

PERFECTLY

Unauthorized Essays on the Life, Loves,
and Other Disasters of
Stephanie Plum, Trenton Bounty Hunter

PLUM

Edited by

LEAH WILSON



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DESTINY: DISASTER!

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

Janet Evanovich begins One for the Money by having Stephanie tell a story about Joe Morelli, a game of choo-choo, a pastry counter, and a Buick. It's the setup for her relationship with Morelli, of course, but it's also Stephanie in a nutshell: curious, rebellious, and not above taking a little well-earned revenge. Her core personality hasn't changed since she was seventeen. What if, Bev Rosenbaum asks, we could go further? What if, seeing Stephanie at seven years old, we could predict the course of the rest of her life?

YOU WANNA TALK DISASTERS? Easy, where Stephanie Plum is concerned. A more disaster-prone woman never walked the earth. Okay, granted, she is a bounty hunter, and blown-up cars are part of the gig (though hers do seem to explode a good deal more than those of other law-enforcement types . . . like, in every book). Ditto hair accidents and destroyed clothing. But let's talk life-type disasters. Relationships, for example. The truth is, poor Stephanie never had a chance at a "normal" life. A cornucopia of genetic (can you say Grandma Mazur?) and environmental (regular working-class neighborhood, my arse) factors combined into a toxic soup that virtually guaranteed a disastrous adulthood for our favorite bail bondswoman.

Remember the famous "Up" documentary series (*7-Up*, *14-Up*, *21-Up*, etc), the premise of which was taken from the Francis Xavier quote and Jesuit motto, "Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man"? In the series, director Michael Apted interviewed the same group of people at ages seven, fourteen, twenty-one—I believe he's up to forty-nine now—to determine if they ended up living the lives they seemed destined for at age seven. I'm totally in love with the Up films, so I'm going to try to apply that same premise to the Stephanie Plum books, and demonstrate precisely how genetic

and environmental factors, together with a seminal incident from her childhood, turned Stephanie Plum into the walking disaster we know and love. “Attempt” being the key word. Keep in mind that, as a novelist, I’m only a wannabe psychologist; I really have no idea which of the following laundry list of factors is responsible, in part or in whole, for how our beloved Stephanie turned out.

But while I’m no psychologist, I *am* somewhat of an expert on disaster-prone children and teens. As I said, I’m a novelist, and one who seems to specialize in odd, disaster-prone teenage heroines, possibly because of my own, er, colorful background. But my own childhood is the subject for a whole other essay in a whole other book. Or perhaps for a therapist’s couch.

But I digress. Back to Stephanie we go. Let’s talk family tree first. And let’s begin with Stephanie’s nutcase of a grandmother, the bony and bug-eyed Grandma Mazur who, when we first meet her in *One for the Money*, is coveting Stephanie’s sexy black biker shorts. Grandma Mazur loves the action (particularly the, er, exciting viewings at Constantine Stiva’s funeral parlor) and Stephanie, fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, seems to share a special kinship with her loony *grandmère*. Possibly because Granny knows exactly how to push her daughter’s buttons and loves to do so. (Like grandmother, like granddaughter.) Indeed, the two often team up against Stephanie’s grimly determined-to-be-normal housewife mother Helen. Like when, say, Grandma Mazur wants to go to a viewing at Stiva’s that Helen doesn’t want her to go to. (And who can really blame her? Grandma Mazur has leapt on corpses, pried open closed coffins, and much, much worse at Stiva’s.)

Which isn’t to say Helen is completely normal herself. In fact, that almost psychopathic determination to lead a “normal” life, as evidenced by her on-the-clock dinner scheduling and constant food-related threats (she seems particularly to enjoy withholding pineapple upside-down cake) is practically a dead giveaway that the whole normalcy thing is a big act. Despite all her talk about how she’d love to engage in “regular” dinner table conversations as opposed to chat about guns and murder and such (and aliens, in the case of Grandma Mazur), Helen clearly possesses a violent streak herself. Witness the food fight she instigates in *Eleven on Top*.

It seems pretty clear to me that Helen is one of those women who

LIFE ON THE HAMSTER WHEEL

Tanya Michaels

It's one of the difficulties of long-running series: you want things to change, because you don't want your audience to get bored, but you don't want things to change too much and lose what the audience loved about the series in the first place. So Stephanie sometimes seems like she's going around in circles—vacillating between Joe and Ranger, never really getting better at bounty hunting, still living pretty much the same life she was living at the end of book one. All that running around getting nowhere reminds Tanya Michaels of something. . . . Oh, right. Rex's hamster wheel.

