

Karin Slaughter's latest novel, [UNDONE](#), features characters from both her *Grant County* and *Will Trent/Atlanta* series who come together to solve a grisly murder. In this interview with Bookreporter.com's Joe Hartlaub, Slaughter describes the hardest aspect of this "cross-pollination" and examines the complex relationships shared by the main characters. She also discusses the shocking statistics she uncovered while researching crimes committed against women in the US, reveals her ultimate goal in writing crime fiction, and shares details about her next book, tentatively titled *BROKEN*.

Bookreporter.com: *UNDONE*, your latest novel, is noteworthy for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it brings together Dr. Sara Linton from your *Grant County* series with GBI agents Will Trent and Faith Mitchell from *TRIPTYCH* and *FRACTURED*. Your *Grant County* series had been going for a while when you introduced Trent and Mitchell. Have you been planning to cross-pollinate the two series since you created Trent and Mitchell, or was this an idea that came to you relatively recently?

Karin Slaughter: I knew when I was writing *INDELIBLE*, my fourth *Grant County* novel, that something big was coming --- a change that would completely shake up the series. At that point, I was thinking about the plot of *TRIPTYCH*, my first stand-alone. I was trying to get inside Will Trent's head and figure out what makes him tick, and it occurred to me that I could have him show up in *INDELIBLE*, but I wasn't quite ready to put him in that world. Instead, I let his boss, Amanda Wagner, show up. It's a link that helped with the eventual cross-pollination, because Amanda knowing Sara --- and Sara's story --- legitimizes her in Faith and Will's eyes when Amanda sees Sara in *UNDONE*. So, I've known for about four years that I was going to bring both series together. Figuring out how was the hard part. (And of course everything I thought would happen four years ago is not going to happen now!)

BRC: In the Prologue, an older couple is driving home from a Sunday visit with their son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren before taking a wrenching right turn that

will affect the entire book. One can almost smell the vinyl seating in the car in the beginning; by the end, one can almost see the blood. At what point did you have the Prologue exactly as you wanted it? Did you begin your writing with the Prologue, or was that done later?

KS: First, thank you --- I am very proud of that prologue! I always write chronologically, from first page to last. I can't go back and forth like some writers do, though I commend them for their ability. With this particular passage, I had given a lot of thought to how the scene would work. Most of my writing happens in my head first, so that by the time I sit down, the nuts-and-bolts writing process goes fairly quickly. I had thought about Judith, the narrator of the prologue, so much that by the time I sat down to write it, everything was very clear in my head. I could smell the vinyl, too.

BRC: Near the beginning of UNDONE you mention a letter that Dr. Linton receives but does not open. The letter is like a quietly ticking time bomb throughout the book; it does not disturb or interrupt the storyline, yet it sits quietly in Dr. Linton's pocket, or on the mantel, waiting to be opened and read and its contents revealed. I thought that this was a great secondary plot device. Do you have any plans for Lena Adams to come back into Dr. Linton's life? Or will you be doing something else with Adams in the future?

KS: I have lots of plans for Lena in future books. Bringing both women into Atlanta and Will Trent's world at the same time seemed too coincidental, so I used the letter as a reminder to long-time readers that Lena was still there, and what's more, that there was still some unresolved anger between the two. The story I am working on now, BROKEN, has Lena in it. She's a great character, and I think it's wonderful that some of my readers want to strangle her at times. Lena can be polarizing. She can make some really bad choices. What I hope people have noticed is that she's getting better. BROKEN is a realization of the emotional journey I planned for Lena from BLINDSIGHTED on. She's not as willful and angry as she was before. She's older. She's trying to build a life. Poor thing --- it won't be easy.

BRC: One of the key elements of *UNDONE* concerns body image. You describe a couple of body advocacy websites that had some surprising points of view. Do these types of sites and/or chat rooms actually exist? And did you visit and/or participate in any of them during the course of your research?

KS: Unfortunately, they do exist. I never participated in any of the sites or discussions because I don't feel that's my place. But let's be honest here: there aren't many women who are perfectly happy with their appearance. I know that I can pick myself apart with the best of them. I remember watching an interview with Nicole Kidman once, and she was talking about how awkward and gangly certain parts of her body are, and I thought, "Crap, if she can't be happy, we're all screwed." I like to talk about social issues in my books, and body image was one of the themes I was obsessed with while I was writing. Women tend to be our own worst enemies. Girls aren't taught to get our anger out like boys are --- at least my generation wasn't. I was in high school by the time Title IX came along, and I never played team sports or learned to get my aggression out physically. (Except for the occasional slap-fight with my older sisters.)

