

## Interview with Kay Williams and Eileen Wyman, authors of “Butcher of Dreams”

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Kay Williams and Eileen Wyman, who are here to talk about their new book, “Butcher of Dreams.”

*Kay Williams is a professional actress who has played leading roles at regional theaters around the U.S., including the San Francisco Actors Workshop and the Pittsburgh Playhouse. Among her many credits are the title role in “Miss Jairus,” Cybel in “Great God Brown,” and Georgette in “The Balcony,” all plays that are part of the repertory of the 42nd Street Theater in “Butcher of Dreams.” She has also performed in many, many new plays off-Broadway in Manhattan and knows how difficult it is for talented new playwrights to get produced and talented new actors to get noticed. She has acted in radio, television, and films. For several years, she worked behind-the-scenes as assistant producer with an award-winning independent filmmaker in New York. Kay is a co-author of “One Last Dance: It’s Never Too Late to Fall in Love,” a novel started by her father, Mardo Williams, and finished by her and her sister Jerri Lawrence. The book won a Best Regional Fiction Award from the Independent Publishers Association and was a Finalist in a National Readers’ Choice Award, sponsored by the Romance Writers of America.*

*Eileen Wyman is a writer of short fiction and has edited many books and film scripts. She has had a career in radio/television and is a gifted comedy writer, crafting jokes for speech writers and comedians, humorous fillers for various magazines, and captions for cartoonists. She has written additional dialogue for films. During her long career, Eileen has held a variety of odd jobs to make ends meet—teacher, social worker, office temp. When she grows up, she wants to be either a wizard or a world class tennis player.*

**Tyler:** Thank you, Kay and Eileen, for joining me today. It’s always a treat to have two authors to talk to. Let’s begin by having one of you just tell us basically what “Butcher of Dreams” is about?

**Eileen:** “Butcher of Dreams” is a suspense thriller set in the 1980’s Hell’s Kitchen when porno shops, girlie shows, prostitution and crime ran rampant. With this seedy and ominous Off-Broadway theater district as the backdrop, sensitive, talented actress Lee Fairchild is attempting to start a repertory theater in an abandoned burlesque house.

Grieving for her husband, who recently died of a heart attack (and missing her daughter who’s away at college), Lee is vulnerable and, against her better judgment, falls into a passionate affair with a younger man. After a ritual Aztec mask is stolen from her home during a cast party, bizarre, seemingly unrelated events plague the theater. A homeless person is found dead on the third floor, his ring finger missing; an actress is poisoned; an actor stabbed. Strange markings are found painted on a set in construction. Is the stolen Aztec mask with its ancient curse somehow connected?

Who is the madman behind the destruction that is threatening the future of the theater (Lee’s dream-come-true)? Lee’s mercurial cast and crew become suspects as events escalate to ritual murder, and Lee herself becomes a target.

**Tyler:** Wow, that sounds like quite a plot. Will you tell me a little bit more about the Aztec mask and the curse associated with it? Is the ritual murder related to the Aztec culture?

**Kay:** The mask has two grotesque half faces, three bright blue fiercely staring eyes, a long black tongue hanging out of its mouth. (The long black tongue signifies thirst, a thirst for blood perhaps.) When Lee and her family visited Mexico, an Indian reluctantly sold the mask to her husband Richard, saying it would bring bad luck to anyone who owned it. Supposedly, it had been stolen from the Tomb at Monte Alban, the City of the Dead, and had been used in Aztec sacrifices. Six months later Richard was dead of a heart attack. Maybe the Indian was right, Lee thinks. Richard was too young, too healthy to have had a fatal heart attack.

At the cast party later, the actors, intrigued by the mask, take it down from the wall, and as a lark, several try it on. Alan confesses, “The mask took me over.” His friend Walter asks to borrow it for a talk he’s doing on Indian rites and occult practices for the Society of Medical Anthropology. At the end of the party, Lee discovers the mask is missing. And that’s when the havoc begins. Detective Green thinks someone may be trying to scare them out of the theater which, with the gentrification of Hell’s Kitchen, may soon become a desirable property. Green also postulates that a cult is involved.

Aztec/Mexican symbols, rites and rituals, including the Cult of the Animal Protector, are intrinsic to the plot right up through the chilling climax.

