

# Eye Witness

## Double Trouble:

Honey West  
& Her Stylish Creator,  
Gloria Fickling

by Kevin Burton Smith



NBC Television

“Honey West here.”

That’s how Gloria Fickling answered her phone when I reached her in her study in Laguna Beach.

Gloria Fickling is the female half of G.G. Fickling, the husband-and-wife team (her “sweet darling” husband, sportswriter Forest “Skip” Fickling, passed away six years ago) that created Honey West, the feisty female private eye. Honey appeared in a pop-

ular series of books back in the 1950s and ‘60s, inspired a mid-1960s TV show, and is “soon to be a major motion picture.” No wonder the locals call the Ficklings’ oceanfront home “the house that Honey West built.”

As we spoke, I soon discovered that Gloria is just as captivating and charming as the character she co-created: playful and sassy, chatty and warm. She’s also got a great laugh, which she uses frequently.

Of course, these days nobody would dare call Honey a feminist icon, but in her time she was a rarity—an independent woman calling her own shots. She may have been prone to frequent “wardrobe malfunctions,” but she was out there knocking on doors, taking down names, and answering to nobody but herself.

She first appeared in *This Girl for Hire* (1957) and would eventually appear in ten more adventures, the books all utilizing the same zany blend of humour and sex that contemporary Richard Prather’s gazillion-selling Shell Scott P.I. series had

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Under the name G.G. Fickling, Gloria Fickling (left) and her husband Richard created the zany, sexy 50s P.I., Honey West. Richard died in 1998 and Gloria is holding a photo of the two of them in their writing prime.

made famous. But when I mentioned that I’d heard that Prather had actually been involved in Honey’s birth, Gloria jumped in to correct me.

“Not really. We were good buddies with Richard and his wife, but when Skip tossed out this idea we’d had at dinner one night about a female private eye, Richard said he didn’t think it would work at all. We tried pitching Honey to Richard’s agent, and he wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole either. ‘Forget it,’ he said.

“In fact, nobody would touch it. But I really believed in Honey, so I said to Skip, ‘Know what? We’re going to hock our last dollar and go back to New York City and pound the pavement until we sell Honey West.’ And that’s exactly what we did—we had thirty days before our budget ran out. And on the thirtieth day we sold Honey West.

“But even then, the editor they put in charge wasn’t crazy about it. He said, ‘Okay okay, I’ll go along with this, but you’ve really got to change that name—Honey West just ain’t gonna cut it.’ But we stuck to our guns, and I think we were right—it’s a magic name.”

I admitted it was a good name, catchy and natural-sounding. But I was dying to ask her about Honey’s clothes, or more precisely the awful problem she seemed to have keeping them on. Where, I wondered, did that come from?

“Oh, well, I used to write for *Women’s Wear and Look Magazine*, you know.”

Huh? So was this your revenge for working in fashion? Because Honey was hell on clothes! She seems to lose them at least once in every book.

“That was just part of the formula, I guess you could call it, that sort of slightly *risqué*, tongue-in-cheek humour.”

So how did you come up with Honey?



“Well, Skip was just a genius writer, he could write anything, science fiction, whatever. He could type page after page without making a mistake or even going back—it used to fascinate the heck out of me. He would just bang out the books on an old-fashioned typewriter, no computers or anything. Every book was his totally. I was more the sounding board and the technical advisor, editing here and there, and consulting on the fashion thing. But there’s one other thing I did.”

Oh?

“Well, a lot of people think Honey was modelled after me.”

You had problems with your clothes too?

“Goodness, no! I wasn’t *that* bad!” (chuckling)

So, “Honey West Co-Creator Admits She Was Clothing-Challenged!”? That’s some lead.

She laughs out loud. “Well, I suppose. I always wore rather provocative outfits, and it always intrigued Skip the way I could get away with things. I was always a trendsetter, I never followed the fashions or did whatever everybody else did. (Still chuckling)

“So I think that triggered something in Skip. Like, I remember one time, back in the fifties, I guess, we were sitting in the bar at the Coast Inn, and I was in my bathing suit, and there was a sign ‘No Bathing Suits Allowed.’”

Oh, no. You didn’t?

“I pretended to.” (Giggling) “After all, I didn’t want to disobey the sign.”

Gloria, I’m shocked!

“Well, I was only twenty-nine then. In fact, please tell everyone I still am.”

Will do. So, you and Skip had a pretty good run with Honey?

“Oh yes. Eleven books, ten million in sales worldwide. And the TV series was our doing as well. We went to William Morris, made a lot of noise and ABC finally went for it.”

