

Whodunit?

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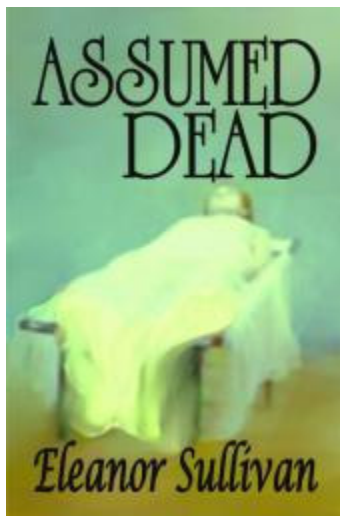
By Laura Raines

Pulse editor

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Whenever Eleanor Sullivan saw nurses portrayed on television or read about them in a novel, it bothered her.

"They never portray nurses accurately," said Sullivan, Ph.D., RN, FAAN. "They often would relegate them to a nothing role, which fails to show their incredible intelligence."



Eleanor Sullivan has written three Monika Everhardt mysteries, including 'Assumed Dead,' which was published in 2006.

Sullivan believes that nurses are the invisible majority in health care.

"The public has little idea how complicated the intensive-care setting is, or what goes on in a nurse's mind every day," she said.

She set out to tell people what nurses do by writing a series of mystery novels with an ICU nurse as its central character. After all, she had been a nurse for more than 25 years and had written several nursing books and journal articles. She also enjoyed reading mysteries.

Her first mystery, "Twice Dead," was published by Hilliard & Harris in 2002.

"My book started with the central character [Monika Everhardt, head nurse of the ICU at a fictional hospital]. I envisioned the kind of nurse I'd want to take care of me," Sullivan said.

In "Twice Dead," Everhardt solves the mystery of who killed a young woman who bled to death after an apparent abortion but was never pregnant in the first place.

"Her character, her skills and frustrations with health care are real, but the plot is all mystery," Sullivan said. "I always start with who was murdered and why, and then do an outline, which usually changes as I begin writing."

Sullivan became a nurse after tragedy struck.

"In 1970, I had just had my fifth child, when my husband was injured in an auto accident," she said. "I watched the nurses take care of him until he died two weeks later and [I] knew that's what I wanted to do."

Sullivan had just lost her childhood sweetheart. She had never gone to college and was the mother of five children under 12.

"People told me I was too old, had too many children, couldn't afford college," Sullivan said.

She enrolled in St. Louis Community College and graduated at the top of her class with an associate degree in nursing in 1974. She earned more degrees, and practiced and taught nursing as she raised her children.

Sullivan became president of the Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing and was editor of the Journal of Professional Nursing. From 1988 to 2003, she served as dean and then as a professor at the University of Kansas School of Nursing.

Sullivan's road from nurse to writer was not easy.

During the late 1990s Sullivan started writing fiction, but soon discovered that it was just as hard as nursing. She realized that what she was writing didn't match up to what she enjoyed reading, so the would-be novelist began attending writing workshops.

"The advice I give people today is that you have to accept the fact that you are totally switching careers, and you'll have to learn a different set of skills," Sullivan said.

She also faced colleagues who told her she was too old to switch careers and that she'd never make money as a writer.

But Sullivan's perseverance paid off. She stopped teaching nursing classes in 2003, and now writes full time. She also has a speaking business in St. Louis.

Sullivan serves on the advisory board of the University of Missouri-St. Louis Barnes College of Nursing.

Revising the seventh edition of her nursing text, "Effective Leadership and Management in Nursing," keeps Sullivan up to speed about changes in the profession. But in her books, she focuses on the murder mystery. As a fiction writer, she knows that putting in too much nursing detail would slow the plot.

"Nurses tell me they love my books. One wrote to say that she 'could tell this was a nurse who had walked those [hospital] halls,' which I take as a great compliment," Sullivan said. "Other readers tell me that [they've] learned a lot, and that's what I wanted to do, to tell people about the vital role of nurses."

In appreciation for the opportunities that she was given in nursing, Sullivan donates a portion of the money from book sales to nursing scholarships.

Sullivan has published three Monika Everhardt mysteries (her others are "Deadly Diversion" and "Assumed Dead"), but is switching gears to write a historical mystery set in 1830s Ohio about a young midwife/herbalist.

"This character is struggling with the rigid authority of her society and religion. It's fascinating to learn about that time, but I really have to think things through, since this character comes from a different time," Sullivan said.

Her goal is to make her characters more powerful emotionally and to deepen the tension and suspense of the story.

"I want to take my writing to the next level," she said. "Having people say that they enjoy my work and like to spend time with my characters is a great reward."