



THE RED PENCIL

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind published manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Greer Macallister's *Girl in Disguise* (Sourcebooks, 2017).

Life is a collection of events, one after another. How you react to the first one influences each subsequent reaction until *voilà*, you have your life. The same holds true in fiction; a novel is simply a series of scenes put together to show not only what happens but also what effects those actions have on the characters. Incorporating a goal, a conflict, stakes, and motivations into each scene adds depth to the story and its characters, which in turn allows each scene to serve more than a single purpose. First drafts often lack all these elements, so an author revises the scene until it shines like polished furniture.

In 2014, Greer Macallister learned about Kate Warne, whom Allen Pinkerton hired as his first female detective. "Why haven't I ever heard of this woman before? She was a pioneer. She saved Abraham Lincoln's life. She was as important in her way as Amelia Earhart, Sally Ride, Marie Curie. And yet, if you ask 10 people on the street who Kate Warne is, nine will have no idea." Since Greer wished to reverse that trend, she opted to write a fictional version of Kate's life, she says, "because I am seriously no good at writing nonfiction, and . . . very little is actually known about her. She's the perfect subject for historical fiction, because we have this core person who's intriguing, but almost none of the detail about who she was, what she thought, how she lived."

When *Girl in Disguise* opens, Kate is a novice and Greer initially concentrates on how Kate learns to become a good detective. "Does she stumble? She was fighting through the enormous, pervasive sexism of the time – how did that feel? The Harrington case, which this scene focuses on, illustrates a little of her journey."

A year into my employment, I was a new woman. I paid off my debt to Mrs. Borowski and left her boardinghouse for a smaller, finer one in the Garden District. I hated to leave her, but my coming and going at all hours had begun to

draw notice from the other boarders. I needed to be where no one knew me. I gave a false name at the new house to make things easier. Whoever I was on the inside, as far as this corner of the world was concerned, I was Miss Olive Harris, spinster. That was all they knew, and all they needed to know.

My new boardinghouse was comfortable and elegant. I had a good-sized room with a bed and bureau, and my own private dressing room. The bedspread was soft under my fingers and the drapes at the window were new enough not to be faded from the sun. I settled in as best I could, and pretended I was fully accustomed to such lush surroundings.

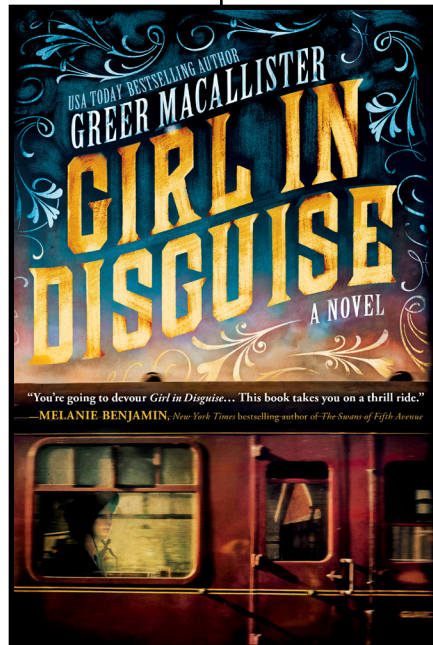
And after only a year, experience had made me wiser and more useful as a Pinkerton operative. I knew nearly every kind of case. Counterfeiting, blackmail, burglaries of all kinds. We had very few murders, though more than I would have liked. Pinkerton nearly always involved me in these investigations. There were often female witnesses or widows to interview, and they shrank away from his bull-headed approach. Subtlety had never been the boss's strong suit. My light touch was needed to make the poor women comfortable. In the process of these investigations, I learned much about the condition of bodies and how they gave away information about themselves, even when the soul was gone and the mouth would never speak words again. But there was no substitute for information obtained from the living, and there, my help was needed.

The most memorable murder investigation in which I participated tested my skills in another way entirely.

It began with a pounding on my door, just after four o'clock in the morning.

Groggy with sleep, all uncertain, I heard the noise. Was it even there? Was it part of a dream? I opened my eyes to see.

As soon as I knew for sure that there really



was a knocking at my door, and that it only grew in volume and violence, I immediately slid across the bed and pulled my gun from the nightstand. Then I cocked it, stood, and wrapped my robe more tightly around my body as I walked toward the door. I could not have been more awake.

"Who is it?"

"Messenger, ma'am."

I drew aside the curtain, just a sliver, and looked out. The boy did indeed look like a messenger.

"Slide it under the door, please," I said.

It was a paper note, hastily folded and not quite square, no envelope. I shouted "Thank you," and watched the shadow on the curtain. The boy waited for a moment or two, then crossed in front of the house and went away.

I breathed a little easier, then opened the paper to read:

136 Devries Road. Fatal case. Come right away. AP.

I dressed hastily, and from there, the only question was whether or not to take my gun. But if Pinkerton hadn't suggested it, I likely wouldn't need it. It sounded like the violence was in the past tense. I put a knife in my boot just in case, and half-walked, half-ran toward the address Boss had given me. When he said right away, I knew he meant it.

Since a scene should have more than a single objective, this draft needed more. "[I] wanted to show all the ways Pinkerton could test her. But I also had to move the story forward. So she's not only going through a personal challenge on this case, she's also redefining relationships with her colleagues, and laying the groundwork to get to an emotional place where she reveals a secret to both Pinkerton and us, the readers." In the final version of this scene, Greer's primary goal remains, but everything we do, everything we encounter has an emotional effect on us, so the same must hold true for Kate. Each case will vary in its complexity and, since she lives in a time of civil unrest, the danger she faces also increases.

