

Cat's Eyewitness

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RITA MAE BROWN
& SNEAKY PIE BROWN

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Quote from the *Book of Common Prayer* (contains Bible passages) of the Episcopal Church of USA, 1928, amended 1952.

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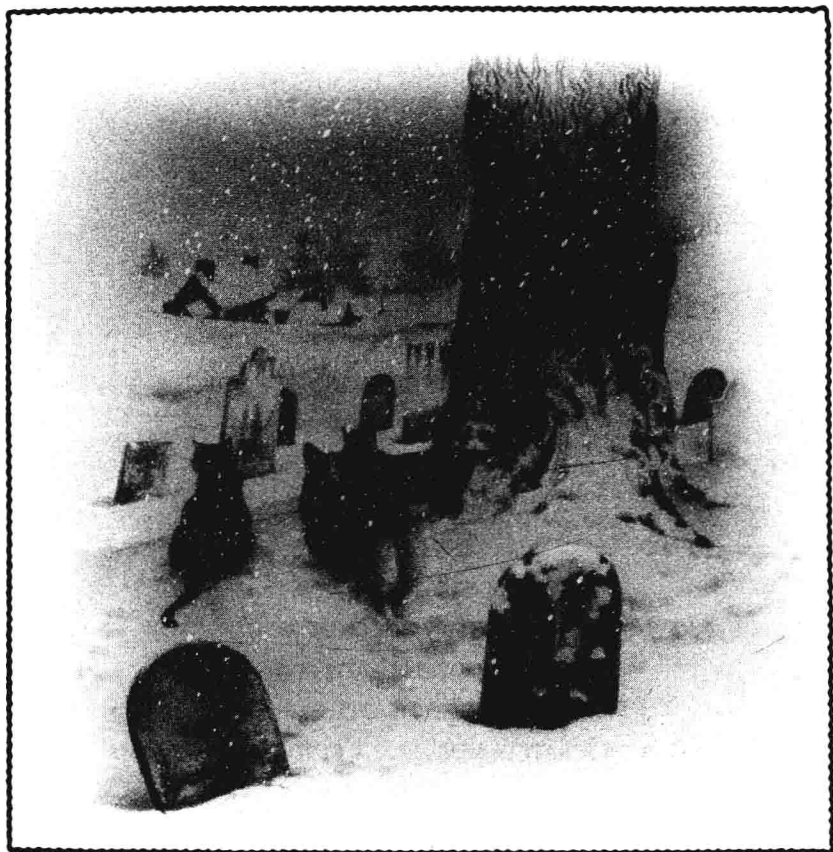
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Books by Rita Mae Brown
with Sneaky Pie Brown

WISH YOU WERE HERE
REST IN PIECES
MURDER AT MONTICELLO
PAY DIRT
MURDER, SHE MEOWED
MURDER ON THE PROWL
CAT ON THE SCENT
SNEAKY PIE'S COOKBOOK FOR MYSTERY LOVERS
PAWING THROUGH THE PAST
CLAWS AND EFFECT
CATCH AS CAT CAN
THE TAIL OF THE TIP-OFF
WHISKER OF EVIL

Books by Rita Mae Brown

THE HAND THAT CRADLES THE ROCK
SONGS TO A HANDSOME WOMAN
THE PLAIN BROWN RAPPER
RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE
IN HER DAY
SIX OF ONE
SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT
SUDDEN DEATH
HIGH HEARTS
STARTING FROM SCRATCH: A DIFFERENT KIND OF WRITERS' MANUAL
BINGO
VENUS ENVY
DOLLEY: A NOVEL OF DOLLEY MADISON IN LOVE AND WAR
RIDING SHOTGUN
RITA WILL: A MEMOIR OF A LITERARY RABBLE-ROUSER
LOOSE LIPS
OUTFOXED
HOTSPUR
FULL CRY



Dedicated to
The Almost Home Pet Adoption Center
of Nelson County

Cast of Characters

Mary Minor "Harry" Haristeen The postmistress of Crozet, Virginia, is curious, sometimes bull-headed, and often in the midst of trouble. Her life is changing and she's struggling to change with it.

