



Gillian Roberts

Judith A. Greber

[1939 –]

Amanda Pepper, a high school teacher in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania:

Caught Dead in Philadelphia (1987)

1988 Anthony Award for Best First Novel

Philly Stakes (1989)

Finalist 1989 Agatha Award for Best Novel

I'd Rather Be in Philadelphia (1991)

With Friends Like These (1993)

How I Spent My Summer Vacation (1994)

In the Dead of Summer (1995)

The Mummies' Curse (1996)

The Bluest Blood (1998)

Adam and Evil (1999)

Helen Hath No Fury (2000)

Claire and Present Danger (2003)

Till the End of Tom (2004)

A Hole in Juan (2006)

All's Well That Ends (2007)

Emma Howe, the 50-something owner of a private detective agency, and Billie August, a young single mother, in Tiburon (Marin County), California:

Time and Trouble (1998)

Whatever Doesn't Kill You (2001)

Gillian Roberts (1939 -)

- born 1939 in Philadelphia as Judith Pearlstein
- University of PA: BS, 1961, MA 1965, some doctoral study
- - married Robert Greber, a business executive in 1962, 2 sons
- - was an English teacher at West Philadelphia High School 1962-65, community mental health worker (Phila) 1967-68
- - University of San Francisco, adjunct faculty in their MFA Writing Program 1979-2015
- - lived in Tiburon CA (Marin County)
- - wrote 4 novels (1982-1992) as Judith Greber
- Amanda Pepper series – many have social issues like domestic abuse, teen pregnancy etc.
- “Judith's been happily married for almost the entire last millennium, and is the mother of two grown sons.
- Gillian, Judith's mysterious alter-ego, was named at a party by Judith's friends after a publisher insisted she take another name for her mysteries, so as not to confuse the readers. Judith's been confused ever since.”

Gillian Roberts - 2002 interview:

1) Your website says you were born in Philly, taught English, and are married with two sons. Can you give us more biography that that?

I've been married for 40 years to the tall, dark, handsome stranger I met the night before I moved to San Francisco from Philly after college. We became pen-pals for a year, and then, barely knowing each other, except by mail, I moved back to Philly and we married. We've had a wonderful and adventurous time. When I married Bob, he was a young stockbroker with Merrill Lynch, then he worked for George Lucas as president of Lucasfilm during the heady *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* days – which is why we moved to Marin County, where Lucasfilm is headquartered. And then, after a goodly amount of time, he returned to his original business and ultimately became Chairman of the Board of the Pacific Stock Exchange, from which position he is now happily retired. Along the way, we produced two sons. Matt is now in marketing at Charles Schwab and Jon is an audio engineer at Skywalker Sound (part of Lucasfilms). So, ironically, they've each followed on of their father's career paths.

2) How long did you teach English?

I taught in Philadelphia for three years at an enormous high school – what used to be called an 'inner city' high school, which was close to a tragic place because

of the way things were (or weren't) run and the way students were undervalued. For example, I got in trouble with my department head for wasting too much paper on "them" (I've of course given that attitude to Helga.) When we moved to LA, I found a job through a college classmate who was now headmistress of an Orthodox Jewish high school and was willing to arrange my classes around my carpooling duties, The boys and girls were in separate buildings and for half the day they received religious instruction and the other half, we came in: in the morning my girls would be told about futures that hinged on finding marriage brokers, and in the afternoon we were working on AP English. Neither school resembled Philly Prep. I still teach, however and have done so for the past 15 years or so, but now I teach writing classes. I'm adjunct faculty in the University of San Francisco MFA in writing program.

3) Why did you start writing?

The short answer is because I have a wonderful, supportive, and goal-oriented husband who shamed me into it.

The long version: For what feels like my entire life, I said I wanted to write. When my younger son entered kindergarten, I decided to go to law school, whereupon my husband said, "You've always said you would write someday. Give me one good reason why this isn't someday? And to encourage me in that direction, he created the "Greber Grant in Aid," which provided, with tongue firmly in cheek, room, board, clothing and a small discretionary allowance if, for the 3 years I would have been in law school, I instead wrote during the hours the children were in school. Having no excuse or rational way to avoid it anymore, I started to write every day. After years of avoiding it, once I began I was hooked.

Gillian Roberts – 2015 interview

1) After your mainstream novels, you turned to writing mysteries. I assume that was because you had been a fan of mysteries for many years. Who were some of your favorite mystery writers when you began your series? Any specific titles among their works that were particular favorites?

1. The way my circuitous career happened was not as deliberate as your question suggests. First of all, *Caught Dead in Philadelphia* was the first book I wrote, but nobody bought it because it went to market in 1980 (I am feeling soooo old writing that date-!) before U.S. women mystery writers had hit the market, and it was rejected by publishers with words to the effect that because of the humor, it wasn't a 'real' mystery...

