

CHARLOTTE MACLEOD, AUTHOR OF MORE THAN 30 MYSTERIES

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Miss MacLeod was the author of more than 30 mystery books, many of them set in Massachusetts, where she lived for many years. Her books featured an array of oddball amateur sleuths, including Professor Shandy, a maverick scholar at a Bay State agricultural college, and Sarah Kelling, a Boston Brahmin who resorted to taking in boarders and solving mysteries on the side in order to retain the lifestyle to which she was accustomed on Beacon Hill.

A tiny woman, barely 5 feet tall, with a penchant for white gloves, ornate hats, and precise diction and grammar, Miss [CHARLOTTE MACLEOD] was considered by many to be the model for Jessica Fletcher, the mystery writer-sleuth played by Angela Lansbury on the television series "Murder, She Wrote."

A former resident of Sudbury, where she wrote her novels in an alcove designed for a washer and dryer, Miss MacLeod moved about 20 years ago to a farmhouse in Durham, Maine, where she had plenty of room to display her 22-volume Oxford English Dictionary.

FULL TEXT

Charlotte MacLeod was a mystery writer celebrated as much for her humor and the eccentricity of her characters as the plots of her novels.

"Her books had a lot of tea drinkers and hermit cookie eaters," Alexandria Baxter said this week of her sister, 82, who died last Friday in a nursing home in Lewiston, Maine.

Miss MacLeod was the author of more than 30 mystery books, many of them set in Massachusetts, where she lived for many years. Her books featured an array of oddball amateur sleuths, including Professor Shandy, a maverick scholar at a Bay State agricultural college, and Sarah Kelling, a Boston Brahmin who resorted to taking in boarders and solving mysteries on the side in order to retain the lifestyle to which she was accustomed on Beacon Hill.

"I'm not a mass-market type author. I appeal to a particular audience," Miss MacLeod said in a story published in the Globe in 1984.

"She wrote specifically for people who didn't want a lot of blood and guts," said her sister, who typed her manuscripts.

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Miss MacLeod was considered by many to be the model for Jessica Fletcher, the mystery writer-sleuth played by Angela Lansbury on the television series "Murder, She Wrote."

"When the show began, its writers came to her looking for advice, and she was horrified," said her sister, who lives in Richmond, Maine. "She said, 'Oh, heavens no. I'm a word person, not a TV person.'"

Miss MacLeod was born in Canada and moved to Dorchester with her family when she was 6 months old.

She said she remembered visiting the monkey house at Franklin Park Zoo and grocery shopping with her mother in Uphams Corner.

"I have the writer's memory," she said in 1984. "It is like having a photograph album in your head."

She and her family also lived in Weymouth and Newton, where her father had an office filled with mysterious objects.

"And here may be a clue as to why I find mysteries so intriguing," she said in 1984. "He kept the office locked, I suppose so we wouldn't get in and mess up his papers. But when we did go in, he would show us the most fascinating things, like carbon paper."

She said she decided to become a writer when she was 6 and a favorite uncle presented her with a copy of "The Four-Year-Old's Storybook" inscribed by the author, Kathleen Poole Stone, a distant relative.

"I thought, this is a relative of mine. If she can do it, I can do it," Miss MacLeod said. "And I sat right down and started to write a book."

After working in a library days and studying commercial art at night at the School of Practical Art, now the Art Institute of Boston, Miss MacLeod got a job as a staff artist in the advertising department at Stop & Shop.

Before long she was writing advertising copy as well. This led to a job with Nathan Miller Advertising in Boston, where she remained until retiring in 1982 as the firm's vice president.

On weekends she wrote short stories. In her 40s, she moved on to books. She began writing books for youths because as a child she felt there were never enough mysteries for girls to read.

She published her first adult mystery, "Rest You Merry," featuring Shandy, in 1978, and followed the next year with the first Kelling mystery, "The Family Vault."

Miss MacLeod was as eccentric as some of her characters. She began each writing day at 6 a.m. and would begin a new book only on a Sunday.

She worked in a bathrobe to avoid the temptation to run out of the house on an errand before her work was done.

She composed her whodunits on a Royal electric typewriter and insisted her sister do the same until Baxter threatened to quit unless she was allowed to use a computer.

She was a stickler for punctuation and grammar.

"She loved words and was very careful about which ones she used," her brother, Walter of Weymouth, said.

"I always loved to write. I love words," she said in 1994. "I can get ecstatic over a semicolon."

A former resident of Sudbury, where she wrote her novels in an alcove designed for a washer and dryer, Miss MacLeod moved about 20 years ago to a farmhouse in Durham, Maine, where she had plenty of room to display her 22-volume Oxford English Dictionary.

"She lived in Maine, but she still considered herself a Massachusetts writer; that's where most of her stories were set," Baxter said.

When Miss MacLeod moved to Maine, she made sure an airport was handy. She traveled widely to publicize her books. "She had a ball at book signings," said her sister. "Her fans appreciated her writing and her sense of humor, and she very much appreciated them. She could talk for hours."

In addition to her brother and sister, Miss MacLeod leaves two nieces.

Miss MacLeod was cremated and no funeral will be held. "But we'll be having a party for her in the spring," her sister said.

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