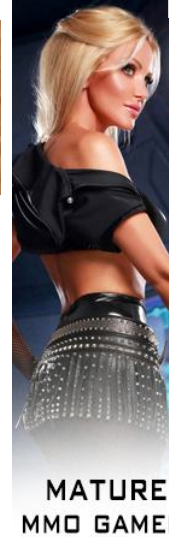


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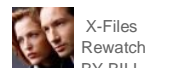
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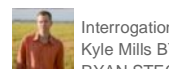
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MYSTERY

Girl Waits with Gun by Amy Stewart

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

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416 pages



"Stewart has said that she fell in love with the Kopp sisters while resurrecting their story, and it shows in her writing"

BOOK REVIEW: The Redoubtable Constance Kopp

BY KIM KANKIEWICZ

If, as [P.D. James said](#), crime fiction appeals to us because it celebrates "human courage and human intelligence and human perseverance," Amy Stewart's *Girl Waits with Gun* is among the most appealing crime novels recently published. At its heart, Stewart's debut novel is a story about an underdog bringing a bully to justice. The underdog, Constance Kopp, is a 35-year-old woman living with her two sisters on a farm near Paterson, New Jersey. The bully is a silk factory owner named Henry Kaufman who, on a summer day in 1914, crashes his automobile into the sisters' buggy. When Kaufman denies responsibility and roars away in a cloud of dust, Constance resolves to make him pay for the buggy's repair.

That small act of bravery sets off a year of terror. The "silk men" wield enormous power in Paterson, cemented by their recent defeat of a mill workers strike through coercion and violence. Constance's brother, Francis, married and living nearby, advises her to let the matter drop. But Constance won't be dissuaded. "The silk men behaved as if they owned Paterson," she tells us. "But none of them had the right to run us down in

the street and get away with it." She sends an invoice followed by a letter, eventually confronting Kaufman at his factory.

Kaufman responds with a campaign of intimidation. His gang of thugs storm the farm in Kaufman's automobile, shouting lecherous threats. They pen menacing letters and tie them to bricks hurled through the farmhouse windows. Constance seeks aid from the sheriff, Robert Heath, but it's soon clear that he needs her help as much as she needs his. Only when the two join forces is Kaufman held accountable for his crimes.

Much of the book's pleasure comes from seeing a woman deliver Kaufman's comeuppance. Kaufman is never more despicable than when he's tormenting women — not only the Kopp sisters, but the factory workers who depend upon him for their livelihood. Kaufman is a menacing presence in every aspect of these women's lives. He owns the corner markets where they buy groceries and the boarding houses where they live. He collects their rents in person and has passkeys to their rooms. There's an implication that several of his employees have borne his children. Constance befriends one such woman, Lucy Snow, whose infant son disappeared during the mill workers strike. Lucy won't go to the police for fear of retaliation, so Constance determines to find the child herself.

Constance has more autonomy than Lucy, but she, too, is in a precarious position. Along with Kaufman's threats, she faces losing her farm and either moving in with her brother ("Most men of his age had an unencumbered female relative or two tucked in an attic bedroom") or finding the kind of work available to women in 1914. She also must overcome the secret shame that sequestered her to rural New Jersey fifteen years ago.

Constance's victory over all these adversities has a feel-good-movie appeal. If Stewart had fabricated the whole story, the circumstances would seem implausible. But remarkably, Constance Kopp was a real woman who participated in a real sting operation against Henry Kaufman following a dispute over an automobile accident. The title *Girl Waits with Gun* comes from a newspaper headline describing Constance's stakeout of a street corner with a revolver in her handbag. Following this incident, Constance Kopp became one of the nation's first female deputy sheriffs. She went on to operate a detective agency with her two sisters — which means we can hope for a sequel recounting the Kopp sisters' further escapades.

Stewart became a detective as well to uncover the Kopp sisters' forgotten story. The bestselling author of *The Drunken Botanist* and other nonfiction titles, Stewart knows her way around research. More impressively, she uses research to serve the story, never bogging down the narrative with extraneous history. Stewart has said that she [fell in love with the Kopp sisters](#) while resurrecting their story, and it shows in her writing. She fully inhabits the character of Constance Kopp, who narrates the book. Standing taller than most men, Constance is the assumed leader among the sisters, a role she accepts with pragmatism. She's outspoken and tenacious, as when she reports Kaufman's harassment to the city police:



Amy Stewart

"Well," he said, closing the book and brushing off his hands as if he'd just completed a long day's work. "That takes care of it. Thank you for bringing this to our attention." He stood to see me out.

I kept my seat. He sank uncertainly back to his. "When can I expect to hear from you, Detective?" I asked.

He opened the ledger again as if he hoped to find the answer written there. "Ah — yes. Well, we have your case on file, and if any other incidents should arise—"

"I expect that there will be no more incidents. I expect you to pursue charges against Mr. Kaufman and put a stop to this unwarranted harassment of my family!" I said, rising to my feet at last.

Constance's sisters are equally vivid. Norma is fiercely intelligent and fiercely loyal. An avid newspaper reader and pigeon keeper, she distrusts strangers and has no time for polite society. Fleurette, the youngest Kopp sister, is theatrical and prone to flights of fancy. She regards the run-in with Kaufman as a great adventure. The two sisters are like the devil and angel on Constance's shoulders, Norma admonishing her to avoid conflict and Fleurette urging her toward heroism. Constance's decision to fight Kaufman — her realization that "we have to be a part of the world in which we live" — changes the course of all their lives.

Girl Waits with Gun is smart, funny, and suspenseful. Beyond entertaining us with a rollicking plot and colorful characters, Stewart allows us to witness the personal transformation of an extraordinary woman forgotten by history. It's a privilege to meet Constance Kopp in the pages of Stewart's book.

Images: Amy Stewart courtesy of www.amystewart.com.

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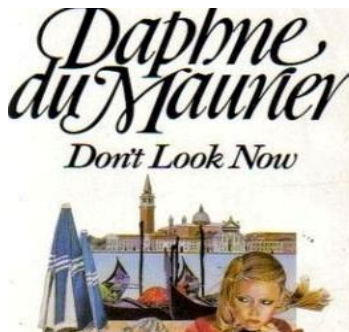
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