

# **GIVING EVERYTHING FOR ONE GOOD QUOTE**

**The Turbulent World of Miami**

**Crime Reporter Britt Montero**

**By Eric Berkowitz**

## **I. Introduction**

“One good quote.”<sup>1</sup> That’s all Britt Montero needs. The police reporter for the *Miami Daily News* will do anything to get it -- including hopping tall fences, running into riots and, in *Garden of Evil*, demanding that she be left alone with a serial killer.”<sup>2</sup> In eight novels featuring Montero, Pulitzer Prize-winning police reporter Edna Buchanan has created a fictional alter ego -- a flawed, driven, lonely woman whose obsessions are satisfied only by chasing down Florida’s worst people.

The novels take place in Miami, where the low sky and relentless sun cook up an unsavory stew of violence, corruption and harsh sexuality. “What more could a writer want?” Montero asks.<sup>3</sup> Buchanan claims to have covered more than 5,000 violent deaths in her 16-year reporting career<sup>4</sup> with the *Miami Herald*, but Montero is catching up fast. Death is everywhere in her Miami, from rafts of dead Haitians landing in front of beachfront hotels, to babies suffocating in broiling cars<sup>5</sup> (or starving in apartments),<sup>6</sup> to poisonous snakes leaping from flowerpots to plant their fangs in people’s limbs.<sup>7</sup>

But it is homicide that commands Buchanan’s closest attention. “At a fresh murder scene, you can smell the blood and hear the screams,”<sup>8</sup> Buchanan writes in her autobiography. “I feel haunted by the restless souls of those whose killers walk free.

Somebody owes them.”<sup>9</sup> Montero feels the same. From her sleepless nights waiting for the phone to ring with a murder tip,<sup>10</sup> to her sense of purpose when closing in on a killer,<sup>11</sup> Montero’s life and career are devoted to reducing Miami’s bumper crop of murderers.

But as Buchanan did for so long, Montero works for a daily newspaper, and if her labors don’t result in published stories they might as well not have happened. Montero’s dogged pursuits of the city’s killers always result in seismic scoops -- revelations that either traumatize the city, put her own life in danger, or both.

Montero likes to work alone, but she can’t do it without the cooperation of two large, and largely unreliable, institutions. First is the *Miami News* itself. Housed in an imposing downtown building with sweeping views of Biscayne Bay, the paper exists both in and apart from the city. Its ruling cadre of editors rarely leaves the office and has a strong distaste for the tough streets that breed Montero’s stories. When big crime stories arise – and it’s an off day when they don’t -- the editors often put up more barriers against Montero’s reporting than tight-lipped cops or dead witnesses.

Montero’s primary nemesis is assistant city editor Gretchen Platt, whom Buchanan portrays as the embodiment of all that is corporate and soulless in the modern newspaper business. “Recruited out of the Medill School at Northwestern, she appeared to be ascending the corporate fast track to the top as rapidly as her exquisitely fashioned Italian-made high-heeled pumps could scramble, and pity the poor soul, man or woman, who stumbled in her way.”<sup>12</sup> Platt’s “only talent that I could see was getting her hair to look great no matter what the weather or how high the humidity,”<sup>13</sup> Montero snarls.

Nevertheless, the daily work of reporting is “almost always a comfort”<sup>14</sup> for Montero. “No matter what happens, the newspaper will come out tomorrow, like the sun.... One of the few sure things in life, it is something to hold on to.”<sup>15</sup>

Montero also works closely with the Miami police department, which is populated by a gallery of colorful characters she mostly respects and, in the case of one Lt. Kendall McDonald, loves. The department’s ambivalence toward the press, and Montero’s knack for uncovering information the top brass wants buried, keeps the relationship dicey.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Montero’s cop sources know she isn’t out to hurt them and often give her unique access to their operations.

But when cops go bad, Montero doesn’t shy away from the story. “No better human being exists than a good cop and no worse creature than a bad one,” Buchanan writes. “The truth is the good cop and the bad cop are often the same cop, at different moments, on different days, with different people.”<sup>17</sup> This duality is amply illustrated in the Montero novels.

Through it all, Buchanan etches a textured picture of a journalist as competitive, conflicted and sympathetic as herself. The reader learns that news stories from “Miami’s mysterious netherworld”<sup>18</sup> don’t magically appear on the doorstep. Someone has sacrificed everything to find them and put them in the paper.