**Tyler:** Eileen and Kay, I’m always curious about writer collaborations? What brought the two of you together and how did the two of you work together to write “Butcher of Dreams”?

**Kay:** We’ve known each other for a long time. We were having dinner at a Greek restaurant in our neighborhood, drinking wine. Acting roles for me seemed to be drying up. I’d just taken a permanent job that wouldn’t allow me to do auditions during the day. Eileen came up with the idea. “We should write a novel.” It sounded to me like it was worth a try. The beauty of it was that we could work on it before and after work and on the weekends.

We have different strengths and we felt we could collaborate very well, complementing each other. For instance, Eileen is great at writing humor, especially satirical and black humor; she excels at short pithy character descriptions and terse, meaty descriptions of places, and her ability to come up with off-the cuff quips and funny one-liners for characters is uncanny. Over 25 years as an actress made me strong at character development and narrative line. As we brainstormed, we knew it would have to be a story about the theater. And about New York—in fact, about our fascinating, seamy, grimy, scary neighborhood—where a number of small off-Broadway theaters eked out an existence. You’re supposed to write about what you know, right? We also knew we wanted to try suspense.

Together, we drafted a plot—that mutated as we went along. But we did know exactly how we wanted the story to start and how we wanted it to end. We decided to tell the story through the eyes of an actress. She had to be very emotionally vulnerable. So we came up with a back story for her. The antagonist had to be sneaky and scary, a world class liar, slippery as a bar of soap. We wanted the reader to wonder whom to believe among this band of actors—all first class dissemblers. We knew we didn’t want the story to revolve around actors working on Broadway, actors who’d made it. We wanted to show the reader what a struggle it is to make a name in the theater (or in any other artistic endeavor, for that matter).

We also wanted to include Aztec/Mexican rites and rituals. And for that, we did research at the library.

I usually did a first pass at a draft. Eileen would make changes. We’d get together and argue and discuss. Through Mystery Writers of America, we found a writers group. So we’d read 10 pages at a time to the group, get feedback and make changes based on their suggestions.

**Tyler:** Tell me a little bit about the main character, Lee Fairchild, and why you think she is an attractive character to the reader?

**Eileen:** Lee is smart, tough, talented, able to manage and act successfully in her own off-Broadway theater. She’s independent, but vulnerable. She’s caring and imaginative. She’s lonely. We thought of her as a combination of Holly Hunter and Emma Thompson. She has the intuition of an artist, seeing everyone’s side. Lee is so empathetic her husband once told her, “You could identify with a mailbox.” That is her strength and her weakness.

**Tyler:** Does Lee get herself into any dangerous situations, and if so, will you give us a little hint of one?

**Eileen:** One night Lee works late at the theater. When she leaves, she discovers the battery from her car has been stolen so she has no choice but to stay overnight. (She'd converted a small room on the theater's second floor into a bedroom but hadn't used it after the body of the derelict was found.) In the middle of the night, she hears sounds coming from the third floor construction area. She goes upstairs to investigate. Lighted candles are everywhere. A giant figure draped in a long white robe (an actor's costume, from "The Balcony"), complete with cothurni (high, thick-soled laced boots, also part of the costume), is wearing the hideous Mexican mask that was stolen from Lee's home. The figure stands before a mirror, a bird, painted blue-green, in his hand. He performs a ceremony with the live bird, cutting its wing, crooning to it softly. He discovers Lee hiding behind a shelf of paint cans. As they struggle, Lee tries to lift off the mask to see the face behind it. The last thing she feels are hands around her neck. She survives, suffering only a small cut between her thumb and forefinger. Her next encounter is not so benign.

**Tyler:** The subtitle is "A Suspense Novel about the Theater." What about the theater appeals to you, especially as a subject for a mystery?