I then wrote a book called *Easy Answers* (not a mystery) and it sold, and I followed it with another contemporary novel called *The Silent Partner* (about trailing spouses, following their husbands' careers—I had just moved for the second time because of Bob's career...) and it sold, and I was then writing an

historical (which became *Mendocino*) when I met Marilyn Wallace, who told me that the entire mystery world had changed in the five years or so since I'd sent mine out. So I asked my agent to send it out again, and it sold in a week to Scribners, who said "and it's a series, yes?" I knew so little about mysteries, I was shocked, but I of course said yes. (They had turned it down in the initial round of rejections. I wasn't allowed to ever let them know that...) The publisher of *Mendocino*, which, it turned out, was going to be published close to the date Scribners had picked, got very upset, said the chains wouldn't buy a hardback mystery or they'd only buy a few copies per store (this was '86 I think) and that would hurt their sales of *Mendocino*. They asked me to break the contract or take another name. This made Scribner's angry because they—erroneously—thought my name was worth something. I gave back part of my advance and changed my name, believing I could revert to my own name again after *Mendocino* was out. I didn't understand about bookstore or library shelving, obviously. I was named at a beach party the night before the catalogue copy was going to press. Alcohol was involved.

My writing a mystery wasn't, alas, the result of my having been a mystery fan for life, or almost ever. I don't remember reading any mysteries except Poe and, oddly, Father Brown. I grew up in a house filled with books and I was an avid reader, but my parents didn't read mysteries and I suppose never thought about them, and the library (Philadelphia) did not stock Nancy Drew when I was young (or for many decades after I grew up, for that matter.)

I almost literally stumbled upon mysteries when my two boys were tiny and I took them to the library for story hour. An hour free to wander the stacks, and I came upon that library's mystery section. It was the habit there, at least then, for readers to write a word or two in the back of the book, giving their opinion. (Very early Amazon star system!) I started picking up a book and opening the back and if people loved it, taking it out. I was rather embarrassed to be reading mysteries and would put them between two "real" books I was checking out. (Ridiculous, I know, but there I was, a lit snob) Of course I became entranced by Agatha Christie at first, and then I slowly branched out.

And so, one night, reading to the boys from Winnie the Pooh, I came across Pooh's real name and because I'd been reading mysteries, I paused and for once, didn't only think "I didn't know that," but thought, "I wonder if many people know that. I wonder if a policeman who didn't read to children would know that. I don't think so which means—it could be a clue." And as insane as that sounds, that is the entire basis of why I wrote a mystery.

I honestly can't remember any titles from that time, and I feel so dim saying I "discovered" Agatha Christie! Miss Marple was my favorite. And later, I do remember Per Wahloo and Maj Sjowall. And Ed McBain—loved his books because of the characters. And Rex Stout (I believe I had a crush on Archie Goodwin).

2) *Publishers Weekly* said of your Amanda Pepper series that it "comfortably occupies the space between cozy and city-grit crime fiction". Do you agree with that characterization?

2. I love that description from *PW*. I hope that's smack where those mysteries are. I wanted to write books that had some serious content or ideas, but were told from the point of view of a woman who saw the world with some humor. So it was a tightrope between being silly and trivializing the idea of murder or crime, which I really didn't want, and ruining the voice of Amanda. To be in the middle of those two poles does my old heart good!

3) What influenced your decision to end the Amanda Pepper series?

3. I think a lot of factors went into making the decision to end the Amanda Pepper series (not that I haven't thought of bringing her back for an encore. I saw a news story that was absolutely perfect for her...still mulling it.) The main one was a growing feeling (and it is so hard to write this without sounding arrogant, which I hope I'm not) that even though I tried small private challenges to make each book a different writing experience (e.g. not actually having anybody die in one of them, or having her book group all be involved in sleuthing, or aiming for a Mack Sennett ending to one of them, having no one killer, but a series of events that led to the death, etc.) I increasingly felt I knew how to write this particular person/world/book/series, and I wanted a challenge. Also, when my longtime editor left, and I was pretty much orphaned, it seemed a good time to get off the stage. (I guess the irony was that I did try something different—an historical mystery set in Mexico in 1650, during the Inquisition here. The protagonist was a secret Jew whose father had been burned at the stake...It was the hardest research imaginable, and it took forever—and nobody bought it. Apparently, nobody cares about here, then... But I'm glad I did it. Now, I'm again trying something different: a contemporary psychological suspense. We shall see what happens with that.

By the way, it is perhaps of interest that *The Bluest Blood's* basic story—that of the two imposters who were criminals, etc., is based on a true news story I read. At this point, I'm not sure if they were really major criminals, but I think they were (both men, though one dressed as a woman) and they conned Philadelphia society in incredible ways, were big donors in the art world, but were complete, criminal fakes. Don't you adore it when you stumble across something like that? And as you know, a school is this wonderful microcosm of the world at large, and you and I and Amanda and Susan can almost always find a hook into those great stranger-than-truth stories...

I'm honored to think Amanda and I influenced Susan Lombardi and you!

Things to Think About

Characters:

- 1) Amanda – Like all the others in the books we've read, she's "single" but not alone. How does she compare to each of the other female sleuths?
- 2) How are parents at Philly Prep portrayed?
- 3) How are the faculty and staff at Philly Prep portrayed?

Plot:

- 1) Did you guess whodunit?
- 2) What were the clues? Were there red herrings?
- 3) Was the ending satisfying?

Style

- 1) The story is told in Amanda's voice. How would you characterize her telling of the story? Did you find it humorous?
- 2) There are several themes – "affluenza," family secrets, book banning – as well as gender and class. How do they play out in this book?
- 3) Title: Who has the "bluest blood"?

Setting:

We've read 3 other books with urban settings (Boston and New York). How does Philadelphia compare?