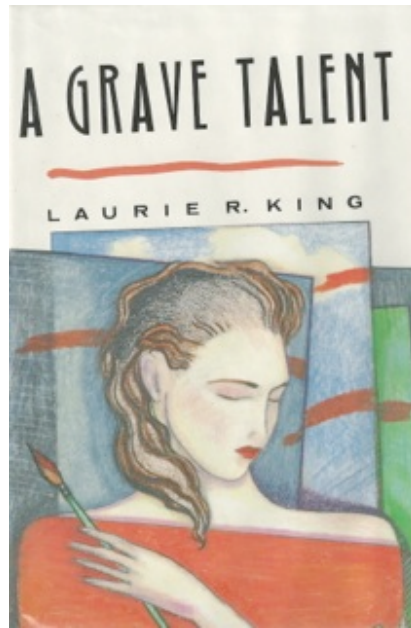


READING GROUP GUIDE



A Grave Talent

A Kate Martinelli novel

Laurie R. King

ISBN: 978-0553573992

About this Guide:

The following questions about *A Grave Talent* are offered as a resource for individual readers and for book groups, to give a starting place for discussion and a variety of perspectives from which to approach *A Grave Talent*.

About the Book:

A Grave Talent was published in 1993, Laurie R. King's first novel in what grew into a series of books about San Francisco Police Department Inspector Kate Martinelli. *A Grave Talent* won the US Edgar and the UK Creasey awards for Best First Novel.

Young Kate Martinelli, new to the SFPD homicide detail, is assigned to Inspector Al Hawkin as a “woman’s face” to the investigation of a series of child murders. The killer appears to be a resident of the hippie enclave known as Tyler’s Road, and suspicion falls on a world-famous artist who was long ago convicted of murdering a child.

King’s essay about the novel starts:

The book had its beginning with two ideas: Can I write a novel in which the protagonist does nothing? And, What would Rembrandt look like if he were a woman?

(Go [here](#) for the full essay.)

Praise for *A Grave Talent*:

... amazing first novel with intelligence, intrigue, and intricacy. The serial murders of three kindergarten-aged girls test the uncomfortable relationship between a crusty San Francisco detective and his new female partner, both known for their independence. Eventually, unforeseen complications involving a remarkable artist's past and an evil stalker's secretive present force the pair into confrontation, and they learn to trust. This work exhibits strong psychological undertones, compelling urgency, and dramatic action. A necessary purchase and a writer to watch.

—*Library Journal*

About the author:

Laurie R. King is a third generation Californian with an academic background in theology, and a practical history of everything from carpentry to coffee stores. Her yearly novels range from police procedurals and stand-alones to one historical series about Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes (*The Beekeeper’s Apprentice; Garment of Shadows*) and another historical series with ex-FBI agent Harris Stuyvesant (*Touchstone, The Bones of Paris.*) Her books have won the Edgar,

Creasey, Wolfe, Lambda, and Macavity awards, and appear regularly on the New York Times bestseller list.

There is more about King, her books, and her online community [here](#).

The book page for *A Grave Talent* is [here](#).

Discussion Questions:

1. An early review for **A Grave Talent** described how an artist friend of the reviewer thought the main character was not Kate Martinelli, but Vaun Adams. Laurie has herself said that she wrote the book as a challenge, to see if a novel could revolve around a character who does not act, but is: a force of nature, a black hole who pulls others from their orbits, for good and for bad. Does Vaun as a character succeed here? Do you know any 'forces of nature' who change lives?
2. Kate Martinelli is a lesbian cop. Both cops and lesbians have said they find the character believable. Do you agree? If you knew that Laurie was gay, or that she was a cop, would it change how you look at the story? If you knew that she was straight, and had never so much as handled a gun, how would that change it?
3. Vaun Adams is a female Rembrandt: utterly given over to her art. In history, most great artists have been men. Is it the completely self-centered personality that leads to the male domination of art, or is it simply that men are traditionally more likely to be supported in spending every waking hour honing their vision and their craft?
4. [Artemesia Gentileschi](#) was a highly talented Baroque painter: a woman, whose rape by a tutor and subsequent traumatic trial (he was sued for damages: she was put to the thumbscrews) colored much of her art. Why do you think she is less widely known than, for example, Georges de la Tour or Nicolas Poussin?
5. Vaun's mother tries hard to 'cure' her daughter's obsessions. Can you understand why she would do this? How is it similar to attempts to 'cure' homosexuality?

6. The book is about the death of innocents, and of innocence: an idyllic hippie community invaded by evil, a vulnerable woman the object of that evil. How difficult was it for you to continue reading when you found the crime was murdered children?

7. A novelist uses elements of the setting to develop her ideas. In *A Grave Talent*, houses play a central role. What do their very different houses tell the reader about Kate, Vaun, Al, Tyler, Jani, and others?

9. *A Grave Talent* has been described as an onion, with the stories of Kate and Vaun peeled away in layers. When we first meet Kate, she is reserved, almost stilted, and deeply closeted; when we meet Vaun, she is utterly absorbed, oblivious to the world when it does not provide material for her art. Could you envision this book being sold and reviewed as a literary novel rather than a crime novel? Why?

10. The story takes place in the late 1980s, when police departments were in general semi-military organizations dominated by men. Could you imagine a police detective choosing to remain closeted now, twenty years later? What about after reading [this article](#) from 2007?