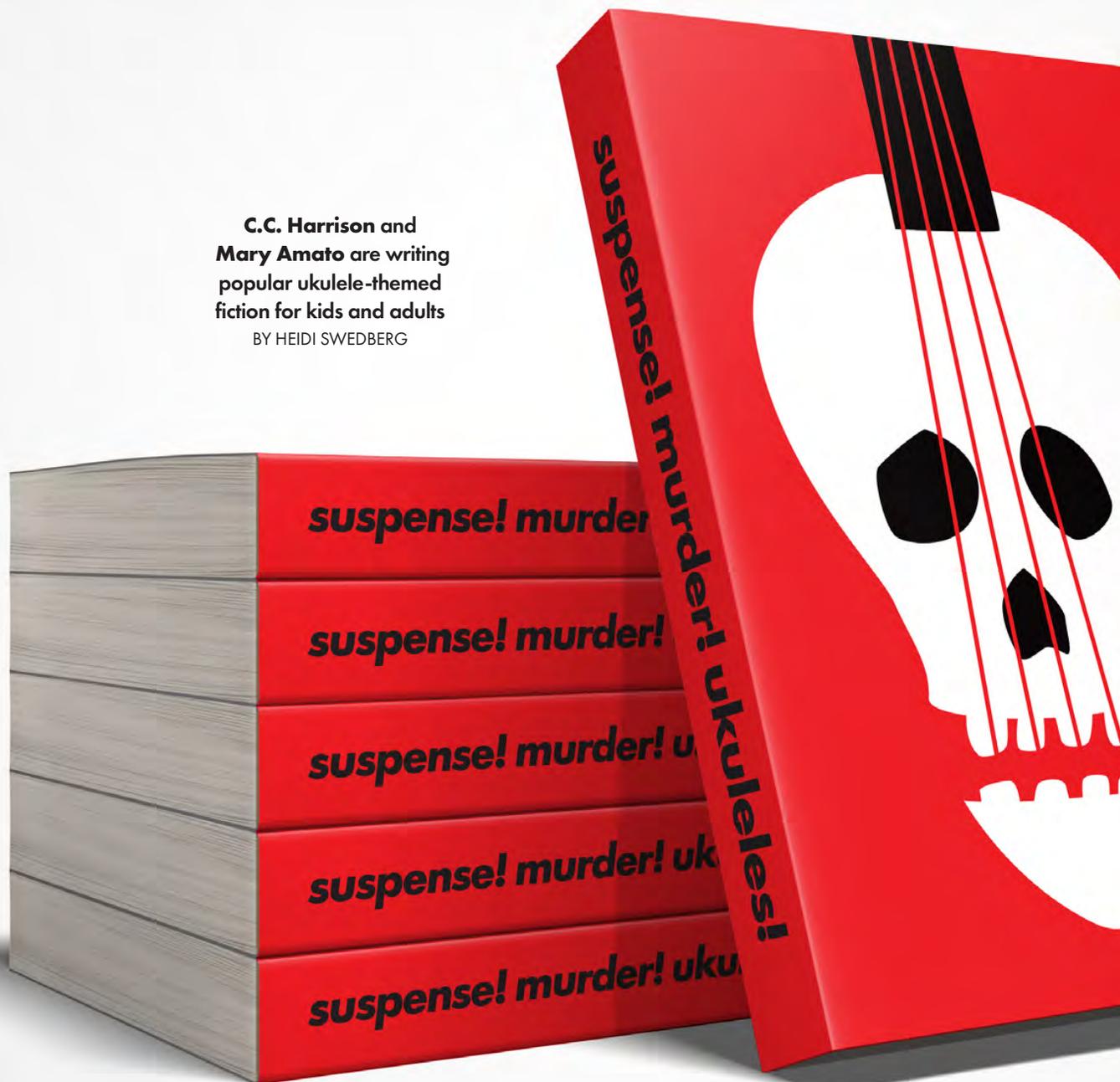


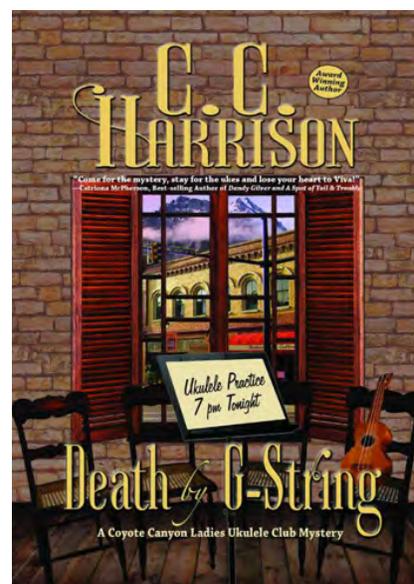
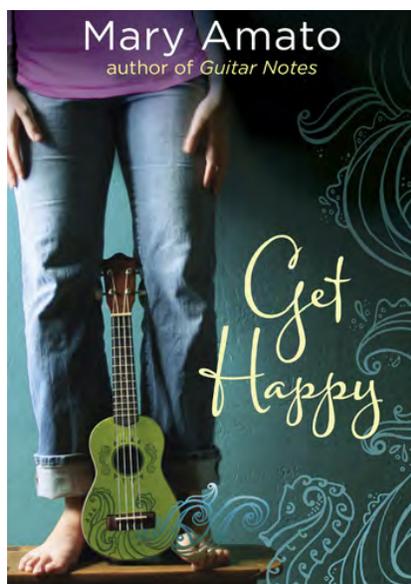
suspense! murder! uku

**C.C. Harrison and
Mary Amato** are writing
popular ukulele-themed
fiction for kids and adults

BY HEIDI SWEDBERG



Ukeles!



“Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend. And inside of a dog it’s too dark to read.”
—Groucho Marx

With travel and gatherings out of the question as this is being written, getting inside of a book is a great way to get away. If you are missing your ukulele gatherings most of all, a story that takes place within the uke club milieu might help satisfy your cravings. Mary Amato and C.C. Harrison are two authors who have instilled their love of ukulele into their protagonists, weaving music through the storylines of their novels, which offer plenty of drama, suspense, and above all, a pleasant escape.

Mystery novels are, by design, nearly impossible to put down, and *Death by G-String* is no exception. Patricia Hubbard, who lives in Anthem, Arizona, is published by WD Publishing in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and writes under the name C.C. Harrison. Her plucky heroine (pun intended), Viva Winter, lives in the small western town where she grew up and has a past to reckon with, complete with an old flame. But things are not as they seem. Formula, in this case, is not a fault, but rather part of the particular joy: Complications! Suspense! Murder! And suddenly you’ve read past bedtime, but the pages seemingly keep turning themselves.

People drawn to the ukulele are a colorful lot, as anyone who has been to a festival or belonged to a strum-along group can attest. Odd characters are fertile fodder for fiction, and recognizing our comrades on the page adds an additional layer of gleeful discovery to this read. The first lines of Harrison’s thriller jump right into the uke-club scene: banter and light gossip between the members of the Coyote Canyon Ladies Ukulele Club (which includes men). We know these people—we can relate, enjoying a who-is-it-who-done-it. However, the familiarity is shattered when a murder most foul occurs amongst the members.

Viva had just begun the countdown to the opening chords when the sound of feet beating a rapid approach along the corridor grew louder. Jen Lansky skidded to a stop in the open doorway, her ukulele case slung over her shoulder. Her face was grave, but her eyes glittered.

A deadpan silence engulfed the room.

“What happened?” A sheet of Lucinda’s music slid off her music

stand and floated to the floor.

"It's Kiki," Jen said in a thin wobbly voice. "She's dead."

Viva took in a breath like she'd been hit in the chest. Lottie's right hand rose to clasp the side of her face. The others gaped silently, absorbing the shock.

"Dead?" Viva croaked.

Jen answered with a slow nod.

"They just found her. At her shop. Strangled with a ukulele G-string."

The characters develop depth and complexity that adds to the intrigue, and the twists and turns are satisfyingly unexpected. Harrison makes good use of her setting, touching on tensions between communities, cultures, and genders. The end is as unpredictable as it should be—it makes surprising sense. My only complaint is that the *next* book hasn't been published yet! (Patricia Hubbard assures us that the next installment is on the way.)

Mary Amato is a popular best-selling writer you will never hear of unless you boldly venture into the children's or YA (young adult) section of your library or bookstore. Based in Hyattsville, Maryland, she writes fiction for young readers, published by Holiday House and Carolrhoda Lab. Her characters are often songwriters who develop before our eyes and ears through their own compositions. Literature for young people is often dismissed by adult readers, which is unfortunate, as their concerns are universal—all of us having been young. Kids' books address fundamental human issues without a bitter after-taste, and with outcomes meant to reassure. All of which sounds pretty appealing right now. That, and as Eudora Welty noted in her *New York Times* review of E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, "White has written his book for children, which is nice for us older ones as it calls for big type."

Books, like almost everything these days, are categorized for marketing purposes, to help place a book on the shelf where it will get the greatest traction. The Harry Potter books are shelved in the children's section, but they are wildly popular with all ages. The

later books of the series, replete with gruesome deaths, love triangles, and violence, skew YA and are not appropriate for little kids, but they are all shelved together. Amato's *Get Happy*, categorized YA, is a great read for ukulele-loving teens and adults. The novel and the songs within it are written from a 16-year-old girl's point of view. So much about this character rings true to me, from my own memories, as well as having a daughter who is exactly that age.

Complicated teen emotional polarities—anger/tenderness, vulnerability/power, passion/apathy, awkwardness/authenticity—make for great reading. The problems are not trivial, and the strength the heroine ultimately employs to confront them is inspiring. There's a healthy lack of nostalgia, so nothing tastes artificially sweet. Devoured whole, it's a special treat, akin to binge-watching '80s teen movies such as *Pretty in Pink*: satisfying, entertaining, and enriching.

