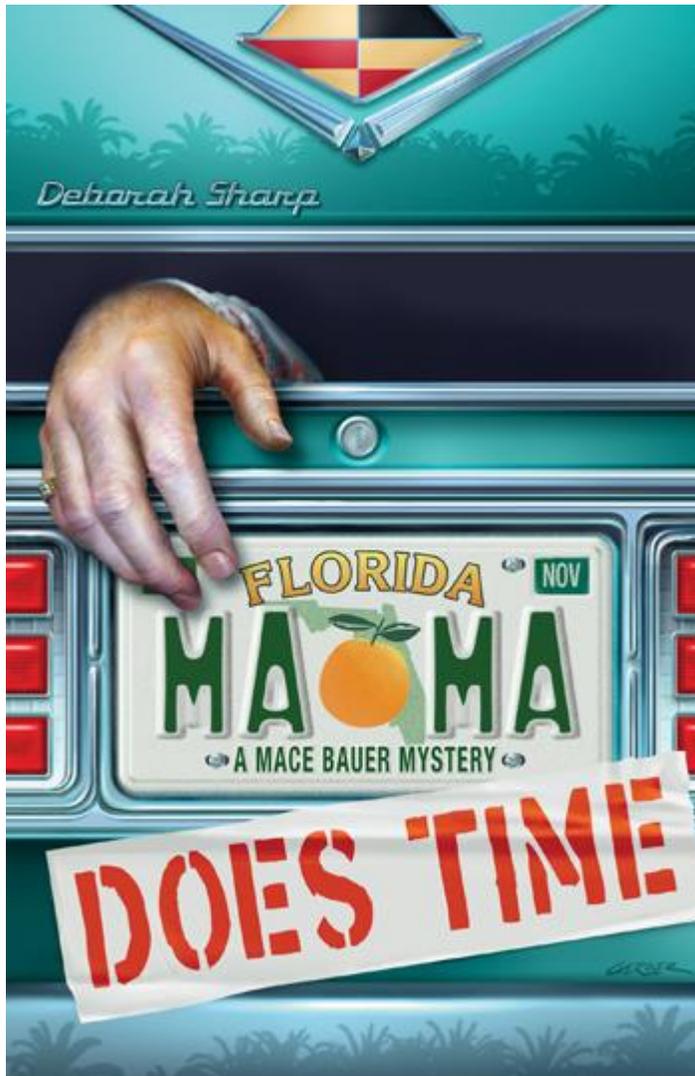


## Mama Knows Best

Smart-alecky Southern mystery is Sharp as an alligator's tooth

By Tina Koenig



The book cover of local author Deborah Sharp's new mystery, *Mama Does Time*, which will be released October 1

anyone. Hmm...what could she mean?

There was something slightly ominous about the way mystery writer Deborah Sharp eyed the booth I'd chosen for our photo session at Lester's Diner. At my request, she'd brought along her 93-year-old mother, Marion. My mission that day: partake in the Southern ritual of eating pie and meet the famous, "Mama."

"We can sit somewhere else," I said, sensing the author's hesitation while she scanned the room for empty tables. Had I been insensitive choosing a booth that was too hard for her aging mother to slide into?

"No. It's not a problem," Sharp said.

I looked at Sharp's mother. If I had to guess her age, I would have been off by 20 years. Ninety-three is the new seventy. No walker, barely a wrinkle, nicely-coiffed red hair.

"We have this down to a science," Sharp offered. "That way nobody gets hurt."

Who knew having pie with an author could be dangerous. But the remark was classic Deborah Sharp—sarcasm mixed with a little suspense, served up with a light Southern accent that makes it hard to believe she could harm

As it turned out, Sharp's mother was neither frail nor infirmed. The women are simply left-handed, a condition that's hazardous for fellow diners.

Sharp slid into the seat closest to the wall followed by her spunky mother, who worked as a banquet waitress until she was almost 80. As long as nobody spilled hot coffee, indeed, nobody would get hurt.

For the characters in Sharp's first mystery novel, *Mama Does Time*, released this month by Midnight Ink, life isn't so kind. They have much more to worry about than a few elbow pokes to the ribs, especially Mama.

The book's plot revolves around some fishy smelling activity in the Central Florida town of Himmarshee. And I'm not talking about the low water levels at nearby Lake Okeechobee. The fuss is about the dead body found in the trunk of Rosalee Deveraux's (a.k.a. Mama's) vintage turquoise convertible.



## How to Talk Like Mama: Southernisms and Swears

**"I am so mad at my former best friend I'm fixin' to knock her teeth down her throat just so I can watch her spit 'em out single-file."**

**"I always say when it comes to animal prints, a little bit is never enough. (Of course, I say that about a lot of things .... including marriages.)"**

**"You look like a pair of pantyhose that's been put through the spin cycle."**

**"Good looks are no excuse for bad manners."**

**"Sacramento Son of a Bee Hive"**

Author Deborah Sharp

Nobody in Himmarshee really believes that a 60-something Sunday school teacher partial to sherbet-colored jumpsuits could take a life.

Well, almost nobody. To quote one of the characters: "...I'm sorry she murdered that man....Knowing Rosalee, she must have had a very good reason."

It's left to Mama's daughter, Mace, to figure out who the real killer is and save her from Old Sparky. Now getting Mama out of trouble should be simple for Mace, an animal trapper and wildlife specialist for the local preserve. But Mace's quest turns into an alligator wrestling match pitting her against several would-be suspects including a cop up from Miami who looks down on the small-towners, Mace's ex-boyfriend and New York mobsters.