BRC: One of my favorite moments in your book is the way you so exquisitely slice into and out of the layers of relationships, be they friends, lovers, and yes, enemies. You pick up on nuances that are quite real, yet that people don't normally focus upon until they are brought to their attention. I was particularly impressed with your subtle comparisons of the off-and-on relationship between Trent and Angie, his estranged wife, who share a different kind of passion and special kind of loathing, and Trent and Mitchell, who are not romantically involved and often snipe at each other, but who are in many ways closer to each other than to anyone else. The possibilities for relationships of all types exist among your core characters. Do you have the relationships among the primary characters in your GBI and *Grant County* novels planned out in advance for future books?

KS: I love Will and Faith's relationship. Faith is a woman who has been a mother for the majority of her life, and she doesn't know how to deal with Will other than to mother him. For Will's part, he's never had a mother, so he doesn't quite know how to behave with Faith, other than to be irritated. I think that the difference between Will's relationship with Angie and his relationship with Faith is that Angie knows everything about him. This is also what keeps them from being passionately in love with each other. It's finding out new things about someone that makes them interesting, and while I think both Angie and Will have new things they could share with each other, the point is that they don't want to. Then throw Sara into the mix, and Lena in BROKEN...sometimes I feel sorry for Will. He's surrounded by strong women who try to push him around all the time. If you pay close attention, they seldom succeed, but Will manages to make them think they are. Quite a trick!

BRC: One of the most riveting aspects of UNDONE is the grim description of what was done to Anna, the abduction victim whose discovery begins the entire course of events in the book. The description of what was inflicted upon her was almost excruciating in its revelation, though you never descended to the gratuitous. I am going to assume that the things described here were not entirely the product of your own imagination. If I am correct, from what sources of your research were they acquired?

KS: I'm never one to rip ideas from the headlines, but I know of a case where certain elements of the torture Anna endured actually occurred. The revelation during the autopsy --- that was real. And horrifying. I remember reading about it and thinking, "My God, what this man must think of women." It was on my mind when I was thinking about my bad guy. I am not one to write books where the reason someone does something horrible is that they're evil, or a bad person. I want them to have motivations that are understood. I used the one horrifying thing I am trying not to give away to people who haven't read the book to convey his hatred. While I was doing research for UNDONE, I was shocked to learn that, according to the FBI's crime statistics, 250,000 women a year are raped in America. This is just what's reported, and only includes women over the age of 18. Can you

imagine what the real number must be? We have a real epidemic of violence against women in our country that is not being addressed because people are uncomfortable talking about one of the most horrible acts of hatred: rape.

BRC: Another striking element of your work is your protagonists, who are so true to life. In your afterword to *UNDONE*, you comment in relation to some liberties you take with roads and landmarks, that “(I)t’s fiction, y’all.” However, your characters are extremely real, for their strengths but primarily for their weaknesses. All of them in some way seem to have deep flaws, even as they struggle --- successfully or otherwise --- to overcome them. Does imbuing your characters with such realism come naturally, or is this an aspect of your writing that requires equal parts inspiration and perspiration?

KS: I think it’s natural for me. Growing up in the South, I learned at my granny’s knee to identify people not by their strengths, but by their weaknesses. The drinker. The man who was cheating on his wife. The mother who didn’t take care of her kids. These were the staples of every good story --- and of course they were embellished. But, as a reader, I’ve never been interested in perfect people. I absolutely love reading series books, but some of them get to the point where the main characters are so perfect that you wonder why you’re still reading. I think it’s much more interesting when people make mistakes. Sara, for instance --- as smart as she is, she made a really big mistake in *A FAINT COLD FEAR*. She’s not sure if the mistake ended up costing someone their life, and that’s something she has to live with. I think mistakes are what make you interesting. You can say you’re a good person until you’re blue in the face, but the proof comes in your actions when something bad happens.

BRC: You demonstrated in *BEYOND REACH* that you are not afraid to remove major characters from your storyline. How do you decide who stays and who goes? And do you have any plans to remove anyone in the future?

KS: That was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. I’m not much of a crier, but I bawled like a baby when I was working on

BEYOND REACH. The decision was very organic for me and happened when I was working on INDELIBLE, two books before BEYOND REACH. Once I'd decided what I was going to do, I had two more books to get through, so it opened up a lot of possibilities. I don't currently have plans to do anything like that again, though. It was too hard on me!

BRC: I am of the opinion that our greatest authors, contemporary and otherwise, have come primarily from the South. There is a tradition of storytelling that exists in the South that seems unmatched in any other part of the United States and translates well to the written page. What, as a native of the Deep South, do you believe lies within the collective psyche of the American South that lends itself so well to storytelling and writing?