MANY OF US WHO ENJOY returning to the world of Stephanie Plum do so not just because we love Stephanie, but because hers is a world full of colorful characters. It's one hell of a rogues' gallery, from two strong Alpha male heroes to quirky Grandma Mazur, from larger-than-life Lula to nemesis Joyce Barnhardt and the bad guys who invariably want Stephanie dead. Yet ironically, with all these people surrounding Steph, it's the smallest character, the one who never says anything at all, who speaks volumes about her life: Rex the hamster.

For members of different species, Stephanie and Rex share an uncanny number of similarities. Neither of them likes hamster pellets, which Stephanie admits to having tried for breakfast (*One for the Money* 13), but they both love Butterscotch Krimpets, Helen Plum's pineapple upside-down cake, Pino's pizza, and a host of other foods. (Rex, of course, has the healthier diet of the two since he frequently eats the raisins, grapes, apple chunks, and carrots that Steph keeps in the fridge for him.) Stephanie has days where she feels like crawling back into bed and hiding from reality; Rex often retreats to his soup can. Like his owner, Rex harbors some affection for Morelli (who's been known to feed him on occasion—love and food are pretty

closely intertwined in the Burg). Both bounty hunter and hamster lead a somewhat nomadic lifestyle, with Steph's apartment serving as sort of a central, frequently broken-into base, as Stephanie, with Rex more often than not in tow, drifts between other locations such as her increasingly crowded childhood home, Morelli's house, and, for a brief period in *Ten Big Ones*, an apartment of Ranger's.

Still, these are mostly superficial resemblances. The more meaningful, and sometimes puzzling, similarity is that both Rex and Stephanie have *survived* for so many books. I love Stephanie and would certainly never wish her ill (even if I do envy the devotion of two incredibly sexy men and her ability to zip jeans and wear short skirts in spite of atrocious eating habits). But you have to admit, it's statistically improbable that one untrained young woman could survive multiple car-bombings, kidnapping, the death wishes of a homicidal rapist, serial killers, gang members with a contract out on her life, and, just to top it all off, the Garden State garden-variety ill will of armed and aggressive FTAs who don't care to be in custody. As Morelli, Ranger, and Stephanie herself have all repeatedly pointed out, Stephanie's main skill as a bounty hunter—and, next to fibbing, her *only* skill—is luck. She attributes this in part to her Hungarian heritage and gypsy intuition (*Ten Big Ones* 2). Steph's the bond enforcement equivalent of an idiot savant.

Rex, unlike his owner, isn't out making enemies, but he still pays a dangerous price for being the only other member of her tiny household. While Stephanie is off losing handcuffs and watching various vehicles go up in flames, Rex faces his own problems at home. In *Two for the Dough*, he is locked in his aquarium with an angry cat; in *Three to Get Deadly*, crazed vigilantes are prepared to shoot him full of drugs and let him overdose in order to make a brutal point; in *Four to Score*, he is alone in the apartment when it is set on fire. Is it just me, or is impending death something of an unfortunate pattern for the dark-eyed little fella?

Then again, in another instance of hamster-mirroring-heroine, Rex employs some of the exact same modes of protection that Stephanie does: no small amount of luck and animalistic survival instincts, for starters. Despite lacking street smarts, Stephanie has enough primitive drive to kill Jimmy Alpha, saving her own life in *One for the Money*, long before she has to shoot Clyde Cone in *To the Nines*.

THE “N” IN NEW JERSEY STANDS FOR NOIR

Amy Garvey

Noir: It's a genre full of down-on-their-luck private eyes solving morally oblique cases and resisting the temptations of mysterious dames with great gams. Stephanie Plum would fit right in. No? Well, Amy Garvey says, actually...

I'M A CARD-CARRYING, lifelong book addict. If you catch me out and about minus a book in my bag, it's a sure sign the world is ending. Even so, there are a lot of books out there, you know? (And I *do* know, because some days it seems like half of them are in the towering to-be-read pile, more correctly called a tower, that lives in my bedroom. And has spawned several offspring in other parts of the house.) Somehow, despite the fact that I lived for nine years just across the river from Trenton and love kick-ass heroines, it took me a while to find Stephanie Plum.

