

[THE APPLAUSE DIES.]

by Lori Rader-Day

Excerpt from the 2023 International Crime Fiction Guild Awards Program: A Transcript
[The applause dies.]

Miriam Hammond: Thank you. Oh, thank you, please do sit. Thank you so much. My goodness, this bobble they've handed me is quite heavy. I will place it somewhere prominent so I can recall my pleasure at finally having my life of crime recognized.

[Light laughter from the audience.]

Miriam Hammond: Some of you didn't like that joke. Some of you don't like me, I suppose. These things aren't unanimous, are they? Every crime-fiction author has her detractors. She has her gushing fans, her acolytes and accolades. But she also has her collection of one-star reviews, screeds written feverishly in the dead of night and published with typos unironically intact demanding quality writing and far less of . . . whatever it is she is, does, or creates. But let us admit a truth hanging over our heads tonight. Who among us hasn't made a career of one-star stuff drafted in the dead of night?

[Laughter from the audience.]

Miriam Hammond: I'd be remiss if I didn't properly thank the Guild and its leaders for this honor. When I received notice that the Guild's Lifetime Achievement Award would be bestowed upon me, I had to check the mirror. Lifetime achievement has a certain patina to it, doesn't it? And there I was, yes, silver hair where

Lori Rader-Day last appeared in *EQMM* in 2014. In the intervening years, she's had half a dozen novels published, winning a Mary Higgins Clark Award, an Agatha, and three Anthony Awards, and receiving a nomination for the Edgar. She's a past president of Sisters in Crime. †

once had been dark. Eyes, once bright, behind glasses peering with confusion back at me. Unfamiliar lines in a familiar face . . . Oh dear, I've sunk to cliché. I've introduced you to the vile protagonist by having her gaze into a mirror. A minor crime, that one.

Speaking of crimes . . .

[Hold for laughter.]

No?

My relationship with crime began at a tender age. Children today are indoctrinated into the world of murder along with their whole-food, vegan pellets—through the mass shootings that plague our nation and the preparations forced upon children in an effort to help them survive one. Back in my day, perhaps yours as well, monstrous origin stories were harder to come by. We didn't know our sugared cereals would kill us, or the sunshine. Simpler times, when real life held simpler fears.

Nuclear annihilation.

[Light laughter from audience.]

Miriam Hammond: So faceless, so clean and Soviet.

We only had to cower under our desks to feel we'd been given the tools to make it through another day and any terrible eventuality. The monster, stowed back under the bed. Murder was something that happened only on TV, but what wondrous TV it was.

All that innocence soon came to a cold, hard stop for me—as most of you already know. The biographers and—I believe the term these days is content creators—have made much of it all my life. We cannot help which town we're born to, which household, what poisons we're fed along with our mother's milk. I am my parents' legacy, my mother's as well as my father's. That odd ambivalence within me, heir of both the murderer and one of his many victims, must surely be the fountain from which my earliest scribblings gushed. Thank God those amateur attempts are long lost or someone would surely comb through them and make them discoverable. Evidence of crime, indeed—maudlin teen poetry.

[Laughter from the audience.]

If these revelations are somehow a surprise to you, I direct your attention to the countless Internet articles that have tried to get to the bottom of my psyche and make me somehow accountable for my own troubles. Murder walls constructed of words, drawing theoretical red string from one assailable, so-called fact to another in the juvenile hope of making connections between random occurrences that add up to my life.

The true achievement of a lifetime, I believe, is surviving one.

Surviving one or flourishing in one, against all odds.

Which brings us to publishing. Let's not let publishing off the hook, even tonight, in this glorious, festooned grand hall, with so many of its true villains out there among us.

Today's publishing landscape, as they call it, as though we were farmers. Or would the writers be the oxen, do you think? Many seem to think we are, and raise us for slaughter. If this publishing landscape is indeed a farm, I leave it to you to consider the produce it yields. To consider what fetid fertilizer we spread upon the ground, and what results can be expected.

It is not the world we all entered so long ago with our little stories held out, our chins high and quivering. To those of us of the silver hair, what a strange world, a strange and twisting ride. As I look out to this audience, I can't help but remember that not many of the people I met as I entered this realm are still among us. My first agent, gone from this mortal coil. My first editor. My first copy editor. The first reviewer to venture an ill-conceived pan—but these are all victims of time. For the most part, as I understand it. With glaring exceptions, but let's not speak of actual bloodshed.

In any case, so many of our former colleagues have left us. Here we are, the survivors of what can only be called a killing spree perpetrated by the clock. The few, the tired. I'm assuming some of your mirror-protagonists have discovered lines upon their faces too, or I would not be standing before you tonight. You and I, we've lived through the highest winds and the roughest seas, our powder and our sense of humor kept dry through sheer spite.

But make no mistake, I have been very lucky. No one could have had as many narrow escapes as—

[Boisterous noise from the audience.]

Miriam Hammond: Oh, dear. Have I upset someone?

[Shouting, indistinct.]

[Crowd noise while security escorts a member of the audience from the room.]

Miriam Hammond: My thanks to that gentleman for keeping things lively. Someone do capture his name and address so that I may send a fruit basket.

[Restless noise from among the audience.]

Miriam Hammond: Now might be a good time for some recognition for our peacekeepers. I've just noticed a familiar face in the back of the room, in fact. Captain Allan Donnelson, a great friend of mine o'er these many years. Let me tell you a story, since that's what you are commending me for on this occasion.