## **II. Britt and Edna**

At 5 feet, 4 inches and 114 lbs,<sup>19</sup> the thirty-something Montero looks like Buchanan, but the similarities go deeper than that. Both are women making it alone in “a city of strangers without community spirit or a sense of belonging.”<sup>20</sup> Both work in a world where women can’t show their true emotions for fear of being branded weak.<sup>21</sup>

And both have to act tougher than men, even when they're in danger. Buchanan uses the first-person format of the books to channel descriptions of her own inner life and fears, as well as the thrills of covering the crime beat.

#### A. Britt.

Montero's single-minded devotion to causes was hardwired into her by her Cuban father, Antonio. An anti-Communist “freedom fighter,” he was killed in Cuba by a Castro firing squad when Britt was three years old.<sup>22</sup> But that hasn't stopped her from feeling his presence and influence. “I am so much like my father,”<sup>23</sup> she says in *Act of Betrayal*, “Our simpatico is ephemeral, more of a spiritual bond than direct knowledge. Whenever I am in danger or despair, he is with me. *Estamos juntos*. We are together.”<sup>24</sup>

While Montero recognizes that her father's early death prevented her from knowing him through experience, “I sense that we are the same,” she says. “Maybe it is because I long to be part of his committed and passionate world.”<sup>25</sup> In *The Ice Maiden*, Montero says her career choice has let her achieve that aim. “I love being a journalist. There is something noble and exciting about venturing out each day to seek the truth.”<sup>26</sup> And the truth is what she needs most. “I always want to know . . . everything. Knowledge, good or bad, is power.”<sup>27</sup>

Montero has little patience for the Cuban politics that consumed her father and still obsesses much of the city's immigrant population.<sup>28</sup> But she still takes after Antonio, both in character and physically. The resemblance is gratifying to a man who shared a prison cell with her father in the old days,<sup>29</sup> as it is for Antonio's sister.<sup>30</sup> For Britt's Anglo mother, Catherine, the similarities between her child and her ex-husband only cause bitterness.

Catherine “never forgave [Antonio] for allowing his dream of a free Cuba to become a fatal obsession,”<sup>31</sup> and she does not accept Britt’s equally obsessive qualities. In *Act of Betrayal*, the issue comes to a head. Britt is assigned to do a profile of one of Antonio’s old anti-Castro comrades, who reveals the existence of her father’s diary. Britt’s desire to find the diary, and thus answer questions about her family’s past, becomes consuming. She soon confronts her mother about the diary, demanding to know why she hasn’t been told about it and why so much information about Antonio has been kept secret. Catherine gives Britt much more than she expected in response.

“Your father was a bastard and it’s a pity you take after him,”<sup>32</sup> Catherine hisses. “The son of a bitch abandoned me and my three-year-old daughter without a word. No note, no good-bye. . . . He left me broke, betrayed, with a child.”<sup>33</sup> Catherine reminds her daughter that she also paid a big price for her husband’s dashing exploits. “People like him don’t care who they hurt. Their lives are never normal; they are drawn to trouble. Danger is an addiction . . . They make me sick with their love of intrigue and their egotistical dreams of making a difference.”<sup>34</sup>

The two bicker throughout the books, with each side rarely yielding ground, but this tirade gives Britt pause. “When justifying my job to her I often talked about making a difference. Now I knew why she always took offense.”<sup>35</sup> Still, Montero was “scalded” by her mother’s words, especially when Catherine said, “The only way I was able to hang on to my sanity was to try to forget it all . . . I could have done it, if not for you. You’re the only proof that it all really happened.”<sup>36</sup>

After Antonio’s murder, Catherine was unable to care for anyone but herself. Britt was shunted back and forth between her father’s and mother’s families,<sup>37</sup> leaving

her lonely and emotionally unmoored. “My father’s family laughed at my Spanish. My mother’s criticized my English.”<sup>38</sup> The two families disliked each other, “with me, the only link straddling two worlds, yet not quite at home in either.” Britt didn’t reunite with her mother for nine years, by which time they “didn’t know each other well, and had little to talk about.”<sup>39</sup>

Montero went to journalism school at Northwestern University, but she hated Chicago’s cold weather and returned to Florida as soon as she could. The *Miami News*, the city’s dominant paper (and a direct nod to the *Miami Herald*), hired her on the erroneous belief that she could write for the Spanish-language section. She soon took over the police beat, which “no one else wanted” and which the editors doubted a woman could endure,” she says. “That only steeled my resolve to master my beat and make it my own.”<sup>40</sup>

And indeed she does. By the time the story line for *Contents Under Pressure* (the first novel in the series) kicks in, Montero is in full stride, with deep connections in the police department and her crime reporting techniques well honed.