I'm not sure what I was expecting. Fun, certainly. A little romance, a little sex, a little action, all of which are right up my alley when it comes to a good read. I mean, how can you go wrong with a female bounty hunter trying to manage both her love life and the criminal element? But after I dug in deeper, I realized I'd found something with a whole lot more meat to it than the pop-art bright covers and catchy titles suggested. I'd found a twisted, funny as hell take on the time-honored noir genre—and I loved it.

What's noir? *Noir* means “black” in French, and that's really the best place to start. *Noir* is black, and not only because the original films that defined the genre were shot in black and white. *Noir* is an attitude—and we all know Stephanie and the other denizens of the Plumverse have that in spades.

But it's not a sunny attitude. A laundry list of influences and world

events—including painting and literature, German Expressionism, and a couple of other European “-isms”—came together to create what we think of as noir, but its visual style is always the first clue, at least when it comes to film. Ever see the black-and-white commercial for Flonase with the detective in the fedora and the dame in distress? Noir influence, right there.

The giants of the genre are some of film’s true classics: *The Maltese Falcon*, *Laura*, *The Big Sleep*, *Key Largo*, *Double Indemnity*. Think shadows, both metaphorical and literal, as well as secrets, lies, deception, and usually more than one dead body or crime. Think edgy, gritty, and not terribly nice, a world peopled with folks whose morals are as flexible as overcooked spaghetti, and one in which the endings aren’t always—or even usually—what anyone would call happy.

For example, in *Laura*, a police detective investigates the murder of a beautiful young woman and begins to fall in love with her as he pieces together her short life. Obviously, no recipe for happiness there—especially when he discovers this particular murder, as well as its victim, is not exactly what it seems.

The *femme fatale* to beat all *femmes fatales* is the key to *Double Indemnity*. Barbara Stanwyck plays a double-crossing beauty who lures an insurance salesman into an affair—as well as a murderous insurance scam.

As counterpoints to other famous movies of the 1940s—films such as *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, and *The Philadelphia Story*—these noir classics couldn’t have been more perfect. Noir is the film negative of the “feel good” movie, what a cynical, sherry-swilling spinster aunt is to a bubbly teenager in pastel sweater sets and a flippy ponytail. Which is partly why I love it—in movies as well as books, I adore fantasy happy endings (think *The Princess Bride* or *Pretty Woman* or any number of deliciously frothy romances), but once in a while I need to ignore my sweet tooth and order a fiery, no-frills scotch, neat. That’s what noir is—a look, not at how the world could be, if it were perfect and the good guys always won and the guy got the girl (or vice versa), but at how the world too often *is*. Despite the black-and-white film technique, noir is all about those inconvenient, all-too-realistic shades of gray.

And all of this has what, exactly, to do with Stephanie’s world, you say? The Plumverse isn’t set in the forties or fifties, for one, and it’s a series of books, not movies! I know, I know. Just wait.

EXPLODING THE MYTH OF THE JERSEY GIRL

Devon Ellington

There are some things about Stephanie that are hard for the average non-Jersey girl to relate to: the excessive hairspray; the tight tops; the deep appreciation for spandex. But Stephanie's nerve? Her humor? Her longing for happiness and security? They're universal.

“EVERYTHING IN NEW JERSEY has a bad odor. It's one of the few things a person can count on” (38). That's one of Stephanie Plum's early comments in the first of her adventures, *One for the Money*. The first time I read those lines, I howled with laughter. I've spent many an hour on the New Jersey highways, windows rolled up, holding my nose as I drove past Newark or “The Toxic Swamp” around the Meadowlands. And just recently, in January 2007, frantic 911 calls were made from Washington Heights to Greenwich Village about a noxious, gas-like odor. Midtown office buildings were evacuated, and the PATH train was shut down for two hours. No one, including Con Edison or the Emergency Services/Terrorist Task Force teams, could figure out immediately what it was—but it was believed to be wafting over the Hudson River from Jersey. You read Stephanie's words and you laugh; they're funny, but they're also true. There's a dryness, a wryness, in the line, and it's one of the hints that Evanovich is not going to use Stephanie to embody a cliché, but explode it.

Every culture has its myths, be it fourth century B.C. Etruscans or twenty-first century A.D. Americans. When we think of Greek, Roman, and Celtic myths, we think of pantheons of gods and goddesses, and stories that explain the behavior of the natural world. Today, the word is often used just to refer to something—say, a popular story or belief—that isn't true. Focusing on the myth as something that is false makes it easy to forget that, false though they may

be, all myths are, at heart, stories meant to explain things: why the sun comes up in the morning—or why girls with Jersey accents always have such big hair.

