the secretary to take over the detective agency and step into her late husband's shoulder holster. The private eye's

murder would be the former secretary's first case.

But Ms. Tree became much more than a playful, or even progressive, gender reversal in a noirish tale of loss and revenge. For more than 15 years, and through various publishers—from Eclipse to Renegade Press to DC Comics—the heroine of the longest-running detective comic book of all time lived, loved, and lost as hard-boiled protagonists do, but she also was afforded a complexity denied most female characters in comic books. Her first case as a PI may have been to track down her husband's killer, but Ms. Tree was never reduced to simply a widow (or, for that matter, a cop's daughter). She was also independent—a killer, a sister, a stepmother, and a dangerous enemy. She was the respected leader of her own successful business, and later became a mother who hunted down baddies while eight months pregnant. She was even lovingly and beautifully depicted on the first page of an issue of *Ms. Tree Quarterly* breastfeeding her newborn—a rarity in comics for sure. She is not a superhero; she doesn't know martial arts—but she is smart, resolved, lethal, and a bad-ass babe. She has a gun, and she knows how to use it.

Jennifer K. Steiler

U IS FOR UNSOLVED *Mysteries*, the long-running television series that made Robert Stack a trench-coated, silver-haired hero to us all and Burbank, Calif., a veritable destination. *Unsolved Mysteries* married camp-noir style (see: Stack's shadowy figure emerging from a fog-machine-generated purple haze in a Hollywood studio back lot) with schlocky, tabloid journalism...and we loved every minute of it (well, except for maybe those "lost loves reunited" segments... booooring). While it was on the air between 1987 and 2002, the show took on topics ranging from the elusive Skunk Ape, a Sasquatch-like hominid reportedly living in the Florida everglades, to the death of Elvis—and everything paranormal and unexplained in between.

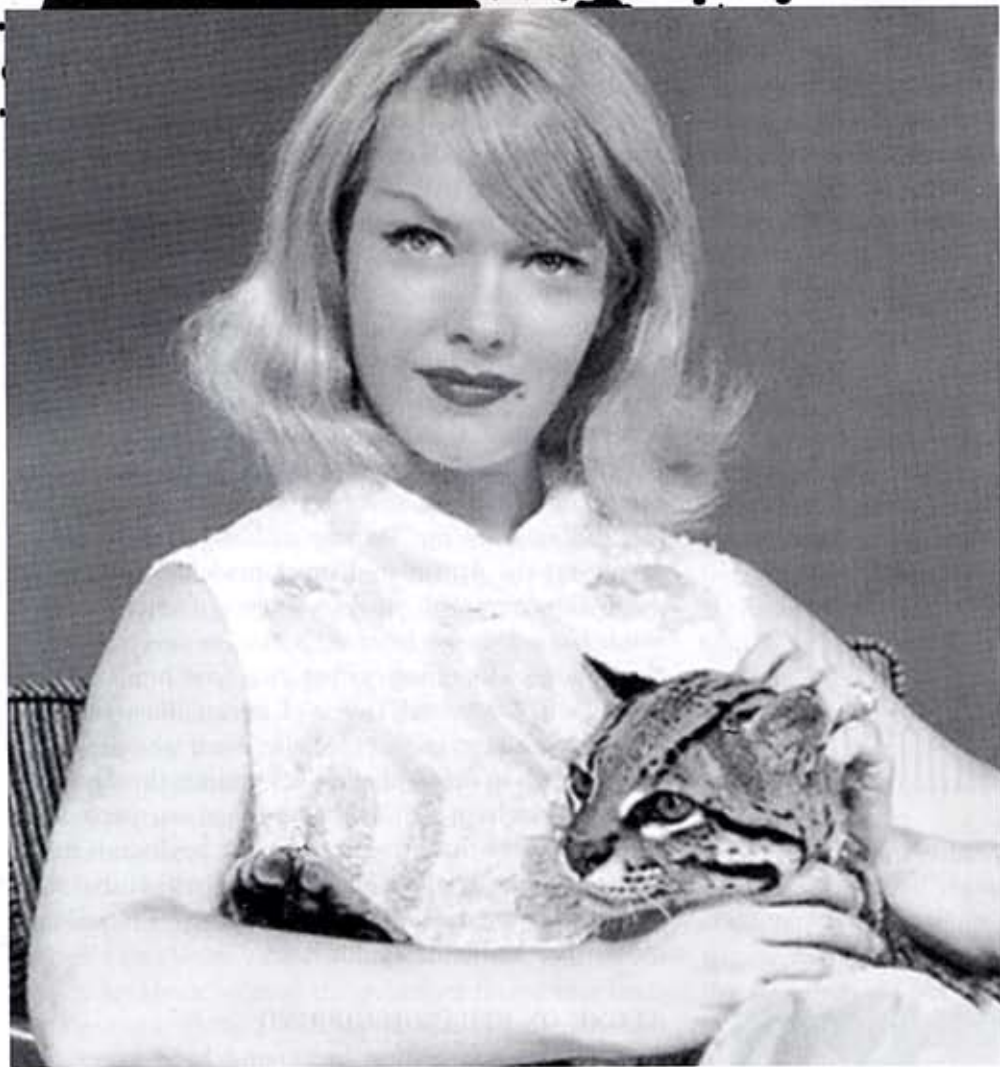
Perhaps the most inexplicable mystery of all, though, was why the show, after a run on NBC and CBS, ended up airing on Lifetime—"Television for Women"—wedged, uncomfortably, between reruns of the *Golden Girls*. A corrective to that series' sweetness and light, *Unsolved Mysteries* engendered a fascination with the dark and the weird that was noir to the bone.

