

## Spotlight: Black Orchid Bookshop By Anthony Rainone

Buying a mystery book in New York City is not a hard thing to do given the presence of book chains sprouting like fungus in the darkened caverns of Manhattan. Add to that, tenacious small bookshops throughout the boroughs, and the plethora of web book sites, and you have a mad hot cornucopia of choices for your crime fiction fix. If you're looking for dedication and passion in your bookstore however, you won't find anyone with a bigger heart, for both readers and writers, than Bonnie Claeson and Joe Guglielmelli of Black Orchid Bookshop.

Black Orchid began with an act of fate born from frustration. Bonnie had been running Foul Play bookstore, on the Upper East Side, since the early eighties, and Joe was a fulltime practicing lawyer and regular customer (he had been "hooked" on mysteries since "reading the Hardy Boys in fourth grade"). They had hit it off initially, and Joe had helped "volunteer many hours" in the evenings. After a particularly difficult day at the office, Joe went over to Foul Play with the idea of venturing a business proposition to Bonnie – they should open their own bookstore. Without Joe uttering a word about his idea, Bonnie intuitively introduced him to a publishing rep as "And this is Joe and he wants to own a bookstore." And so, their crime fiction icon was born.

With dedicated friends scouring potential locations for the new store, they hit upon a former bakery, with an exposed brick wall interior that everyone fell in love with. The deal was officially sealed when Bonnie brought her hairdresser by, and he gave it the thumbs up. The two partners in business (and now in life), opened their store in 1994 and took the name from a Rex Stout novel, *Black Orchids*. "Bonnie is a big Rex Stout fan," said Joe, "and

thought [the name] had that nice air of intrigue."

Robert Crais captures the first time experience of entering the cozy confines of the store. "So here's this hallway – this long, narrow space, and in hands other than Bonnie and Joe's, it would probably remind you of the death corridor in *THE GREEN MILE*." With bookshelves lining the brick walls and a quaint spiraling staircase that descends to a sublevel housing more bookshelves (and where this author stocked up on Ross MacDonald reissues from the seventies), there is a palpable warmth. "This space, which could and would be so cold in the hands of others, reflects the true good hearts of these people-- who love this genre and books and readers and writers," said Crais. "I have never stepped into their store when I did not feel cared for, and cared about."

New York City holds some advantages for Black Orchid, because the city "is still the publishing capital to a large extent," explains Joe. "If authors are doing publicity and come to New York, it's easier for us." And meeting writers is not just fun for readers, it gives Bonnie and Joe a thrill, too. Kinky Friedman stops by to chat when he's in town, and Andrew Vachss prefers visiting on quiet afternoons. While all writers are welcomed, there are a few moments that stand out, such as when PD James visited for the very first time in February '06 ("She was magnificent," said Bonnie). Another cherished moment came when Evan Hunter, too sick to visit, sent a photo instead festooned with cartoon bubbles and funny sayings. A note of caution for new writers: avoid trashing Robert B. Parker. Joe finds bad-mouthing Parker (and yes, Joe's a fan) the indication of a writer who ends up a flash in the pan. "For some reason, that's usually the sign. They come in and say 'he used to write, but now he sucks,' and you go: okay, here's another one." If you're going

to trash talk another author – at least make it a literary writer.

To fully understand the impact that the Black Orchid Bookshop has made on the crime fiction community, all you have to do is survey the reactions of crime writers. Consider what Rebecca Pawel had to say: “I have a special spot for Black Orchid, because it was there that I did my very first book signing. It was the day of the huge anti-war demonstration in February 2003... I...of course found [the Black Orchid] completely empty. Bonnie and Joe were incredibly sweet and gave me hot tea and stacks of books to sign, and we sat and chatted. They rock.” Charles Ardai, publisher of *Hard Case Crime* and author of *Little Girl Lost*, is equally enamored. “Their passion for what they do comes through every time you see them. I think you'd be hard pressed to find a mystery writer who hasn't benefited from their friendship and support.” Black Orchid has been embraced by the local (non-mystery) community, too. “People on the block stop by to say hello and see how we're doing,” says Bonnie. “The people in our building are very warm, and they're not even mystery readers.”

Serving the crime fiction community and recognized for their “support of established and emerging writers” has garnered Bonnie and Joe the Raven Award, given for outstanding achievement in the mystery field outside the realm of creative writing. They will receive their award at this year's 60<sup>th</sup> Edgar ceremony, though it “hasn't sunken in yet,” said Bonnie. When she first learned of the award from MWA Office Manager Margery Flax, Bonnie “cried” and Joe found it “mind boggling.” Bonnie plans on letting Joe give the acceptance speech. “For someone who likes to talk, I'll just be [befuddled] up there,” she related. Though they feel bookselling is simply what they “do,” their influence is enormous and goes beyond the bounds of their Manhattan store. Reed Farrel Coleman

recalled: “I was headed to my first Bcon in Austin and I was frankly scared to death. I did notice a friendly-faced guy reading...on my flight...and I introduced myself...it was Joe from Black Orchid who knew my work...his kind face and reassurance really helped.”

Running a bookstore poses economic challenges, and the Black Orchid is no different than many small businesses, in a city where monthly rent surpasses the gross national product of most nations. While one might surmise that bookstore chains are applying all the pressure, you might be surprised to learn that Bonnie and Joe don't see them as the bigger problem. The real culprits are the publishers. “[They] cater so much to what the chains want and what the chains think,” states Joe. “The problem is we're not as complete as we used to be,” acknowledges Bonnie. “When it comes to back listed authors, if [the chains] don't order them, we can't get them either, because the publishers stop printing them.” When readers are forced to go places “like Amazon” to find those hard-to-get earlier back issues, that takes money out of the pockets of small stores. While Black Orchid has “yet to turn a profit,” those who crave their Black Orchid fix shouldn't fret. Though you might not see them selling books anytime soon at future Bouchercons

(it's too expensive to ship books to conferences and neither one drives; in fact, Joe has the “only documented case of back seat road rage”), Bonnie and Joe's love of books guarantees that Black Orchid will continue to be a part of the crime fiction community, “even if I have to sell books from my living room,” stated Bonnie. Sounds like a damn good reason to pick up a mystery book – at Black Orchid preferably -- if you haven't already.

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