The show, produced by Aaron Spelling, aired during the 1965-66 season, and featured Anne Francis as “the sexiest private eye to ever pull a trigger.”

How do you feel about the series now?

“Very proud. It was the first TV drama to feature a female lead, you know, and we won an Edgar and a Golden Globe for it. So we were very pleased that way. But they changed the character, added too many gim-

micks, and insisted Honey have a running mate, Sam Bolt. In our books it was Johnny Doom, and he wasn’t her partner, he was just a, uh, suitor, I guess, and he wasn’t bailing her out all the time. We loved the ocelot, and we thought Anne Francis was lovely, but we didn’t like Auntie What’s-Her-Name who was always around. That made Honey look like she couldn’t stand on her own, and they wouldn’t let her live alone, so that no shenanigans would happen. But in the books, Johnny and the police lieutenant—who was also crazy for Honey—were there more to warn her than to rescue her. But of course she’d never listen.”

Thank God those private eyes never listen.

“Right.” (Laughing) “I mean the books were provocative, but there was also a sort of sweetness and innocence about them. And they were never obscene. In fact, that’s a ma-

jor part of our movie contract: Honey will never be portrayed as a lesbian, she will never use four-letter words, and there will be no explicit sex.”

Ah, the movies.

“Yes, that’s the big thing I’m up to, the big blessing these days. Did you know Dodi Fayed once had an option? Or that Danny de Vito optioned us in the mid-nineties? And even Raquel Welch wine and dined us, hoping to create a TV cartoon version, which we turned down. But finally, we have a done deal with Miramax for a motion picture franchise.”

So it’s in production?

“They’re not telling me. All my agent and my attorney say is that something’s going on in New York. We had an option agree-



Anne Francis starred as female P.I. HONEY WEST on the NBC series of the same name from 1955-1956. Honey initially appeared on the show BURKE'S LAW.

ment about three or four years ago with the people behind *Legally Blonde*, they did what everybody else does, they tried to come up with their own version of Honey. Harvey (Weinstein, head of Miramax) didn't like it, so he threw it back at them. The last I heard is that they've got a new writer and she's basing the script on one of the books."

There were rumors that Reese Witherspoon will be starring?

"No, Reese is way out of the picture now. That was back when the two girls [*Legally Blonde* scriptwriters] Kiwi Smith and Karen McCullah Lutz had it. They're the ones who got Miramax involved initially. They tracked me down, wrote me a nice letter, asked me if would I talk with them. And they came rushing over and we got to be really good friends, we partied, we had martinis, we went dancing and I was heartbroken when they were cut out of the picture."

In a perfect world, how would you see the picture going?

"In a perfect world, every film would be based on one of the books. *Bombshell* (the ninth in the series) has a really very, very exciting story, and Skip even wrote a whole shooting script for it. I'm hoping if things turn out well, eventually someone will look at that script. We could never get anyone to ever even look at it before."

And who would you like to play Honey?

"Well, there's that girl with the funny name, just about the right age, just won an Oscar, um, Charlize Theron. They sent a whole packet of photographs of her with one of the scripts, and I thought she'd be just fabulous."

And you still live in Laguna Beach?

"Yes, we've lived here since the fifties, and I still do. In fact, I'm sitting here behind my computer, and I'm looking at an entire wall of Honey West books in every language, and we have this gorgeous view of the ocean and the hills, and we have three wonderful sons and I just feel we've been very blessed."

So you're keeping busy?

"Oh my, yes. I'm still writing, I do restaurant reviews for the local paper. I'm very high profile here in Laguna Beach, I attend art galleries three or four times a week, and I love to dance. Oh, and I'm still twenty-nine, of course."

Of course. Anything else?

"Honey was the first, she broke the barrier and I'm very proud that Skip and I did that."

You should be. I mean, Grafton, Muller and Paretsky get a lot of credit, but Honey



Wardrobe malfunctions were an everyday issue with this 'tec. Episodes from this goofily charming series are now available on DVD.



NBC Television

West was there first. And sure, these women characters may have a bit better clothing control than Honey ever did, and boast a few more serious themes...

"But they're not as much fun!" (Chuckling). Exactly. ◆

Got *P.I. News*? Operators are standing by. Kevin Burton Smith is a Mystery Scene columnist and a regular contributor to January Magazine and The Rap Sheet, as well as the editor/creator of The Thrilling Detective Web Site. He can be contacted at <[kvn-smith@thrillingdetective.com](mailto:kvn-smith@thrillingdetective.com)>.



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