The mystery and its plucky narrator will draw you in faster than a raccoon to a trash can. Its engaging style having been enhanced with Southernisms and funny asides like this one in Chapter 25: "Mama's head swiveled like a one-eyed dog in a butcher shop."

"I love language and regional differences," says the author. "I always keep a notebook with me when I travel to jot down funny sayings I hear."

Sharp readily admits that her mother is the blueprint for the book's Mama character—including her passion for sweets. The author drew upon "only the good qualities, I swear!" she wrote in an e-mail. "She's a super-strong role model for persevering in the face of tough odds. Through a lot of loss, a lot of tragedy, a lot of 'hard knocks,' she always managed to remain a kind and giving person."

Although experienced at storytelling and deft at fictionalizing her mother—adding several husbands, questionable taste in clothing, and jail time—Sharp said she wasn't one of those kids who always knew she'd be a writer. And according to Marion Sharp, "My brother was the writer."

In fact, Deborah Sharp had planned on being a psychologist. "I pursued that all the way through college and into a Ph.D. program. Only then did I realize I didn't want to listen to people's problems all day. By chance, the journalism school was next to the Psych department at the University of Georgia. I wandered over late one night in search of junk food, and found a new career."

Sharp covered the state of Florida beginning in the 1980s at the News-Press in Fort Myers. More recently, she reported for Gannett News Service and then for USA Today.

"As a reporter, I traveled all over Florida's back roads and little burgs, absorbing a lot of the down-home flavor I put into creating my main character's hometown of Himmarshee."

The author left journalism in the wake of 9/11 and the war. "Especially after 9/11, the news took an awful turn toward tragedy. I wanted to write things to bring a smile to people's faces instead. I figure I'll give mystery-writing 15 years or so, and then become an astronaut."

The transition will be easy for Sharp with NASA only a stone's throw away.

Describing herself as, "on the downside of 50," the author got her big break at a local writing festival called SleuthFest. She "pitched" her book idea to an acquisitions editor for Midnight Ink in March 2006. It took seven months before the editor had a chance to read her first 50 pages.

"Everything about publishing took way longer than I thought, especially coming from daily news deadlines. I finally signed a two-book contract in January 2007."

### **On Deborah Sharp's Nightstand**

***Clubbed to Death* by Elaine Viets**

***Fancy White Trash* by Marjetta Geerling**

***Braless in Wonderland* by Debbie Reed Fischer**



Deborah Sharp and her mother Marion, at Lester's Diner in Fort Lauderdale

To aspiring novelists the author offers this advice: "Join some writers' groups, attend some conferences, and expose yourself to other authors, both in print and in person, in the genre of your choice. Learn both the craft and the business. And, finally, if you really want to write a book, stop talking about it. Sit down and start."

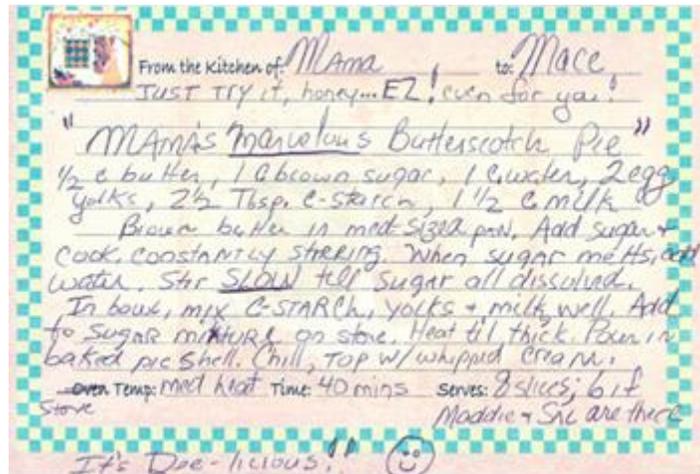
Although the afternoon's undertaking was for pie and a photograph, there was one last glitch before we were ready for the women's close-up. Unfortunately for the story, the two Sharps had a taste for chocolate. They ordered a slice of cake. But mercifully, like a ball in a roulette wheel, the spinning dessert carousel landed me in front of banana cream pie. We quickly exchanged

props—I mean plates. The author, preferring the shape of the tea cup to the coffee cup, quickly removed the tell-tale bag (You never drink tea with pie!) and set the pie plate next to the stand-in coffee cup. We tried several poses and action shots of the women tasting what was left of my pie. After about 10 shots, Deborah noticed the other diners watching us.

She turned to her mother. "Don't you feel like a celebrity?" she said. Then she wrapped her arms around her mother's shoulders and gave her a big squeeze.

Marion was visibly touched. She was proud of her daughter and the book, but it was the hug she liked best. No book, no slice of pie was as sweet as that.

Deborah Sharp will be reading from *Mama Does Time* at Murder on the Beach in Delray Beach on October 24, at 7 p.m., Barnes and Noble in Plantation on October 30 at 7 p.m. and during the Miami Book Fair, November 4-11. To read more of Mama's Southernisms visit: <http://ask-mama.blogspot.com> or the author's web page <http://www.deborahsharp.com>.



Mama's recipe for Butterscotch Pie. Recipes are a recurring theme throughout *Mama Does Time*.

Have a comment about what you've read? E-mail [letters@miamiartzine.com](mailto:letters@miamiartzine.com).