

Why There Are Only Two Nine Muses Mysteries
A Letter to Interested Readers of the Nine Muses Books

Dear Friend,

Thank you very much for your interest in my work. It has truly been heartening for me to know that you find my writings worth your time and attention.

I am writing today to tell you that, unfortunately, I have been unable to complete the third Nine Muses mystery, which was to have focused on music. Instead, I have now had to set the manuscript aside indefinitely, most likely forever.

A little history: When I sold “Corpse de Ballet,” the first Nine Muses Mystery, in August of 2000, I signed a contract with St. Martin’s Press to write two other, similar mysteries with the same protagonists. “Slightly Abridged” came out in 2003 as planned, and I began work on the music book fully expecting to deliver it on time as well.

But as I wrote—and wrote, and wrote—the story became mysteriously uncooperative, sometimes changing without notice, sometimes stubbornly refusing to yield when I tried most forcefully to rearrange it. As with the other Muses, I had worked out the bones of the book—the plot and the solution to the mystery—in advance. But on this book, after the first few chapters, my plans no longer felt right to me.

At the same time, the characters and their feelings increasingly took off on trajectories I had never envisioned, growing darker and darker rather than keeping to the tone and the kinds of relationships established in the earlier books. After the death in Chapter One, Juliet began to sleuth, then lost heart. In the next draft, Murray investigated for her, then found himself lost in a tangle of procedural dead ends. He did tell her he was trying to find the killer; no, he didn’t, he kept it a secret lest he fail, or discover something profoundly disturbing (likely enough, since the victim was Juliet’s father). He was allowed to investigate even though the case happened outside his precinct; no, he wasn’t, he had to do it on the sly, with the help of a friend who was officially involved. He was still on the force; no, he had taken a leave of absence after his injury in “Slightly Abridged.” And so on, with their roles and motives churning through change after change.

As for their personal relationship, I could not make it hold still. In one draft, their attachment to each other had been acknowledged and acted upon; in the next, I knew it hadn’t: scared, they had both backed off. No, wait—six months later, I decided that Murray had been willing, but Juliet shied away. Then, a year in, I saw it all: they had been together a while, but things went badly... For a time, uncharacteristically, I did not write at all, as if Juliet had infected me with her writer’s block.

Among my less mysterious problems was that, the more I researched music and musicians (I had chosen to write about the world of classical and new concert music), the less I felt like bringing murder into their world. Music seemed to me immensely civilized, and the classically trained musicians I met some of the finest people I’d ever known.

If you have ever dried a pair of sneakers in a clothes drier, you will know what the inside of my head felt like as the thousand clues, plot points, motives and character developments that constitute the variables of any mystery turned over and over in my head. Think, think, think, until my brain felt like a pummeled boxer desperate to crawl from the ring.

In the end, when I was finally able to back far enough away to view my dilemma with some perspective, I was forced to recognize that what had happened was that the world around the Nine Muses had changed so radically since I conceived the series in 1998 that I could no longer write in the tone and vein I myself had devised. One of the pleasures for me of writing “Corpse de

Ballet” had been the chance to portray New York City, my home for twenty years now and a place I dearly love, as the spiky, spicy, rich, funny, maddening, deafening, challenging, proud, provincial, cosmopolitan, wonderfully contradictory treasure-box it had been for me. I almost thought of the city as a character itself.

But the changes brought here by the attacks of 9/11 were so great that the format and tone I initially developed simply no longer reflected my conception of New York. Nor did they leave room for what was going on now in my imagination. This difficulty had already announced itself while I was working on “Slightly Abridged,” conceived and begun before 9/11 but finished afterward. Indeed, in early 2003, I wrote an article for the New York Times about the troubles many writers with series set here had in bringing their characters into the post-9/11 world. (The article is available on the website under the headline, “Whodunit? Suddenly Nobody Cared.”)

I had set Muse Number 3 a year after the attacks; one key day in the sleuthing was the first anniversary itself, and the main characters (one of them a police detective, after all) were still adjusting to the events that made Manhattan a part of America. By then, of course, we had gone to war and the whole country, the whole world, had dramatically changed. I could not ignore these new facts of life, but neither could I successfully incorporate them into the world I had made for the Nine Muses. Like many of the authors in my article—especially authors toward the cozy end of the spectrum—I could not knit my real new world and my old imaginary one together. The more I tried, the more they pulled apart.

My editor at St. Martin’s was tremendously kind during the miserable period when I wrestled with these problems. But supportive as she was, she and the house did want and expect (and deserve) the series to keep the same crisp but essentially sunny and reassuring tone as I had initially established. Contractually, I owed this to them, and I suspected most of my readers would want it. (I would, if I were reading a Nine Muses Mystery.) Since I could not fulfill this aspect of the contract, my editor and I agreed to end it. And, practically speaking, that is the end of the Nine Muses Mysteries. At least for now.

I am very sorry, and somewhat embarrassed, to leave the series at Two Muses. I would not like anyone to think I came to this pass lightly or willingly. I worked for two full years on the book, ending up with a manuscript of almost 300 pages. In that time, I imposed on the generosity of dozens of people who shared with me their expertise in music and police work. Of course, I lost the income I had counted on from the contract. It was also the first time in my professional life when I failed to deliver something I had promised—a very painful first for me.

I miss Juliet and Murray. I wish I could offer you something to read besides this long explanation. I’ve begun a novel that is not a mystery—but it looks from here like it will be a long time a-writing.

Meanwhile, I thank you again so much for your kind support. I hope you are finding many wonderful books to read.

With all good wishes,

Ellen