In the following scene, *Get Happy's* main character, Minerva, finally earns enough money to buy a ukulele, and she and her friends Fin and Hayes have an impromptu busking session on the street.

I had memorized three songs from the uke songbook that Fin had given me for my birthday. I started to play "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and Fin took off the hat he was wearing, set it on the ground in front of us, and started singing harmony with me. People started smiling at us. A woman dropped her change into the hat. An old guy gave us the thumbs up. Who should come along but Fin's parents and his two little brothers. Inspired, I started wailing on the uke, playing this hoe-down old-timey song that I was making up on the fly, and everybody started square dancing.

Sometimes you have these perfect moments, these moments that are stuffed with one-thousand times more life than they can seem to hold; and you want to laugh and

cry at the same time because you are so happy, and yet you know the moment is going to end and eventually your soul is going to settle back down.

There was something about singing out there on the street with Fin and Hayes, something about the blue of the sky, something about Fin's parents and brothers dancing, their faces, the way they were just letting it loose, something about having that uke in my arms, the simplicity of the strumming, the fact that all this joy was coming out of four little strings that belonged to me. It got me right in the heart."

At the conclusion of *Get Happy*, the author maintains the first-person voice, inviting the reader further into Minerva's world, offering "Some of My Songs." Lyrics written within the story reappear, complete with "campfire" chords. Tunes can be learned by following a link to Amato's website, where moody black-and-white videos are appropriately performed by an accomplished 16-year-old girl. Other coordinating materials, including karaoke tracks and a printable songbook, can be found there as well.

There are currently four books in Amato's *Lucy McGee* series, targeted at kids aged seven to ten. The books chronicle the misadventures of Lucy and her friends in an afterschool ukulele club. I liked the first one, and have found them to get even better as they go along. As the reader grows familiar with the characters, less exposition is required, and the action can take off in unexpected directions. Plot complications escalate to life-and-death situations in the latest installment, *Lucy McGee, Star on TV*. The turns are gripping, but, as is appropriate for a kids' chapter book, all's well that ends well: lessons learned, crisis averted, triumphs achieved—just what we all long for. As with *Get Happy*, there are generous resources online, including recordings and video tutorials featuring young, talented children. It is a joy to watch kids teaching kids. **U**

10 Questions For...

C.C. Harrison (Patricia Hubbard)

What was your first instrument?

A soprano ukulele purchased with Amazon points.

How many ukuleles do you own?

I have a Luna soprano, Kohala tenor, Makala baritone, Lanikai baritone, and a Fender tenor. I keep eyeing others when I'm in Sam Ash Music, though. A Black Mountain dulcimer and two Martin guitars also found a home among those ukuleles. It's addictive.

What do you play most often?

Folk, country, or western on baritone ukulele or sometimes mountain dulcimer.

Do you perform?

Occasionally, but at my coffeeshop debut, nobody listened. They were busy eating.

What book(s) are on your nightstand?

I have 27 books on my reading pile, so I'll name two: *Cattle Kate* and *The Widow*.

What's on your music stand?

"Suzanne" [Leonard Cohen], "Jolene," [Dolly Parton] and "Ex's and Oh's" [Elle King].

Who inspires you musically?

Florida Georgia Line to Miley Cyrus to Kacey Musgraves to the Waifs. Taylor Swift before she grew up.

As a writer?

All the mystery writers, and William Kent Krueger and Tim Johnston.

If we met you, would we recognize you in a character from your work?

Definitely! Read *Death by G-String* and you'll see me. It's up to you to guess which character.

What's next for you?

I'm working on *Don't Fret the Small Stuff*, *Death of a Two-Timing Man*, and *The Women of Cheater Mountain*.



Mary Amato

What was your first instrument?

Guitar, unfortunately. Had I started on uke, I would have been a happier, better musician.

How many/what make of ukuleles do you own?

I am currently a Luna artist, so I have two Luna concerts and a Luna banjolele. I also have a Córdoba tenor, Ohana and Lanikai sopranos, and Kala and Oscar Schmidt concerts.

What do you play most often?

A concert uke I keep by my desk.

Do you perform?

Yes.

What book(s) are on your nightstand?

Obsessed with Cigar Box Guitars: Over 120 Hand-Built Guitars from the Masters by David Sutton; *Imperfect Harmony: Finding Happiness Singing with Others* by Stacy Horn.

What's on your music stand?

A new original; "Been a Long Day" by Rosi Golan and Richard Simon Causon; Daniel Ward's *Arpeggio Meditations for Ukulele*.

Who inspires you musically?

I'm driven by lyrics and harmonies. Regina Spektor for lyrics. For harmony, the Staves.

As a writer?

Reading short stories, poetry, and essays in *The Sun* and *The New Yorker*.

If we met you, would we recognize you in a character from your work?

For me, writing is like making a smoothie. Everyone I've ever met gets thrown into my head and mixes up with me and what comes out is something new. But all my characters love to sing.

What's next?

The first book in my new sci-fi series called *Star Striker*. Even though it's about a soccer tournament in space, singing will play a role!