KS: Well, I certainly agree with you, and that's not just because I'm southern. My favorite authors are all from the South. When Walker Percy was asked a variation on your question, he answered, "Because we've experienced the fall." He of course meant the South losing the Civil War. I don't want to spread the idiotic stereotype that Southerners haven't gotten past the war, but I think it's something that is in our collective memory. The socio-economic impact is certainly still there. The poorest states in the Union are Southern. The worst schools, the lowest paying jobs, the most toxic factories, are all in the South and spread over into Texas (which is not really the South, but it's close enough to feel the negative effects). I can't speak to the Northern experience, but I know from my own youth that being close to hardship gives you a certain view on life, and I think that comes out in Southern stories. We've historically been a more agrarian society, too. Public schools did not exist in Atlanta until the turn of the last century. Before that, the wealthy sent their children abroad to be educated and poor folk told their kids stories as they sat around the fire at the end of a hard day working the fields. It's this sense of oral tradition that makes the huge difference. I grew up hearing stories from my dad and grandfather, and I have no doubt that is why I turned into a storyteller.

BRC: What has drawn you to writing thrillers?

KS: I've always loved reading thrillers and crime fiction, but I have a broader definition of what constitutes a crime novel than most folks. *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*, *THE GREAT GATSBY*, *A TALE OF TWO CITIES* --- these are all novels about crimes. When I started writing my own stories, I mirrored the themes in my favorite books, so it seemed a natural extension to have crimes in my novels. The author who had the most influence on me was Flannery O'Connor. I remember reading one of her stories when I was 12 or 13. It was a revelation that a southern woman could talk about violence in such a frank way and get away with it. Of course, when I re-read her as an adult I realized that the violence was just a fulcrum she used to pry the scab off the human condition. I think that's what good crime fiction should always do, and I try to do the same in my own work. Human beings have been writing about crime and violence for a long time. I'm not going to reinvent the wheel. The fresh perspective I can bring is how folks react to crime; how it changes their lives and the way they look at the world. That's always the goal of my stories --- not the crime, but what the crime leaves behind.

BRC: You've been writing for over a decade. Have your work practices changed during that time? How do you schedule time to write? Do you find it easy or difficult to maintain the discipline?

KS: Good Lord, has it been that long?! I'm sorry to say that my work habits haven't changed much. Travel is a big issue for me because I tour around the world most of the year, so I have to be very careful about who I say yes to and where I go, because the only reason I do any of it is so I can write for a living. I think it's very easy to lose sight of your goals when you tour too much. You can start believing the hype, which is never good. I keep a writing calendar and block out time for just writing. I have a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia and I go up there for a week or two and write all day and all night until my fingers ache. Then, I come home and whine about how tired I am, then I go back up a few weeks later. It's not a good way to write, but it works for me.

BRC: What have you read in the past six months that you would recommend to our readers?

KS: I just finished the new Anne Tyler that's coming out in the fall. I love her stories because they seem really simple, but they're actually complicated in the best way. I loved Lee Child's GONE TOMORROW --- I think it's his best book yet. Kathryn Stockett's THE HELP reminded me of my childhood in a lot of ways. Very bittersweet. I've bought about 10 copies of the book to give to friends and they have all loved it. The Columbine book was very interesting to me. Like everyone who watched the tragedy unfold on television, I thought I knew what happened. I was wrong. The scariest part was the way the press bent the facts to tell their story. I can't watch the news anymore without wondering what truth they're subverting to make the story more sensational. I am very worried that we no longer can trust the media.

BRC: Looking back on how you initially broke into publishing, is there anything that you wish you had done differently? Is there anything that you did that didn't seem wise at the time, but that in hindsight you are pleased that you did?

KS: Everything I did back then --- good or bad --- got me to where I am now. I'd be scared to change any of it because it might cause something crazy to happen in the present. It's good to make mistakes sometimes, because that's the only way you learn. But, if we had a wish list, I would be taller and thinner.

BRC: Your biographical material at the end of the book indicates that you are working on your next novel. Can you tell us what we can expect?

KS: BROKEN is the title I've come up with --- and will hopefully get to keep! It opens on a rainy morning in Grant County. Lena Adams is watching a body being pulled out of the lake. Meanwhile, Sara is driving down from Atlanta to be with her family for Thanksgiving. It's her first time back in town in three years. Of course, something really awful happens, and the GBI

gets called in, and you'll have to wait until next summer to find out what happens next!

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