Once upon a time, my husband, Rick, died under quite surprising circumstances, some of you will remember. Captain Donnelson was once a newly minted detective, eager but perhaps wet behind the ears, as the saying goes. He was tireless, just tireless, and passionate to seek justice. It's true that he did some damage to my reputation at the time, but I have long ago forgiven him. He was merely doing his job, of course, and though I am not privy to every detail having to do with the investigation into Rick's death, which is, of course, still open, I do think the culprit will be caught, someday, with the help of our men and women in blue.

A round of applause, if you will, for the captain, whose recent retirement has clearly not kept him from remaining in dogged pursuit of . . . justice.

[Applause from the audience.]

Miriam Hammond: A credit to his badge. Now I've learned a great deal from my long acquaintance with the captain. Although I don't believe mentorship was his goal when we first met. [Laughter from speaker.] But it has been a gift, Captain Donnelson, truly, because I have been able to bring a certain verisimilitude to my wicked little stories with your help.

It was Captain Donnelson, in fact, whom I called when my second husband, Michael, died only a month—Excuse me, I . . . It's fresh, you see. The wound of having a loved one wrenched from you in such a violent manner never goes away. I have learned it all too well. Perhaps it . . . dulls with time. But I have not yet had the time required to speak of Michael's absence so casually.

[Indistinct noise into the microphone. *Note from transcriptionist: Crying?*]

Miriam Hammond: Thank you for humoring an old woman, but I owe so much to the men I have had the honor of calling my partners. They, each, were my world and should indeed be acknowledged here tonight, for they each had as much a role in my life of crime as any agent or editor ever did. Rick steadied me in the early years of my career and gave me the foundation to reach for what I wanted. With his loss, I thought I would never recover my senses. Whatever the press—these web-spinners—had to say about my spending of the insurance money and the sale of Rick's company, I barely remember it. I was in a tailspin. But when Michael entered my life, he brought me back from the brink and—I'm sorry. Forgive me, but I think there is something here I want to say about finding love and devotion when the model you were given in your home of origin was so violent, famously violent, inescapable.

My father being who he was, you might expect me to be . . . something I am not. A monster. Maybe I have told this story elsewhere, but I believe this audience would like to hear it.

When my father finally met with justice—the messy kind, if you'll remember, he was usually so skilled with his knife—I was on hand to receive the police, the reporters. I was

covered in his blood, of course. Almost everything in the house was. If you've seen the photos . . . Those first on the scene believed I was a victim of my father's crimes, and that couldn't be further from the truth. I was never just the victim of my parents' crimes—I collapse them both together here, for expediency's sake. I have benefited from those crimes, by embracing them. The attention my parents could not provide, I have received. I turned the grisly details into fiction you have all read and now honor, into a career. A lucrative one. Indeed, you could say I learned a great deal from my parents.

[Indeterminate noise from the crowd.]

Miriam Hammond: Oh, some of you rather disliked that. I see jackets being put on, valet tickets in hands. Let me wrap up quickly before we're left with too many desserts. All I meant to say was that even with such a rocky beginning, I have managed something vital to human happiness that my dear parents—yes, I loved them, no matter the suffering they caused—something they never knew: love, joy. This lifetime has been fraught with loss and despair . . . With suspicion—Captain Donnelson, don't think I don't know that you're here lurking in the back of the room in the hopes some bon mot will fall from my lips that will cinch my wrists at last. This lifetime you celebrate has been a trial, and I mean that in both ways, both an ordeal to bear and withstand and a tribunal in the court of public opinion. But it has also been far more than that.

Perhaps my choice of career has kept me in this harsh spotlight, but it was my father's crimes that put me there in the first place. I suffered his crimes again and again, apologizing for pains I did not cause, apologizing, in a way, for my own survival. My

own thriving, my own health and bloom, my own fortitude and eventual success.

But since we are here—in part, let's not discount the other awards handed out tonight, those heavy, heavy obelisks now to be perched like so many murder weapons in so many homes—since we are here to honor this lifetime, mine, allow me this one moment to let the judgments and suspicions drop away, to exult. To crow, just this once, that I survived the worst our species has to mete out against one another, that I pulled the pieces together to create myself anew, someone capable of love and worthy of it, twice—at least twice in this lifetime and perhaps I'm not done yet.

[Indeterminate noise.]

Miriam Hammond: As old as the protagonist in the mirror looks, she's still brimming with lifeblood and vitality, strong as an ox for the fertile fields where we all toil. There are many crimes against the written word left in this old broad, but thanks for trying to put the punctuation mark at the end of it all with this heavy memento and a play for a line in my obituary—Lifetime Achievement winner, nice try, fellas. You'll have to get in a long line to become a part of this bitch's obit, if Captain Donnelson's men have anything to say about it.

[Crowd jeering.]

Miriam Hammond: I see the tell-tale signs of an escort off the stage. The hook, vaudeville style. But before I go, since I asked you to forgive my gloating, I want to follow through. One crow of glory as I stand here on this stage for what will obviously be the last time. My father, my mother, my husbands, that agent and the one that came after, the people who dared to think they knew my work better than I knew it myself . . . none

of them are standing here before you.

[Indistinct noise. Note from transcriptionist: Another voice. A scuffle for the microphone?]

Miriam Hammond: None of them lived this lifetime, baby. None of

them. Me. I'm the one who accomplished everything she ever set out to do, no matter who stood in her way. I did. I did it. I did it all.

[End excerpt.] ●

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