“The beat is more a lifestyle than a job,” Montero explains.<sup>41</sup> She wakes to the sound of a police band radio scanner. Before she leaves her South Beach<sup>42</sup> apartment, she feeds her cat, Billy Boots, and her dog, Bitsy (an orphaned police poodle). Then she packs her purse with a Smith and Wesson .38, notebooks, sheets of unlisted phone numbers and an “unassuming tear gas grenade.”<sup>43</sup>

After she loads up on powerful Cuban coffee (usually the only food in the house), she fires up her T-Bird and heads off into “superheated, supercharged” Miami, where “people kill for a seat next to the floor fan.”<sup>44</sup> Her first stop is usually a visit to the police

station to examine the crime logs for the prior night. If an explosion, crime tip or other unexpected event doesn't divert her, she then drives through the thick air to spend part of the day in the *Miami News* building. Before she goes home, she will have cranked out as many as three stories.

The *News* sits at the edge of Overtown, a slum area where much of Miami's violence takes place. But the paper's proximity to the city's dark side is ignored by many of its editors. Sitting in the “over-air-conditioned, unnaturally frigid building,”<sup>45</sup> they are “insulated from the world by security, voice mail and recordings,” she complains. “Editors in their ivory towers are blind to the realities of the street.”<sup>46</sup>

Montero prefers to live close to South Beach's “Felliniesque side show of disturbed youth, drag queens and go-go dwarfs.”<sup>47</sup> By contrast, the paper's publisher lives in Bay Point, “an affluent, walled-in waterfront community. . . *Leave It to Beaver* land, with children at play on safe, shady streets, while outside the walls, in gritty real life on the boulevard, prostitutes flag down traffic, the homeless hunker in doorways, and crime plagues small businesses.”<sup>48</sup>

Montero also prefers to be in the office at night, when the building is empty and there are no editors around to bother her. After she files her stories, she relishes “that dizzying high” that comes from returning to the real world and inhaling that “first breath of hot moist night air.”<sup>49</sup>

Not all of the *News*' editors avoid trouble. Some, such as the rarely seen managing editor are specters from the old world of big-city journalism. For him, the “scent of political scandal send[s] the printers ink that passes for blood pounding through his veins” and draws him into the newsroom “like a bear from a cave, sleeves rolled up,

intense and driven.”<sup>50</sup> But occasional sightings of the managing editor (who doesn’t know the names of most of the reporters<sup>51</sup>) don’t obscure an overriding motif of the novels: the inclination of modern newspapers to avoid the suffering of the poor, the full scale and impact of violent crime, and the foibles of the city’s ruling classes.

No one personifies journalism’s wrong turns more than “assistant city editor from hell”<sup>52</sup> Gretchen Platt, whose ice-cold mixture of incompetence and treachery weigh heavily on Britt. Platt is “a vocal supporter of the Chamber of Commerce types who ran the city and strongly influenced our editorial board, she complained bitterly about ‘too much negative news’ in the paper, and regarded my beat with contempt. She believed that the less the public knew about danger and crime, the better, especially in a resort city dependent on tourist income.”<sup>53</sup>

Montero’s hatred for Platt is boundless. The novels are packed with invective against Platt’s “cotton candy pink lips,”<sup>54</sup> her malevolent jutting of her “pointy breasts,”<sup>55</sup> and her “take charge attitude,” which would “impress anyone who didn’t know that she was clueless, mean-spirited and homicidally ambitious.”<sup>56</sup> In contrast to Montero’s rumpled attire, Platt is “always polished as the cover of *Vogue*, she looked like Ms. Perfect. In reality, she was Perfectly Awful.”<sup>57</sup>

Buchanan sets up Platt as a middle-management “roadblock”<sup>58</sup> to good reporting, an apparatchik accomplished only at wrecking stories and fostering distrust between reporters.<sup>59</sup> The senior editors also show little regard for their reporters’ welfare. In *Miami, It’s Murder*, Montero gets possession of some evidence about a serial rapist that the cops want. City editor Fred Douglas decides to extract a price from the police for the evidence, even though such a demand might expose Montero to prosecution for



obstruction of justice. Rather than protect Montero, they saw her possible imprisonment as an opportunity to write “rousing editorials while the martyr languished in jail.”<sup>60</sup> Platt was “grinning” at the idea of Montero’s imprisonment.<sup>61</sup>

B. Edna.

Montero resembles her father, but she really takes after Buchanan. In a lengthy 1986 *New Yorker* profile of Buchanan (made while she was still a full-time crime reporter), Calvin Trillin describes Buchanan’s daily habits in a way that just as easily could refer to Montero:

She still dresses every morning to the sound of a police scanner.