Mrs. Murphy Harry's tiger cat accepts change better than her human does. She's tough, smart, and ready for action, and she'll always take a little catnip, too.

Tee Tucker Harry's corgi bubbles with happiness and bravery in equal measure. She loves Harry as only a dog can love.

Pewter Harry's gray cat affects aloofness but underneath it all, she does care. What irritates her are comments about her plumpness and her hunting abilities.

Mrs. Miranda Hogendobber Miranda observes a great deal but keeps most of it to herself. A widow, she's a surrogate mother to Harry and the relationship means a great deal to both women.

Susan Tucker Harry's best friend has been putting up with Harry's curiosity and attraction to danger since they were children. They have their ups and downs like most friends but they stick together.

Ned Tucker Susan's husband and a lawyer who is now running for political office.

Fair Haristeen, D.V.M. Once Harry's childhood sweetheart and then her husband, he hopes to be her husband again. He has a good mind, a stout heart, and the patience to put up with her.

Olivia Craycroft "BoomBoom" Once Harry's nemesis, the two have settled into a slightly strained rapprochement. BoomBoom is quite beautiful, a fact never lost on men.

Alicia Palmer A former resident of Crozet, she keeps an estate there. She conquered Hollywood as an actress and now in her mid-fifties, she's come home. She's retained all of her glamour while losing most of her illusions.

Rev. Herbert C. Jones Beloved, humorous, fond of fishing, all of Crozet knows that when the chips are down, "The Rev" will come through.

Marilyn Sanburne "Big Mim" The queen of Crozet exerts her social power with whatever force is needed to accomplish her task. She can be a snob but she's fair in her own fashion and believes strongly in justice.

Jim Sanburne As the mayor of Crozet, he presides over the town, which is easier to do sometimes than to be Big Mim's husband.

Marilyn Sanburne, Jr. "Little Mim" She is emerging from her mother's influence. She's a contemporary of Harry, Susan, and BoomBoom but she's always been set apart by her family's wealth. She is the vice-mayor of Crozet and a Republican, which is quite interesting since her father is a Democrat.

Deputy Cynthia Cooper A young, bright officer in the Sheriff's Department, she likes law enforcement but wonders if it keeps romance at bay. She's become a buddy of Harry's, and the cats and dog like her, too.

Sheriff Rick Shaw There are days now when Rick is tired of criminals, tired of their lies, tired of pressing the county commissioners for more funds. But when a murder occurs, he focuses his sharp mind to bring the pieces of the puzzle together—if only that damned Harry and her pets would get out of the way.

Tazio Chappars A young architect, she gets men's hearts racing. She's a rather serious sort of woman but kind and considerate.

Paul de Silva Big Mim's new stable manager is handsome, efficient, and a little bit shy. He's crazy about Tazio.

Brother Handle The Prior of Mt. Carmel Monastery is hard-headed and focused on saving his order in an increasingly secularized world. Events at the monastery shake him to his core.

Brother Prescott The second-in-command, he humors Brother Handle while trying to keep peace among the brothers.

Brother Frank The dour, mistrustful and hard-working treasurer. Others can indulge in flights of fancy, he has to pay the bills.

Brother Thomas Susan Tucker's great-uncle. Kind, patient, fond of good cognac, he is the oldest monk at eighty-two.

Brother Mark He never met a substance he didn't try to ingest. He woke up one bitter winter night in the middle of Beverly St. in Staunton and found Jesus. He's the emotional type.

Nordy Elliott A young, handsome, conceited newscaster at Channel 29. He has an eye for the main chance and when it comes, he makes the most of it.

Brother Andrew A physician at the monastery who bends the rules when he feels justified in doing so.

