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MIAMI, IT'S MURDER

By Edna Buchanan

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City of the tawny shoulders, Miami's fame and infamy swell, tightly braided, in the world's eyes. Frosty Northerners flee snowflakes for this balmy paradise where flakes in chartered planes drop a different snow imported from the south. Today, only New York rivals Miami as the city whose natives and semi-natives feel the most intense love-hate relationship for their hometown, like children whose parents alternately clobber and caress.

To Pulitzer Prize-winning Miami Herald reporter Edna Buchanan, who on her police beat reported more than 5,000 violent deaths, Miami is murder. And one of the more common opinions you'll hear in the journalism community is that no one does murder like Edna.

In Buchanan's second Britt Montero novel, homicide lurks everywhere. A spirited Cuban-American reporter for the Miami Daily News, Britt finds herself swirling in three separate sub-plots whose confluence spells terror.

Britt's tracking a serial rapist through downtown Miami. So far, he's victimized six working women, attacking them in rest rooms, growing increasingly brutal, leaving their bruised bodies coated with a mysterious powder. To make sure their pain doesn't leave when he does, he infects them with penicillin-resistant gonorrhea. The more Britt writes about him, the more his fury redirects itself toward her.

Britt's also pursuing an old story for the newspaper's "Take Two" column which updates past stories. Twenty-two years earlier, eight year-old Mary Beth Rafferty was abducted one afternoon, sexually mutilated in the woods and killed. Her body was found by 17 year-old Eric Fielding whom Britt's old friend, retired detective Dan Flood, remains certain was the killer although he could never prove it. Convinced Flood is right, Britt reopens the investigation. It's become a timely story again. Fielding is running for governor.

The third subplot involves a string of killers who eluded justice in court but are starting to turn up "accidentally" dead, usually in the most metaphorically appropriate ways. One common thread links these murders, and gradually Britt starts to reel it in.

When a Miami crime reporter's heroine is a Miami crime reporter, of course, we might suspect alter-egocentricity. Uh-uh. Edna's too clever for that. This novel advises: don't jump to obvious conclusions. There's a world of difference between Edna Buchanan and Britt Montero. Edna's from New Jersey; Britt's the orphan of a Cuban freedom fighter. Edna's a cool professional; Britt cries when victims do. And Edna can make language perform surgery; Britt speaks in deadpan Dragnet, the voice of a vulnerable 32 year-old who affects street-smarts yet has never heard of sexual aphasia and is "still surprised by what my mama never told me."

To compensate for Britt's weak voice with its clichés ("I drove home through the mother of all thunderstorms"), arch wordplay ("former loved ones in hot pursuit of uncool things") and even a larcenous echo of Tommy Lasorda ("Criminals...avoid people whose bosses buy ink by the barrel"), Buchanan flecks her canvas with interesting characters, like newly liberated librarian Lottie, Britt's old boyfriends and dashing cruise ship captains. She vividly evokes Miami's rich ethnic diversity, as Britt finds sources of protection ranging from her Cuban aunt's *santería* to a neighbor's *mezuzah*.

Buchanan props her story on weighty issues. Britt often notes the slow progress of and added layer of rules encumbering women in the professions. And at the heart of this novel is an exploration of mounting public rage against a legal system that betrays public trust. Rapists jump bond, and killers walk free on technicalities; if convicted, they serve a fraction of their sentence. "Murderers laugh at the system," says Dan Flood. Of politicians, Flood notes, "I've *arrested* people I could trust more." When law and justice seem on opposing sides, the public is willing to cheer its vigilantes and Dirty Harrys. "We all want to rid the world of scumbags," says Britt. Those closest to her have decided there's no statute of limitations on justice.

But just when you think you've got the scales lined up right, you'll find something new tossed into the balance. When things begin to clear, Edna's waiting with a new twist.