Unless she already has a story to do, she still drops by the Miami Beach department and the Miami municipal department and the Metro-Dade department on the way to work. She still flips through the previous night’s crime reports and the log. She still calls police officers and says, ‘Hi. This is Edna. What’s going on over there?’

Like Montero, Buchanan has little use for editors. “When Edna went to Fort Lauderdale not long ago to talk about police reporting with some of the young reporters,” Trillin wrote, “she said, ‘For sanity and survival, there are three cardinal rules in the newsroom: Never trust an editor, never trust an editor, and never trust an editor.’”<sup>62</sup>

The personalities of the real and fictional reporters line up closely,<sup>63</sup> but there are some important differences. Montero was born in Miami and lost her father in heroic circumstances. Buchanan comes from New Jersey, where her family was abandoned by her drunken louse of a father when she was seven. He “simply left town, took off, never

to be seen or heard from again,”<sup>64</sup> she said. She helped her mother (with whom she is close<sup>65</sup>) by taking care of her little sister.

When, as a young adult, Buchanan took a trip to Miami, she knew she had found her true home and moved there immediately. “All I have ever missed about New Jersey is the summer harvest of juicy beefsteak tomatoes – and the pizza.”<sup>66</sup> A career in journalism took shape over years of working at a small circulation paper and, finally, the *Miami Herald*. “Young journalists today [including her own creation, Montero] study, train, and prepare for the profession. I stumbled and fell into it,”<sup>67</sup> Buchanan wrote.

Both Montero and Buchanan have a fulfilling ongoing love affair with Miami, a romance not matched by their love lives. “Nobody loves a police reporter. It can be lonely,”<sup>68</sup> wrote Buchanan. “Covering the police beat does little to enhance one’s social life.” Buchanan described her failed marriage to James Buchanan, as “my Pearl Harbor.”<sup>69</sup> The rest of her romantic life hasn’t been much better. Given her proximity to the police and her tilt toward manly men, it isn’t surprising that she would eventually hook up with a cop. But that relationship, which also failed, only taught her “never to mix business with pleasure. [¶] I always learn everything the hard way.”<sup>70</sup>

Montero never learned.

### **III. Sex and Romance in Monteroland**

Britt’s love and sex life are active but ultimately unfulfilling. Few men can handle a woman for whom “proximity to sudden death feeds a basic, primal urge . . . for a life affirming act, like sex.”<sup>71</sup> And most women would be uncomfortable standing in a blood-spattered apartment with a man who just took an ax to a burglar. Not Britt. The

drama -- and the man’s good looks -- were a turn-on for her. “Sex after death is great – so long as the death isn’t yours.”<sup>72</sup>

The aphrodisiac of sudden death isn’t always around, but Montero usually finds a way to get some physical fulfillment, whether it be by a Hollywood actor,<sup>73</sup> a cruise boat captain or a crime victim. But she loves Lt. Kendall McDonald, and she loses him forever.

McDonald was a high-ranking Miami police officer with the looks, smarts and connection to the crime world to hold Britt’s attention. Cops “really know how to make a woman feel secure,” Montero says in *The Ice Maiden*, and McDonald (“lean, long-legged, in uniform. *Muy macho*. Strong jaw. Cleft chin”<sup>74</sup>) made her feel safe like no one else. McDonald was just about the only man with whom Montero is able to put her guard down, place her head on his shoulder and relax. Soon after their “eyes met across a bloodstained barroom floor,”<sup>75</sup> she knew he was the man for her.

The main problem was the fact that she covers cops and he was one. As with Buchanan’s doomed romance with a police sergeant, Montero and McDonald were “a perfect example of why you can’t mix business with pleasure.”<sup>76</sup> “The men you deal with on the police beat understand the hours, the pressures and the deadlines. But they’re off limits.”<sup>77</sup>

The libido is always stronger than the brain, and Montero and McDonald pressed forward anyway. Soon after they met, she reflected, “I knew of other reporters who had got into real jams by becoming involved with sources. Yet, instead of considering whether it would be ethical to go out with McDonald, I found myself wondering dreamingly about what to wear when I did.”<sup>78</sup>

She didn't wear much for long. On their first date, they got themselves “in the mood” by talking in detail about murder cases, victims' last words and the Mansons. Then they made love in a shack on the beach.