Brother John Also a doctor, goes along with bending those rules.

Bo and Nancy Newell They own and run Mountain Area Realty in Nellysford.

Pete Osborne The program director at Channel 29, he gives Nordy Elliott his big break and deeply repents unleashing that fulsome ego of his. Soon he has cause for other worries.

Mt. Carmel A monastery founded in 1866 modeled on the Carmelite order.

Dear Reader,

Catnip! Tuna! Chipped beef! These are the things that make life wonderful. Of course, I wouldn't mind a bunny with a limp.

The more I write these mysteries, the more I enjoy myself. I don't really need Mother at all except to type, open the canned food, and give me furry toys.

Pewter contributes about as much as the human in the house.

As for the dogs, poor things, they try so hard to read.

I hope you are all well, lots of mice in the cornfields, moles in the ground, and little voles, too.

The old truck finally pooped out at 200,000± miles. I want a big new one with my name emblazoned on the side. Too flash? How about a small S.P.B. on the driver's door? I know Mother is frothing at the mouth to buy one but she has to drag it out, research it to the max. Right now she can't make up her mind between an F-250 4×4 or an F-150 4×4. Personally I deserve an SL 55 AMG, but we are farmers so I have to be practical. The S.P.B. is a must, though.

You should insist that your human put your initials on the door. After all, they can't put one foot forward without us.

Ta ta,



Sneaky Pie

Dear Reader,

Having just picked up the manuscript, discovering Sneaky Pie's letter, I feel I should set the record straight.

My God, how she flatters herself.

I work just as much on these mysteries as she does.

Furthermore, I don't waste time bringing baby copperheads into the house. Nor do I dash after the chickens only to have them turn on me. She's not as smart as she would have you believe.

As for the old truck, I sure got my money's worth. What's wrong with researching thoroughly? A truck or car is a big purchase. I can't just throw the money away so she can ride in comfort. Yes, the star likes to be ferried about in style. Get her? An SL 55 tweaked by AMG. Catitude!

Catitude to the tune of about \$119,750 retail base price. I mean, she can't even think about the regular SL 500 at \$88,500 retail base price. No, she wants the SL 55 AMG. That's one pussycat that needs to be Number One on the *New York Times* best-seller list, because I'm not buying her a sports car. Wait, a sports car with her initials on the door.

I suppose I'll have to put her initials on the truck or she'll shred my shoes. Sneaky Pie practices revenge.

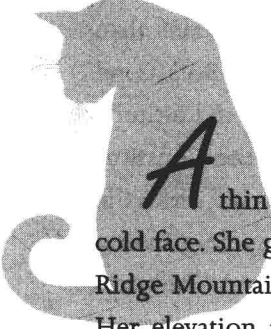
Wish me luck.

Rita Mae

About the Authors

RITA MAE BROWN, bestselling author of over thirty books, loves her work. An Emmy-nominated screenwriter and a poet, she lives in Afton, Virginia. She is The Master of Foxhounds of The Oak Ridge Foxhunt Club.

SNEAKY PIE BROWN, a tiger cat born somewhere in Albemarle County, Virginia, was discovered by Rita Mae at her local SPCA. They have collaborated on twelve previous Mrs. Murphy mysteries: *Wish You Were Here*; *Rest in Pieces*; *Murder at Monticello*; *Pay Dirt*; *Murder, She Meowed*; *Murder on the Prowl*; *Cat on the Scent*; *Pawing Through the Past*; *Claws and Effect*; *Catch as Cat Can*; *The Tail of the Tip-Off*; and *Whisker of Evil*, in addition to *Sneaky Pie's Cookbook for Mystery Lovers*. She wants everyone to know that the wonderful foxhounds of Oak Ridge are the only hounds in the world supported by a cat.