I had been a Pinkerton operative for more than a year before someone tried in earnest to kill me.

By then I was living in a smaller, finer boardinghouse just off Des Plaines Street. My unusual comings and goings at Mrs. Borowski's had started to draw notice from my fellow boarders. I gave a false name at the new house to

make things easier. Whoever I was on the inside, as far as this corner of the world was concerned, I was Miss Cora Harris, spinster. That was all they knew and all they needed to know.

My new boardinghouse was comfortable and elegant. I had a good-sized room with a bed and bureau and my own private dressing room. The bedspread was soft under my fingers, and the drapes at the window were new enough not to be faded from the sun. The window overlooked the street at the front of the house, shaded by a pretty, delicate birch tree. I was fully accustomed to such lush surroundings. Miss Cora Harris had not been raised in theaters and flophouses, terrified of being left behind on purpose or by accident; Miss Harris was a lady.

And while I returned to the boardinghouse nearly every night, all my days were spent on cases. A year of experience had made me wiser and more useful as a Pinkerton operative. I knew nearly every kind of case. Counterfeiting, blackmail, burglaries of all kinds. I had impersonated a fortune-teller to suss out a poisoner, a case that was not just memorable because of its novelty but because the nut juice Tom Bellamy offered me to darken my skin did not fade completely for an entire month. I assumed he'd stained me on purpose, but I didn't complain, either to him or to Pinkerton. I knew that appearances were everything. If I appeared to be a difficult employee, even if I had every reason, I'd lose the ground I'd gained with the boss. And Pinkerton had come to rely on me more and more. Sometimes, he even seemed friendly.

It was only unfortunate that my least favorite kind of case was also the kind Pinkerton found me most essential in solving: the murders.

The Harrington case began with a tapping on my window, just after four o'clock in the morning.

Groggy with sleep, all uncertain, I heard the noise. Was it even there? Was it part of a dream? I opened my eyes to see.

As soon as I knew for sure that the sound was real, and the gentle tapping became a louder series of knocks, I immediately slid across the bed and pulled my Deringer from the nightstand. I thumbed the hammer, stood, and wrapped my

robe more tightly around my body as I walked toward the window. I drew aside the curtain, just a sliver, and looked out. I could not have been more surprised at what I saw.

Tim Bellamy stood under my window, hunched against the nighttime chill and darkness, staring up expectantly with his cold, blue gaze.

After a few long moments, he said in a normal speaking voice, "Let me in, please, Mrs. Warne. I don't think either of us likes me standing here."

I replaced my gun in the drawer and hastened into the hallway, unlocking the front door of the building and holding it open to admit him. He immediately handed me something and stood silently with his heels together on the carpet, waiting like a messenger boy.

I opened the paper note, hastily folded and not quite square, no envelope. It read:

136 Sedgwick. Fatal case. Come right away. AP.

"He was going to send a messenger," said Bellamy quietly. "I offered to come instead. I didn't think you should go alone this time of night.

It wasn't the time to argue. I could defend myself against his chivalry some other day. I turned back toward my room and said, "Come on."

"Mrs. Warne, I don't think—"

"The hallway's worse than outside. Someone will come along. Think of my reputation."

That got him moving. He stood in my room like a statue, facing the closed door, while I dressed hastily. I would have suspected any other man of peeking over his shoulder while I was en déshabillé, but I doubted our white knight would lower himself to something so base. Had the circumstances been otherwise, I would have needled him about it to amuse myself, but had the circumstances been otherwise, he never would have been standing there.

After that, the only question was whether or not to take my gun. But if Pinkerton hadn't suggested it, I likely wouldn't need it. It sounded like the violence was in the past tense. I slid a jackknife into my boot just in case.

Bellamy and I walked together in complete silence, keeping a brisk pace, block after block disappearing behind us. I scrambled a bit to

keep up, my breath coming faster, but I had no intention of asking him to slow down. When the boss said right away, he meant it.

Greer's editor challenged her to improve the opening paragraph, and almost getting murdered is far more interesting than moving to new digs. Notice, too, that Bellamy has replaced the messenger. "Bellamy is one of Kate's coworkers and he's important throughout the book. I wanted to demonstrate what their relationship was like at this particular stage. I think it improves the scene, too – otherwise it could just start with her arriving at the Harrington's house, because she's just receiving a message. Now she's reacting to a noise, she's getting out her gun, she's teasing him a little – it all illustrates character, both hers and his." His insertion also allowed Greer to include a historical fact. "We only know a few of the cases that the real Kate Warne worked, and she impersonated a fortune-teller in one of them. But I wouldn't have included it just for that. At this point her relationship with most of her colleagues, especially Bellamy, is extremely contentious. He's the one who gives her the nut juice, knowing what will happen."

The rest of this scene shows Kate's detecting skills and how her plan to trap the murderer almost results in her death. Greer's changes draw you into the story so you feel and react as if you're "right there with her, struggling to breathe." This enables you to see and live in "her world instead of ours."

As Greer relates, she loves "creating people and places and stories, but I also really love talking about those people and places and stories with people who share my love for books. My book tour schedule is on my website at greermacallister.com/events and I also love to Skype with book clubs, wherever they might be." ❀



A freelance editor and historical novelist, CINDY VALLAR also presents writers' workshops and writes nonfiction articles about maritime piracy and historical fiction. Her historical fantasy "Rumble the Dragon" appears in Dark Oak Press' anthology *A Tall Ship, a Star, and Plunder*. You can visit her at www.cindyvallar.com.