But as their relationship developed, the pressures of their jobs pulled them apart and they cut it off. Montero found other men and McDonald took up with a police lieutenant. Nevertheless, the “ache” of the relationship remained for both of them. On one occasion in which an old couple was mugged, she heard on the police radio that McDonald was coming to the scene. As she considered whether to hang around to catch a glimpse of him, she wondered, “What would McDonald and I have been like after so many years together, if circumstances had been different, if career choices, pride, and ethics hadn't stood in our way?”<sup>79</sup>

Their romance rekindled from time to time, but in *The Ice Maiden*, they finally broke through and decided to marry. “It's time, Britt, our time,” he said. “Life is uncertain. All I'm sure of is that I want to spend it with you.”<sup>80</sup> Britt was finally fulfilled, “loving the fact that life for me was about to change forever.”<sup>81</sup>

It changed, but not in the way she had hoped. After they returned from a romantic vacation in the British West Indies, McDonald was killed saving another man's life.<sup>82</sup> Another death in Miami, where death is no big deal.

#### **IV. Miami – Death City**

No less than Montero, McDonald or the endless procession of grotesques that crowd Buchanan's novels, the city of Miami is a central and recurring character. It's a “magic place, at sea level, at the foot of the map,”<sup>83</sup> she says, “where colors are too vivid to be real, where ugly is uglier, beautiful is breathtaking, and passions run high.”<sup>84</sup>

Miami is the perfect setting for Montero to ply her trade. “Why dodge bombs or bullets in some godforsaken strip of real estate thousands of miles away when you can do it right here? We have it all: war, murderous weather, foreign intrigue, spies, refugees, and hand-to-hand combat in the streets. What more could a writer want?”<sup>85</sup>

The city is the only place Montero can imagine living, and she paints it in freakish colors. The streets are a brightly lit display case of death. Sometimes it’s random, as when a “sweet little old lady” trying to bake cookies is “shot in the face” by exploding ammunition hidden in the oven by her grandson,<sup>86</sup> or when a backyard electric bug zapper vaporizes a mosquito, sparking a barbecue gas explosion that kills a man.<sup>87</sup>

“Nobody knows better than I that the world is a landmine ready to explode beneath your feet,”<sup>88</sup> says Montero. And it does for many in Miami. On the broiling Palmetto expressway, “a sinkhole suddenly yawned open, swallowing three trucks, two cars, and a van loaded with migrant workers.”<sup>89</sup> The “remorseless heat” of Miami also burned the life out of an old woman as she reclined in her lawn chair. Thirty-six hours later, she was still there, with dried lips “drawing up her mouth as moisture evaporated from her body, shrinking the skin on her face, thinning her nose. . . the first stages of mummification.”<sup>90</sup>

The city is a murderous environment, but in Buchanan’s books death most often comes at the hand of other people. Miami is where “a stop sign means time to reload”<sup>91</sup> and where killers come to do their work.

In *Garden of Evil*, Montero ponders what draws them to the area. “I heard someone say once that it is the carrion smell of the corpse flower that attracts the dregs and bottom feeders who drift inexorably toward South Florida. The amorphophallus,

now in bloom, resembles a phallus and smells like something dead. Its sickening spoiled-meat odor attracts flies.”<sup>92</sup>

The newspaper itself, which records the deaths, has some of the same sexual aspects. In *The Ice Maiden*, Montero picked up the Sunday paper on her doorstep, “the protective plastic sheath slid like an oversized condom off the giant phallus upon which my life revolved.” Montero is the job and the job is the city.

## V. Montero Makes the News

Buchanan knows as well as anyone that when reporters become personally involved in the stories they cover, they should stop covering them. But good journalistic ethics make for bad journalism books, and in most of the Montero novels the journalist and the story become inextricably knotted up.