Andy Lauer

W IS FOR HONEY WEST, the private dick chick

who jumped into the PI business headfirst after her beloved father, Hank, was murdered in a Hollywood alley. West, a vivacious and busty blond, took over her father's agency in order to find his killer. Though one of the first female protagonists of detective fiction—and a profeminist—Honey frequently found herself accidentally, and often ludicrously, disrobed through circumstances such as a game of strip poker or an oceanic undercurrent. She first appeared in the novel *This Girl for Hire* (1957), and then again in 10 more books published between 1958 and 1971, all written by husband-and-wife team Gloria and Forest Fickling under the pseudonym G. G. Fickling. West was also brought to television as the title character of an eponymous show. Loosely based on the novels, this mid-1960s series was produced by Aaron Spelling, and as it predated the state-side debut of Emma Peel by one year, *Honey West* was one of the first television dramas in the United States to feature a female lead in an action-adventure role.

Rather than strictly adhering to detective tropes, the television incarnation of Honey West readily borrowed from the spy craze that was



Anne Francis as Honey West cuddles her pet ocelot, Bruce.

sweeping both the U.S. and the U.K. As a result, Honey's handbag carried not just the requisite gun, but also gadgets such as a lipstick microphone, radio transmitters disguised as martini olives, tear gas earrings, and an exploding compact.

Advertised as a "private eye-fu," Honey's sex kitten appeal was emphasized through glam attire: black catsuits, leopard print coats,

Jackie O. sunglasses, very red lipstick, and, in an odd departure from the books, a pet ocelot.

Nevertheless, Honey West, particularly in her television incarnation, is a notable, yet relatively unknown, early feminist character. Capable, brave, and wicked smart, she was the head of her own detective agency, was skilled in martial arts, and, in an all-too-rare reversal of gender roles, had

a male sidekick who deferred to her authority. *Honey West* only lasted one season (1965-66), but the seductive Anne Francis should be remembered for playing the for-hire tough cookie with sophistication and cool beauty—and winning a Golden Globe for her effort. *Jennifer K Stuller*

W IS FOR
CORNELL
WOOLRICH,
the writer

who practically invented noir. Starting in the 1930s, he produced a series of pulp magazine stories, and later novels, that mixed dark atmosphere and bone-cracking suspense with hopeless romanticism and grim fatalism. His settings were the cheap rooming houses, all-night movie theaters, and station-house back rooms of Depression-era America. His characters were unemployed bookkeepers and desperate dime-a-dance hostesses, trapped by innocent misadventure and random machinations of fate. His work was adapted into more than a dozen classic-era film noirs, most notably Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, as well as into more than a hundred radio shows and television programs.

Amazingly, his life was even darker than his fiction. After an early Hollywood screenwriting contract and California marriage came to similar ends (contract cancelled; marriage annulled), he retreated to his native Manhattan. He spent most of the rest of his life sharing increasingly decayed residential hotel rooms with his domineering mother. His life and aesthetic can be summed up by the phrase his works inspired, but which he never used: "First you dream, then you die." *John Mann*