The myth of the Jersey girl explains who these particular girls are and what they want; it's a form of shorthand that lets viewers and readers achieve a basic understanding of a particular character quickly. And there's certainly some truth to the myth; there would have to be, or we wouldn't see it so often. But we've seen the Jersey girl so often that she's become a cliché. What Evanovich has done so successfully is redeem the cliché, turning the Jersey girl from someone we think we know (and can therefore dismiss) into a real person, whom we can care about and sympathize with. Evanovich isn't content just to repeat the myth. Instead she takes us beyond it to create a real character on a real journey. That's why her audience has stayed with her for twelve (to date) Stephanie Plum books (plus holiday specials), created a market for her pre-Plum romance novels' re-issuance, and gobbled up her new series starring Baltimore-raised mechanic extraordinaire Alexandra Barnaby as quickly as Evanovich has been able to write them.

The early books take us into the familiar Jersey myth. Although in each book, Stephanie moves beyond expectations to show she's more than a mere cipher, the early books set up the solid foundation she needs in order to soar in the later ones. In *One for the Money*, she is well suited to epitomize the Jersey Girl cliché, joining the ranks of Marisa Tomei's character Mona Lisa Vito in *My Cousin Vinny*, the women of *The Sopranos*, and characters from innumerable forgettable television sitcoms. She wears spandex and acts like a hockey jersey is the height of fashion. She carries hairspray in her purse to preserve the big, Jersey hair (Jersey girls can rival Texas girls when it comes to big hair). She has the red lipstick. She firmly believes that, when in doubt, add mascara. She used to be a lingerie buyer for a discount store. She knows how to remove a distributor cap from a car. And she's not alone. Her friend Mary Lou fits the stereotype, as does the office manager of her cousin Vinnie's bail bonds office, Connie. They have the big hair; they're man-hungry; they're loud; and they dress in tight clothes.

They're women we recognize and are prepared to laugh at. They're the ones we make fun of when we go out. They're noisy and crude,

LEARNING TO FLY

WHY BOUNTY HUNTING IS MORE THERAPEUTIC THAN RUNNING OVER MORELLI WITH A BUICK

Sylvia Day

When we first meet Stephanie, she can't afford therapy—she can barely afford her low-rent apartment and regular meals. A couple of hours a week with a trained professional, not that you'd have talked her into it, probably would have done her good. Luckily, as Sylvia Day suggests, she found bounty hunting instead.

Bounty hunter. It held a certain cachet.

—Stephanie Plum, *Three to Get Deadly* (3)

This simple statement is Stephanie Plum in a nutshell. But it is important to note that while the statement itself is simple, the reasons why such a thing would be important to Stephanie are a little more complicated.

Yes, superficially, the job carries a certain prestige that Steph finds appealing. When Janet Evanovich first introduces us to our intrepid heroine, it's only a few days before Stephanie pursues her first bounty. But as her story unfolds and we hear more about her past, our picture of her broadens. We learn that, as a child, she was stifled and misunderstood in a dysfunctional family in which she felt like an outsider. Her mother is Trenton's second answer to *Desperate Housewives's* Bree Van De Kamp (after Mrs. Morelli, who is said to make all other Burg housewives look second-rate), her father is negligent in his duty to provide a strong father figure, and her older sister Valerie is (or at least was, before her husband left her) perfect in every way, setting an example Stephanie could never live up to. Steph spent her early years feeling insignificant, and went on to a forgettable stint at Douglass

College and a lamentable marriage to an unworthy man she never seemed to be very attached to. When asked why she married Dickie Orr, she replies it was because he had a nice car. Translation: She has no idea.

Stephanie made these choices knowing they were the wrong ones for her. They were, however, the choices her family (most likely her mother) approved of.

I

Two blocks to my parents' house, and I could feel familial obligation sucking at me, pulling me into the heart of the Burg. The clock on the dash told me I was seven minutes late, and the urge to scream told me I was home.

—Stephanie Plum, *One for the Money* (7)

Prior to Stephanie stumbling into bounty hunting, the impetus for most of her decisions was fulfilling familial expectations. Going to college and marrying a lawyer were never goals she had set for herself.