**Kay:** In the theater, film and TV, where we'd each had years of experience, we'd met many temperamental actors with overblown egos, actors with a heart of gold, actors living alternate lifestyles, brilliant but erratic directors and playwrights. We knew they would make unforgettable characters, characters easy to be suspicious of. In "Butcher of Dreams," we have Alan Dunbar, Lee's Artistic Director, who has troubling gaps in his resume; Ernst Kromer, her other director, who is a tyrant, rigid and uncooperative. In the acting company, we have wraithlike Fleur Mahoney, whose first role is a dead girl—and she almost is; Barry Blackwell, talented actor, compulsive practical joker; Harry O'Brien, company stage manager, who'd kill for a role; beautiful Samantha Read, Barry's live-in lover. Other major characters from the "real" world are just as quirky: Michael Day, Lee's sexy and mysterious assistant; Alan's lover, Walter Kaplan, eccentric psychiatrist and medical anthropologist; Heather, Lee's 18-year-old daughter, who has a surprising secret life; pock-marked, cynical NYPD Detective Mordecai Green, who moonlights as an actor.

**Tyler:** What specifically about the 42nd Street Repertory Theater, the setting for the book, makes it a great setting for a mystery?

**Eileen:** The fact that it's an off-Broadway repertory theater—almost an anomaly in New York City; that it's under-budgeted and under-staffed leaves room for plenty of mistakes and mishaps. The time is the mid-eighties. Small, struggling off-Broadway theaters lined 42nd Street. The theater was just three blocks from the Hudson River where an enclave of the homeless lived in cardboard boxes. At that time, the neighborhood was crime-ridden. Live nude shows, erotic bookstores, x-rated movies were just a block away from our apartment complex (we live in Manhattan Plaza, housing for performing artists). Crack cocaine was sold by dealers in the streets. Prostitutes blatantly solicited.

(By the time we finished the book, the Disney Corporation had renovated the Amsterdam Theater, moved in "The Lion King" and Hell's Kitchen was well on its way to being gentrified. Now our area is one of the safest, cleanest neighborhoods in New York City.)

**Tyler:** What would you say were your biggest influences in writing mysteries?

**Kay:** We love stories with an odd twist; characters who are slightly askew. These authors are among our favorites: Ruth Rendell, writing as Barbara Vine, P.D. James, Elizabeth George, Dorothy Sayers, Patricia Highsmith.

**Tyler:** What do you think sets "Butcher of Dreams" apart from the many other mystery novels out there?

**Eileen:** The book's mixture of temperamental actors, undercurrents of the supernatural, and a madman on the prowl set it apart from the many cozies, police procedurals, legal mysteries, high tech thrillers that dominate today's mystery world. This one is about people whom you like and learn to dislike, dislike and learn to like, real people in believable—if slightly bizarre situations. After all, it is the theater so that added theatrical flair is a must.

**Tyler:** What do you find most difficult about writing a mystery?

**Kay:** To give enough clues but not too many so that the reader will guess the culprit right off the bat. It's great to have a writers group as your first audience because if they say, "I suspect so-and-so," you know you have to be a little more subtle and pull back on information you're giving the reader. Also it's difficult knowing what to reveal when. Again, it's a great help having a writers group to bounce first drafts off.

**Tyler:** What did you most enjoy about writing and collaborating on “Butcher of Dreams”?

**Eileen:** Collaboration gave us more than one voice.

Also, Kay tended to overlook the flaws in the performers because she identified with them so strongly. I, as a theater-goer and lover of theater, wanted them to behave better. We feel we reached a happy medium.

**Tyler:** What will your next writing projects be? Do you plan to collaborate on writing more books?

**Eileen:** We’ve started a sequel to “Butcher.” It opens in Leningrad in 1991—filmmakers competing at the Leningrad International Film Festival, against the chaotic backdrop of a disintegrating Russia. Then the action moves to New York and deals with the Russian Mafia in Brighton Beach and the 42nd Street Rep as it’s evolved in the past five years. Also the reader will get a glimpse into the world of making independent films.

**Tyler:** Do you both plan to stick to writing novels now, or will you return to the theatre—maybe even turn one of your novels into a play?

**Kay:** We may attempt a screenplay of “Butcher of Dreams.” But first we have to get further into our Russian book.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Kay and Eileen, for joining me today. Before you go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information can be found there about “Butcher of Dreams”?

**Eileen:** Our website is: <http://www.calliopepress.com/butcherOfDreams/index.shtml>

Additional information on the website includes: suggested book discussion questions, comments about the book from reviewers and readers; authors’ pictures and bios; excerpt; ordering information.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Kay and Eileen. I hope you have many more successful collaborations together.