In *Garden of Evil*, a female serial killer lures a series of men (including a philandering sheriff and a politician) with sex and then shoots off their genitalia -- but only after she kisses the bullets with lipstick. When the “Kiss Me Killer” demands a one-on-one meeting with Montero, Montero sees the biggest scoop of her life and the police see an opportunity to make an arrest. City Editor Fred Douglas objects to the sit down, saying they can’t “allow reporters to become swept up in their own stories, to lose their detachment.”<sup>93</sup> But he relents (what good would the book be if he didn’t?), and the paper works with the police to use the interview to snare the killer. Montero’s one demand for her cooperation with the police is the opportunity to do an interview before the arrest takes place. “If I can get one good quote from her before you guys drag her in, I want that chance.”<sup>94</sup>

The police agree, but the operation goes haywire. Montero ends up a captive of the killer (whose real name is Keppie Lee Hutton) and is taken on a harrowing road trip across the state. Over the next several days, Montero witnesses enough killing and kidnapping to last a lifetime, and is personally subjected to Hutton’s death threats and aggressive sexual advances. But even while Montero trembles in horror, she tries to get an interview. “This could be my access to a candid confession of an unrepentant serial killer willing to expose the dark side of her own sick soul – a journalist’s dream.”<sup>95</sup>

The dream turns out badly. After she dramatically escapes from Hutton, touching off “a media frenzy unlike any since the Versace case,”<sup>96</sup> she decides not to write about her experiences. “The big story I had wanted was all mine. But it had lost its appeal,”<sup>97</sup> she said. “I should have reported the story, not become a part of it; that was my mistake.”<sup>98</sup>

Montero reaches no such lofty conclusions in *The Ice Maiden*, even though she is actually recruited by the police -- the subject of her beat -- to investigate a case. The department’s “Cold Case Squad” decides to look into the 14-year-old murders of two teenagers, but is taken off the case when their commanding officer decides there is no chance of success.<sup>99</sup> Rather than give up the search, they ask Montero to look into it for them -- on the sly.<sup>100</sup>

She jumps into the case, forms a close relationship with the one surviving victim and some of the suspects, and then finds the killer in the most unlikely of places. Throughout the story, the line between reporter and subject disappears, to the detriment of journalistic ideals and the betterment of crackling good crime fiction.

## VI. The Vast Wasteland of Television News

One reason Buchanan allows Montero to get so involved with her subjects is that her key goals – getting bad guys and getting out stories – aren’t compromised. In fact, Montero’s personal style of reporting is suited to getting to the truth. But that reporting is based on trust between reporter and subject, which does not exist in the tungsten glare of television lights. In the Montero novels, television news practitioners are presented as clumsy, second-rate hacks intent only on grabbing sensational footage, regardless of who gets hurt.

In *The Garden of Evil*, news helicopters follow Montero and the Kiss Me Killer as they are chased by police across Florida. The airborne reporter’s constant chatter about the police’s position, which Hutton plays live on the car radio, gives Hutton the information she needs to give the cops the slip. “I cursed the reporter for screwing up a police operation,”<sup>101</sup> Montero said.

In *Contents Under Pressure*, delicate police work was required to get a man who had killed someone in a bar. Montero unobtrusively followed the police as they approached the suspect’s house. Just as McDonald was quietly going up the steps, a television crew “squealed” to the scene and flipped on their lights, putting McDonald in danger and potentially blowing the operation.<sup>102</sup> “They had no idea what was happening, but were determined not to miss it if it should be newsworthy,”<sup>103</sup> said Montero.

“Gitoutdahere, you scum,” a detective snarled at the crew. “You cudda got somebody killed.”<sup>104</sup>

The same heavy hand and lack of thinking by broadcast news crews is depicted in *Miami, It’s Murder*, in which a “blond anchorwoman with the big hair and silly smirk”



asked a rape victim how she feels,<sup>105</sup> and also in *The Ice Maiden*, in which a baby’s fall down a well causes a “pack” of television news crews to run “amok,” churning up dust and trampling everything. “TV reporters are relentless when they smell tears,” Montero said.<sup>106</sup>

Given Buchanan’s evident hostility to television news, it’s surprising that at one point “she almost went over to the enemy” and took a television job. Trillin reports that she turned down the lucrative offer because “crime could never be covered on local television with the details and the subtleties possible in a newspaper story.”<sup>107</sup>

Montero expresses the same belief in *You Only Die Twice*: “TV reporters would have scant time to report and fill in the background. They might air the news flash first, but only we would have the complete story.”<sup>108</sup>

## **VII. Leaving Nothing to Chance**

Montero may be in the business of gathering facts, but she still operates on faith sometimes. “At one time in my life I sought logic in everything. Now I know better,”<sup>109</sup> she said. She is, after all, a product of Miami, which is soaked in the magic and mysticism of its immigrant population.

Britt’s aunt Odalys, Antonio’s sister, is a link to magical elements that surface in several of the books. Odalys practices Santeria, a “blood religion, a mix of Catholicism and African ritual from Cuba”<sup>110</sup> given to potions, herbal cures and prognostications. Montero is dubious of such things, but not enough to refuse Odalys’ prescriptions to carry pouches of odd stuff around her neck and in her underwear.<sup>111</sup> When one of the bad guys Britt confronts also shows signs of practicing Santeria, Odalys helps her solve the crime.