Stephanie was a square peg trying to fit into the rounded hole of a housewife that Valerie filled so beautifully, and Steph's failure left her as the odd child out. For Mrs. Plum, the roles of wife and mother constitute her entire identity. They define her world, and she seems capable of relating to her daughters only when they live inside these roles, too. This is partly why Mrs. Plum is constantly suggesting jobs more worthy of a high school student than a woman in her early thirties: in her mind, Stephanie should be holding a job that can be easily discarded when she marries and assumes her true career as a housewife. When we first meet Steph, her mother laments her clothes as being a deterrent to men, then goes on to list potential boyfriends without using any type of criterion for selection. If they're male, they are a possible husband.

These machinations, while driven by the best of intentions, reinforce to Stephanie that she can't be trusted to make important decisions on her own. The poor quality of the men her mother suggests is insulting, clearly expressing Mrs. Plum's belief that Steph should gratefully take what she can get. Is it any wonder that a career with

I LOVE STEPHIE

Carole Nelson Douglas

Bree, Lynette, Gabrielle, and Susan, Stephanie is not. (Well, maybe Susan—being locked out of your house naked is just the sort of situation Stephanie would be able to empathize with.) But she does have a lot in common with a zany, lovable Desperate Housewife of an earlier age: Lucy Ricardo.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series that has put her at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and made her loyal readers see purple? What has made them, in the words of Janet's promotional catch phrase, go "Plum Crazy" for thirteen laugh-a-lot years?

Is it Janet's unique mix of a quirky, loveable heroine with a quirky, lovable, but dysfunctional family? Is it the sinister-humorous take on East Coast Family in terms of the mob? Is it the dark underside of the humor: real danger and a slew of *Fargo*-like venal, bumbling psychopaths for Stephanie to go up against? Or the classic romantic triangle with two desirable Alpha guys courting a feisty gal trying to make it in a man's world just to pay the rent and keep her independence?

Or is it the inspired underpinnings of another comic leading lady from long ago and far away?

Janet told me once that she knew from the beginning that the series had to run on "the humor and the chase." That phrase could describe everything from *Keystone Kops* shorts in silent films to *Romancing the Stone*. The chase in this case is both criminal and romantic. The motive is Stephanie "getting her man." Criminal or criminally attractive. And the method in both pursuits is often hilariously comic.

Stephanie's Literally Comic Roots Are Showing

Janet has often cited an Uncle Scrooge comic book addiction as a child. (I had that one too.) So what was the Scrooge McDuck mystique? Well,

he was literally rolling in money, yet his image—spats, top hat, cane, and reading specs—was smiling and lovable. And his adventures were imaginative and far-ranging—just like Stephanie Plum’s.

Janet is so Uncle Scrooge-happy that, where other authors might name *Moby Dick* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the book that had the most significant impact on her life, she cites the Uncle Scrooge adventures by Carl Banks.

With such literally comic roots, no wonder humor is the hallmark of Janet’s wildly successful mystery series: Stephanie’s constantly exploding cars, the scatological dog-poop pranks, and the physical low comedy of some of Stephanie’s “captures.”

Take the window-mooning, self-exposing, oiled, and naked obese man in *To the Nines* who is too big, slippery, and obscene to submit to physical capture. Please take him. Stephanie can’t. Not only that, what he is waving around only proves him insufficiently endowed.

Stephanie’s clothes end up covered in Vaseline, and she’s the object of racy comments for some time afterward. It’s a literally dirty job, but somebody has to do it. Stephanie Plum does it to keep from giving up and giving in and moving back home, where we know she would become a desperately bored housewife.

It’s easy to visualize Stephanie Plum, while in pursuit of an FTA, getting into a grape-stomping, no-holds-barred wrestling war with a hefty Italian woman who could be the Godfather in drag, or going undercover with Lula on a candy-box-stuffing assembly line . . . and then falling so behind that they start stuffing missed chocolate creams into their faces to hide the evidence . . . until their clothes, hair, and faces are smeared with feces-dark chocolate, making them look like guilty toddlers who got toilet training very, very wrong.

Those grape-stomping and chocolate-stuffing scenes are classic clips from the *I Love Lucy* show. It’s humor at its most domestic and messiest, distaff humor that isn’t afraid to get down-and-dirty physical and well as outrageous.

Maybe some readers find the Plum series humor raucous and vulgar, or some of the shtick (exploding dog poop dumped on mean girls’ doorsteps) juvenile and rowdy, but so is the Burg, that earthy part of Trenton, New Jersey, that is Stephanie’s beloved beat. Irreverence is the ethanol that makes cheeky comedy run, and Janet has that quality in spades, clubs, and hearts too.