

HOT WIRED by Jane Isenberg

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menopause da mystery series

Jane Isenberg

When I had my first hot flash back in 1991, I did what most English profs do to confront a new and, perhaps, difficult life passage. I turned to fiction in search of a role model. To my dismay, I found not a single literary character sweating and forgetting the way my friends and I all were. In those pre-*Menopause the Musical* days there weren't any fifty-something women wringing out their nightgowns on stage, on TV, or in films either. The invisibility of menopausal women in the media struck me as ageist, sexist, and retro, and it made me furious. Seething and sweating, I decided to make up the character I wanted to read about and put her in a book.

But when I sat down at my PC to do this, I realized that I didn't know what story I wanted to tell about her. I did know I wanted to put her in a situation that would showcase her wisdom, warmth, wit, and pluck. I wanted her to validate those of us who believe that, in spite of the rigors of estrogen depletion, fifty really is the new thirty today. So for about a year, my sleepless and moody protagonist with dry eyes and wet nightgowns danced around in my head waiting for me to dream up an adventure worthy of her.

Lo! Once again, life provided inspiration. A corrupt board of trustees forced the president of my community college to resign because she refused to hire their singularly untalented friends and relatives to fill academic and administrative posts. The president was a young, talented, hardworking, student-friendly female leader. Again I was livid. As I bemoaned our college's loss, I also thought about the damage the president's "resignation" would do to her career. It was as if she had been murdered professionally. As soon as I muttered to myself the word "murdered," I had one of those epiphanies that Elizabeth George talks about in *Write Away*. She says, "When I'm on to the right story . . . I feel a surge of excitement in my solar plexus that literally sends the message *Yes yes yes* to my brain." Suddenly I realized what kind of story I wanted to write about my menopausal character. I'd write a mystery! My spunky sweat-soaked woman would be an amateur sleuth, an English prof of course. She would solve the murder of a community college president. I would title the book *The "M" Word*.

As I developed Bel's character in that and seven subsequent books (*Death in a Hot Flash, Mood Swings to Murder, Midlife Can Be Murder, Out of Hormones Way, Hot and Bothered, Hot on the Trail, and Hot Wired*), it occurred to me that an amateur sleuth is a fitting embodiment for a midlife woman. To track down a killer one needs to be part shape changer, part shaman, a multi-tasking problem

solver who is also flexible and strong. A modern midlife woman needs similar strengths, along with a sense of humor, to cope with the demands of her multi-generational family, her career, and her relationships while praying that her estrogen patch is not making her vulnerable to cancer. In each of the books, I focus on a different aspect of midlife. So over the course of the series, Bel, a divorcée, parents adult children, remarries, struggles for bladder control, reacts to news of her daughter's pregnancy and wedding, takes care of her own elderly mother, supports a friend through breast cancer therapy, and returns to her Jewish spiritual roots. It is typical of midlife women to be overbooked, and Bel is no different. She has to do all these things AND bring murderers to justice.

In *Hot Wired*, Bel's crime solving takes on a new urgency. The victim is a former student with a grudge, a wannabe rapper who has posted a nasty hip hop diatribe dissing Bel on a college website. This public putdown rattles the college community and threatens Bel's job. When the young rapper is found dead, Bel is the police's prime suspect. To investigate, Bel enters the alien world of hip hop. Why did I make the victim a hip hopper? Why immerse Bel in the hip hop scene? The answer to these questions is related to one of the themes of the series which is, as I have already indicated, ageing. Up until I began the research for *Hot Wired*, like Bel, I was clueless about hip hop. I thought all hip hoppers were trigger-happy, woman-hating, drug thugs who get off by exposing the cracks of their behinds. But as hip hop beats, lyrics, fashion, and films gradually became part of mainstream popular culture, I began to think I might be missing something. My ignorance was making me feel marginal, out of step, even, God forbid, old.

So I read *Hip Hop America* by music critic Nathan George and watched rented rap videos. I no longer skipped the newspaper articles detailing the lives, loves, and court appearances of rap stars, and I listened to hip hop music online. The walls of our condo in a sedate retirement community in Issaquah, WA pulsed, the floor vibrated, and the neighbors wondered what the rumpus was about. Before long, I had liberated my inner hip hop artist and was writing my own rap lyrics. *Hot Wired* has at least three of my original rap pieces, including the catalytic rhyme that disses Bel on the book's opening page. I no longer think that 50 Cent is just a half dollar misspelled and now I know that, to some, Eminem is more than a melt-in-your-mouth morsel of chocolate. Best of all, Bel and I both emerged unscathed from our forays into the lively world of hip hop, and my husband and our neighbors are recovering.

About the author: Jane Isenberg, a retired community college English prof, and her husband, Phil Tompkins, a retired systems analyst who runs a Parkinson's Disease website, live in Issaquah, WA near two succulent grandkids. www.Janelsenberg.com

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