Montero has learned the perils of scoffing at her aunt’s odd ways. At one point Odalys told her to wear some beads and a talisman for protection. “I ignored her and nearly lost my life.”<sup>112</sup>

The relentless influx of Haitian refugees to Miami also keeps Voodoo close to the surface. Each day, a special team of city janitors is dispatched to remove the “decapitated chickens, roosters, and dead goats” left on the courthouse steps by Voodoo magicians trying to fix the outcome of trials.<sup>113</sup> Inside the courthouse, the ashes of burnt papers with the names of the judges, jurors and others are mixed with white powder, “which is sprinkled around the jury box to tilt justice in favor of the accused.”<sup>114</sup>

“Public relations geniuses dubbed Miami the Magic City many years ago. This is not what they had in mind,”<sup>115</sup> Montero observed.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

Britt Montero is the rare person who feels most alive when things are falling apart around her. This attitude can only exist in a few settings, such as armed combat, commodities trading and police beat journalism in crime-ridden Miami. Like an animal suited to one environmental extreme but helpless elsewhere, Montero is perfectly adapted to Miami’s criminal biosphere, but would perish if she were dropped anywhere else.

As they careened across Florida, the Kiss Me Killer asked Montero what scared her. Her answer: “People don’t read anymore . . . Sometimes I’m afraid my profession is in its twilight years. If newspapers die before I do, how will I make a living?”<sup>116</sup>

Let us hope that never comes to pass.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Edna Buchanan, *Garden of Evil* (Avon, New York, 1999), p. 156.
- <sup>2</sup> Buchanan, *Garden of Evil*, pp. 156-157. “How many other reporters ever get this sort of chance?” she asks as she dismisses warning of the danger. *Garden of Evil*, p.160
- <sup>3</sup> Edna Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, (Hyperion, New York, 1995), p. 22.
- <sup>4</sup> Edna Buchanan, *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face* (Pocketbooks, New York, 1987), p. xv.
- <sup>5</sup> *Garden of Evil*, p. 51
- <sup>6</sup> Edna Buchanan, *Margin of Error* (Wheeler, Rockland, MA, 1997).
- <sup>7</sup> Edna Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal* (Hyperion, New York, 1996), pp. 100-101. .
- <sup>8</sup> Buchanan, *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face*, p. 3
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Edna Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure* (Hyperion, New York, 1992), p. 115.
- <sup>11</sup> Edna Buchanan, *Miami, It’s Murder* (Pocketbooks, New York, 1994), p, 217.
- <sup>12</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, p. 82
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, p. 20
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 51
- <sup>17</sup> Buchanan, *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face*, 131
- <sup>18</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 52
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 211
- <sup>20</sup> Buchanan, *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face*, 1
- <sup>21</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 89
- <sup>22</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, 18
- <sup>23</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 57
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Edna Buchanan, *The Ice Maiden* (Avon, New York, 2002), p. 46.
- <sup>27</sup> Buchanan, *Margin of Error*, 73
- <sup>28</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 76. But in this novel, Montero can’t help but get caught in the “murky undertow of Cuban exile shenanigans,” when a story puts her between rival Cuban groups, one of which was responsible for her father’s death.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 95-96
- <sup>30</sup> “My aunt Odalys insists that I was born with a gift – or curse – *tengo un presentimiento*, the sixth sense that leads me into predestined paths. I believe her at times, when something or someone, spiritual or supernatural, perhaps my father, helps guide me through the minefields surrounding the truth.” *The Ice Maiden*, p. 215.
- <sup>31</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 219. See also, Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, p. 18
- <sup>32</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 242
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-158
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 157. Elsewhere, Catherine berates her daughter by demanding to know “why are you always so fascinated by the dark side, engrossed in contemptible things that shouldn’t involve you? . . . You’re just like . . . like . . .” Montero replies, “Say it . . . Like my father.” *Miami It’s Murder*, 38
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 157
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 158-159
- <sup>37</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, pp. 18-20
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 18

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 19

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 20

<sup>41</sup> Buchanan, *Margin of Error*, p. 39

<sup>42</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 164

<sup>43</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, p. 71

<sup>44</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 106

<sup>45</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 203

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 30

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>48</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 71

