Megan Abbott

For Megan Abbott, I've discovered, literary paths are neither stable nor conventional nor do they go where or as expected. Pursuing a graduate degree in English literature at NYU, she decided to focus on the hardboiled noir books that were responsible for so many of the movies that she loved – as did I -- while growing up. These are the novels, set from the period of the Depression through the Cold War, generally featuring a tough-guy, solitary private eye, written by legendary authors, all the famous ones male, including Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James Cain. Abbot's thesis was published in 2002, under the title *The Street was Mine*, and received academic acclaim as well as plaudits from major writers in the genre.

So what's a girl to do when armed with such a prestigious Ph.D?: almost inevitably, she goes on to a college or university gig teaching literature. Not Abbott (though she has taught in a number of colleges and universities). Having sharpened her analytic apparatus, she plunged not into the traditional life of an academic, but swerved unexpectedly into writing noir fiction herself, dark tales set perfectly in the period, brilliantly plotted with impeccable control over the voices, the ambience, the manners, and the motives, but with one monumental difference from the noir classics: Abbott's tough main characters -- the perpetrators and the victims; the investigators and the criminals; the hunters and the hunted – are primarily women.

From 2005-2009, Abbott published four period novels -- two of them based on real events -- which perfectly captured the noir ethos, and which deservedly garnered wide admiration, readership, and awards. *Die a Little* was an 2006 Edgar nominee (Edgars are the prizes for mystery fiction) for best first novel by an American; *Queenpin* won the Edgar for Best Paperback novel in 2008; and *Bury Me Deep*, a nominee for the same award and several others in 2009, was also selected as one of the top crime novels of the year by the Los Angeles Times, the Detroit Free Press, and several other newspapers and magazines.

So you'd think Abbott had found her groove, or the groove had found her, right? But after just four years, having accumulated three Edgar nominations, three starred Kirkus reviews, and having been proclaimed by more than one reviewer to be the heir apparent to the original masters, Chandler and Hammett, Abbott suddenly engineered yet another major swerve in her literary trajectory. Her next four novels, including *You Will Know Me* from which she will read this evening, leave the dark, liminal worlds of the 30's to the 50s for the present, for the seemingly well lighted suburban small town, and most strikingly, for the turbulent worlds of teenage girls. But these are not young adult novels, however

superficially her main characters – cheerleaders, gymnasts, the girls next door (or even inside the door) – seem to be standard issue teenagers with standard teenage issues.   We have long read dark portraits of teenagers in troubling settings – think *Lord of the Flies*, *Turn of the Screw,* or *Lolita*, perhaps more recently, Brett Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero* or Jeffrey Eugenides' *Virgin Suicides*, – but never before, I think, found the action located in such placid, superficially conventional circumstances. In each book of Abbott's second quartet, without breaking stride or breaking the frame, Abbott reveals how standard noir themes – alienation, obsession, cruelty, greed, ambition–also lurk somewhere, somehow deep within contemporary teenage experience. And, because Abbott remains Abbott, we may be shocked but not surprised to discover a troubling mystery, crime, or horror at each fictional core. With these four books, Abbott seems to have created a new crime genre, though one which currently may have only a single expert practitioner.

And the critical accolades poured in in for this new genre as well: *The End of Everything* was chosen as One of the Best Books of 2011 by Publishers Weekly and the Boston Globe, while drawing raves from literary stars like Tom Perrotta, Kate Atkinson, Tara French, Gillian Flynn, and Jennifer McMahon. Of her next novel, *Dare Me* in 2012, Chelsea Cain wrote in the New York Times Book Review: "Megan Abbott has [written]...The Great American Cheerleading Novel, and—stop scowling—it's spectacular.... Subversive stuff... 'Heathers' meets 'Fight Club' good. Sexy and sinister. "*The Fever*, 2014, was chosen as one of the best books of the year by Kirkus, Amazon, LA Review of books, Grantland, the Boston Globe, NPR, and won the International Thriller Writers Award for Best Hardcover Novel.

Which brings us to Abbott's new book, *You Will Know Me,* from which you will hear very shortly. Chosen as one of the Best Books of 2016 by NPR, the Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe, the Washington Post, Publishers Weekly, and Kirkus Reviews. Paula Hawkins, author of *Girl on the Train*, says of it: "Almost unbearably tense, chilling and addictive" and the magisterial Steven King twittered "What an excellent novel. Gave me the creeps in the best possible way".

For now, Abbott has established herself as "our laureate of female adolescence" but it would be foolhardy, as we have learned, to assume that from now on we'll get more of the same, that Abbott's terrain is ever permanently settled, that what we see is what we'll get. But isn't that itself a formula for a good literary mystery? To perhaps give us a clue to this and other enigmas, I'm pleased to introduce, Megan Abbott.