A thin trickle of water zigzagged over the Virgin Mary's cold face. She gazed westward from her home on top of the Blue Ridge Mountains, between Afton Gap and Humpback Mountain. Her elevation approached two thousand two hundred feet. The fertile expanse of the Shenandoah Valley spread below, rolling westward to the Allegheny Mountains. The Valley, made immortal by the military genius of Stonewall Jackson, had been beloved of the Native Americans long before the European immigrants, refugees, and mountebanks ever beheld its calming beauty.

Had the Blessed Virgin Mother been able to turn her head and look east, undulating hills traversed with ravines and ridges stopping at the Southwest Range would have delighted her eyes. The last spur of the Appalachian Mountain chain, the Southwest Range gives way on its eastern slopes to land with a gentle roll. These rich fields and forests drop until the Fall Line, the true geographic boundary between low country and up-country, between sandy soils, red clay, and loam mixtures. This line also divided the Iroquois-speaking peoples from the Sioux-speaking peoples. Neither side liked the other much, warfare and raids occurring with savage regularity. Into this political hot zone trooped the

English, the first surviving colony founded in 1607. Those that lived, learned.

The conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1781, one hundred and seventy-four years after Jamestown was founded, unleashed an exuberance of trade, exploration, birthrate, and optimism. Even the fierce Monocan tribe and their allies, who had kept the whites from building safe communities ever westward of the Fall Line, couldn't hold them back.

The land on which Mary stood was settled in 1794 by Catholics more comfortable on the crest of the mountains than walking among their hustling Protestant neighbors in Richmond or the Tidewater. They built a log chapel. The land and altitude were good for apples. Orchards flourished. After the Constitutional Convention, the new Constitution made crystal clear the separation between church and state. Many of the apple-growing Catholics moved down the mountain into Nelson and Albemarle Counties on the eastern slopes, Augusta County on the western slopes. Nestled in the valleys, the temperature warmer, the winds less fierce than on the mountaintop, the former religious refugees prospered.

The hard-core mountain people, many of them distillers of clear liquor—the mountain streams being wonderful for such endeavors—stayed in the hollows. They didn't want to live on a mountaintop.

Finally in 1866 a war-weary Confederate captain founded a monastic order based on the Carmelites. He called it Mt. Carmel after the original in Palestine. Carmelite orders were being founded in the north after the War Between the States. Captain Ainsly was defiant and remained independent of the international monastic order even though he followed their rules. Instead of being known as Whitefriars, the monks on Afton Mountain were called Greyfriars because of their gray wool robes, an echo of their uniform color.

The monastery itself was not open to the public. The dairy, the

chandler's building, the food building with honey and jams, and the ironmonger's forge were open, though, as were the exquisite gardens. The products were made by the monks themselves. Applejack was their biggest seller. Made on the grounds from apples grown in the old orchards, the brothers took special care with their distillery. Folks said Greyfriars' applejack could kick one harder than a mule.

The Virgin Mary stood on the highest point of land, the spring gardens nestled below her. She was carved from native soapstone by another Confederate veteran sick of war and worldly corruption. The Blessed Virgin Mother radiated a sorrow, a forgiveness that touched many who looked upon her. The stones leading to her, worn concave from many feet, bore testimony to her grace and power.

On this day, November 24, Thanksgiving, snow settled in the folds of her raiment. It covered the earth down to a thousand feet above sea level. Below that, freezing rain pelted farm and forest.

Mary Minor "Harry" Haristeen had driven up before the rain reached the eastern meadows. But as she squinted upward into a leaden sky, she knew getting down Afton Mountain would take a steady hand and a steady foot, no jamming on the brakes.