<sup>49</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 203

<sup>50</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 114

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 117

<sup>52</sup> Buchanan, *Garden of Evil*, p. 38

<sup>53</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, pp. 81-82

<sup>54</sup> Buchanan, *The Ice Maiden*, p. 44

<sup>55</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 69

<sup>56</sup> Buchanan, *The Ice Maiden*, p. 48

<sup>57</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, p. 82

<sup>58</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 24

<sup>59</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 141. On only one occasion does Montero gain an advantage over Platt. Late one night, Montero and *News* photographer Lottie Dane found Platt *in flagrante delicto* with a writer on the couch of the executive editor’s office. Dane immediately shot photographs, capturing Platt as she “covered her bouncing breasts with both hands.” Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, 144-146. Rather than squeal on Platt (as Platt would surely do if the roles were reversed), Montero and Dane keep their mouths shut. Still, Dane got some mileage out of the affair when she was later gets in trouble at the paper. In counseling Dane on how to deal with Platt, Montero said, “It’s payback time. Tell her we all do things we regret sometimes, but us women in the newsroom have to stick together. She’ll know what you mean.” Buchanan, *Margin of Error*, pp. 290-291. Platt got the picture.

<sup>60</sup> Buchanan, *Miami, It’s Murder*, p. 141. Montero expressed the same sentiment in Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*. Referring to the *News*’s lawyer, Mark Seybold, she said, “Each time Mark saved me [from jail], he disappointed the members of our editorial board. They would have been delighted to see me jailed, giving them the opportunity to fiercely editorialize about freedom of the press.” *Contents Under Pressure*, \p. 89.

<sup>61</sup> Buchanan, *Miami, It’s Murder*, p. 141

<sup>62</sup> Calvin Trillin, “Covering the Cops,” *the New Yorker*, February 17, 1986.

<sup>63</sup> Aside from doggedness and a love of crime reporting, both Montero and Buchanan have a tendency to say “heck” and “darn” a lot. Both are also suckers for stray animals.

<sup>64</sup> Buchanan, *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face*, p. 50. Note, however, that in Buchanan’s *Act of Betrayal*, Montero’s mother uses almost the same language to describe Antonio’s departure, saying the “son of a bitch” was the “proverbial husband who went out for a loaf of bread and never came back.” *Act of Betrayal*, 156

<sup>65</sup> Trillin, “Covering the Cops.”

<sup>66</sup> Buchanan, *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face*, p. 63

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 63

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 101

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 68

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 82

<sup>71</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 109

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 109

<sup>73</sup> Buchanan, *Margin of Error*, pp. 134-136. In an interesting twist, the object of Montero’s passion in this book is, at least temporarily, robbed of some of his physical prowess. While the actor, heartthrob Lance Westfall, is blinded with bandages after an attack, Montero takes the dominant role in a graphically described sexual encounter. “How incredibly exciting to make love to a helpless man,” she said.

<sup>74</sup> Buchanan, *The Ice Maiden*, p. 83

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 239

<sup>76</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 84

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 84

<sup>78</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, p. 153

<sup>79</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 6

<sup>80</sup> Buchanan, *The Ice Maiden*, p. 238

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 240

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 300-303

<sup>83</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 40

<sup>84</sup> Buchanan, *You Only Die Twice*, p. 2

<sup>85</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 22

<sup>86</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 1

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Buchanan, *Garden of Evil*, p. 185

<sup>89</sup> Buchanan, *Suitable for Framing*, p. 112

<sup>90</sup> Buchanan, *Garden of Evil*, 50

<sup>91</sup> Buchanan, *Margin of Error*, 141

<sup>92</sup> Buchanan, *Garden of Evil*, 49

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 145

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 157

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 172

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 278

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 278

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 279

<sup>99</sup> Buchanan, *The Ice Maiden*, p. 62

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-65

<sup>101</sup> Buchanan, *Garden of Evil*, p. 227

<sup>102</sup> Buchanan, *Contents Under Pressure*, p. 106

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 107

<sup>105</sup> Buchanan, *Miami, It’s Murder*, p. 131

<sup>106</sup> Buchanan, *The Ice Maiden*, pp. 53-55

<sup>107</sup> Trillin, “Covering the Cops.”

<sup>108</sup> Buchanan, *You Only Die Twice*, p. 72

<sup>109</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 40

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>111</sup> Buchanan, *Miami, It’s Murder*, p. 182

<sup>112</sup> Buchanan, *Act of Betrayal*, p. 40

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 149

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Buchanan, *Garden of Evil*, p. 182