Her three dearest companions—Mrs. Murphy, a tiger cat, Pewter, a gray cat, and Tee Tucker, a brave corgi—had smelled the shift in the weather before their human friend knew it was coming. Confident in her driving ability, Harry wouldn't have turned back even if she had foreseen the change. She was determined to spend an hour on the mountain, alone and in thought, before plunging into Thanksgiving cheer. She'd quit her job as postmistress after sixteen years because the U.S. Postal Service was building a large, modern post office in Crozet by the railroad track. In this fit of improvement, the bigwigs decided that Mrs. Murphy, Pewter, and Tucker could no longer "work" with her. How could she live without the cats and dog? How could millions of Americans sit in windowless cubicles without even a bird to

keep them connected to real life? Harry couldn't live like that. Not yet forty, she felt a disquieting alienation from so-called modern life. What seemed vital to others, like wading through their e-mail, seemed fake to her. Harry was at a crossroads, not sure which way to jump.

The dear older woman she worked with, Miranda Hogendobber, walked out when she did. But Miranda had her deceased husband's retirement to draw upon; she'd been frugal and was in good shape.

Harry wasn't in good shape financially. Taxes crept upward like kudzu threatening to choke her small farm profits, in particular, and ultimately free enterprise, in general. Services became ever more expensive and gas prices bounced up and down like a basketball in an NBA game.

On top of those worries was her ex-husband, Fair Haristeen, who still loved her and had made significant amends for what Harry saw as bad behavior. Fair had grown up and wanted her back, wanted a mature bond. He was handsome. Harry had a weak spot for a handsome man. Fair qualified at six five, blond hair, all muscle. An equine veterinarian, he specialized in reproduction. They both shared a profound love of horses.

Harry, at last, had made peace with the bombshell Fair had dallied with four years back when their marriage blew up. Olivia "BoomBoom" Craycroft slew men the way longhaired Samson slew his enemies. BoomBoom had enjoyed Fair's impressive physique and his Virginia gentleman ways, but she bored easily, soon dismissing him. "Think of this as recess from class," were her exact words. For all of BoomBoom's heartlessness with men where romance was concerned, she loved animals, was a good athlete, and demonstrated great community spirit. In a word, she was fabulous, until you slept with her or if you were the woman left in the dust by your boyfriend or husband.

As Harry stared up at the unearthly face of the Virgin, she shivered. Tucker, at her feet, shook off the thickening snow.

"She's beautiful," the corgi said.

Harry bent down, patting the glossy head. "Bet you think I'm crazy standing out here. Probably am."

Tucker lifted her nose, breathed deeply. "Susan." The little dog took off toward the enticing scent, skidding to a halt about forty yards away where a curved stone bench overlooked The Valley. The bench, situated on a winding path below the statue, was hidden from view if one was standing in front of the Virgin Mary.

The Valley was usually colder than the eastern slopes. Snow was falling there, a patchwork quilt of white, beige, and corn stubble two thousand feet below.

"Tucker," Susan said, surprised. "Where's Mom?"

Harry, pursuing her dog, slipped along the walkway between tall magnificent English boxwoods, only to be equally surprised when she saw her best friend. "Susan, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Susan replied, smiling.

Harry brushed off the snow to sit next to Susan. Tucker wedged between them. "I'm here because I, well, I need help. I know the Blessed Virgin Mother has always been reputed to have powers—the statue, I mean. Miranda says whenever times get tough she comes up here and talks with Mary."

"Girl talk." Susan smiled, her auburn hair peeking out from underneath her lad's cap.

"Wish she could talk. I'd like to hear that Jesus wasn't perfect." Harry sighed. "It's too hard having perfect Gods—you know, God the Father, God the Son, and I have no idea who or what the Holy Ghost is. I mean it," she said as Susan laughed. "You went to Bible school in the summers, same as I did; we suffered through two years of catechism together. We only made Confirmation because Reverend Jones took pity on us. I can recite the Nicene Creed but I still can't tell you why I'm supposed to care about it. What is the Holy Ghost?" She threw up her hands, red gloves bright against the gloom. "But I understand Mary, the Blessed Virgin Mother. She's one of us; oh, better, but still, she's one of us."

"Yes." Susan reached for her friend's hand, her tan glove