



NewsandViews
 CoverStory
 Stew'sViews
 Uncensored
 LibertyBeat
 NextGen
 Wayne'sWord
 CommonPoint
 EarthTalk
 News
 Hygeia
 Perspectives
 InCaseYouMissedIt

Buzz
 BuzzLead
 OverTones
 SoundCheck
 HighDecibel
 InMotion
 GameFace
 WeeklyPickOff
 CenterStage
 Artflash
 GettingItOn
 SoundTrack
 UnCovered
 ReelToReel
 Screen
 Cuisine
 Elevation
 BuzzCuts
 TheShortList
 Astrology
 RestaurantListings

Calendar
 Letters
 Classifieds

Search/Archives



Bullet for my valentine

Pamela Clare's Hard Evidence is a hot mix of sex and violence, just perfect for a Valentine's read

by Vince Darcangelo (buzz@boulderweekly.com)

With the recent release of the Boulder-based film Catch and Release, people all across the country are getting a taste of the Front Range at its most predictable—you know, granola; peace and love; the Grateful Dead. In her new book, *Hard Evidence*, best-selling romance novelist Pamela Clare (B-dub Editor Pamela White) presents the Front Range at its most primal—sex trafficking; drugs and violence; and homegrown hip-hop.

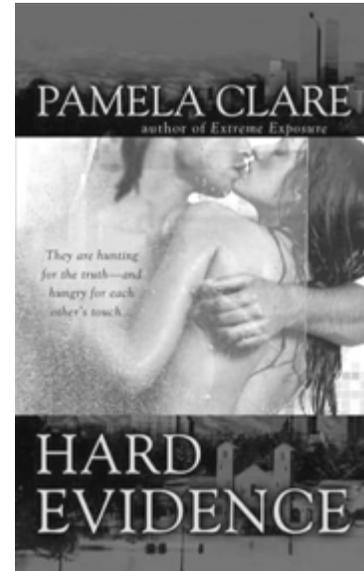
And, of course, there's an epic romance between a young journalist and a mysterious stranger.

Clare, who started her fiction career penning historical romance, moved into the realm of the contemporary thriller with 2005's *Extreme Exposure*, a tale of romantic suspense centered in a Denver newsroom. *Hard Evidence* returns to the newsroom to trail reporter Tessa Novak as she investigates a murder in Aurora that forces her into the seedy world of sex trafficking, Russian Mafioso and a leather-clad man who lurks in the shadows of the crime scene.

With *Hard Evidence*, Clare doesn't so much push the boundaries of romantic fiction as she car-jacks them and takes them to the genre's darkest corners. Utilizing equal parts fantasy, real-life events and investigative journalism, *Hard Evidence* will please the traditional romance reader and attract a new following with its high-intensity action. In other words, it's a co-ed experience, and with Valentine's Day just around the corner, we thought it the perfect time to chat with Clare about sex, violence and other human needs. (For the complete interview, visit www.boulderweekly.com/buzzlead.)

Boulder Weekly: So we return to the newsroom of the Denver Independent with *Hard Evidence*, your second contemporary romance. How was your experience writing a contemporary novel the second time around as opposed to writing a historical?

Pamela Clare: This time around was tougher than the first time, in part because I was completely exhausted coming off the last historical novel, *Surrender*. I sat down to write *Hard Evidence* with no plot, no outline, not even a synopsis. It was total seat-of-the-pants fiction writing, and I



couldn't tell if I was going to end up with a novel or a train wreck in the end. Still, I have to say that contemporary novels are much easier than historical novels and when I was finished, I loved it. It's the only novel of mine that I've read after publication.

BW: Do you see yourself writing more contemporary or historical romances in the future?

PC: At heart, I'm a lover of historical romance, but right now I'm on contract for two back-to-back contemporaries, so that's what I'll be doing first. I hope eventually to get back to alternating between the two. It's tough to transition between the two very different sub-genres, but I think it keeps my writing fresh.

BW: Do you ever see yourself venturing outside the romance genre?

PC: Yes, absolutely. I'm already stretching some aspects of romantic fiction to the edge, particularly with language, the level of violence and the action scenes, not to mention the subject matter. I've got a fairly strong male readership, and more than a few men have (including the husband of a New York Times best-selling author friend of mine) suggested I quit writing for "them," i.e., romance readers, and start writing straight thrillers. It just so happens that I have a couple of thrillers in my head. I also want to explore straight historical fiction, as well as mainstream women's fiction. The truth is, I have a head full of stories I want to tell and not all of them are romance.

BW: What was the impetus for *Hard Evidence*?

PC: I worked on a news story in 2004 about child sex trafficking. In the course of researching that story, I interviewed David Race Bannon, aka David Wayne Dilley, aka David Dilley Bannon, who claimed to have worked as an assassin for Interpol, tracking down and killing the worst perpetrators of child sex trafficking. As it turned out, Bannon was a complete fraud. But the topic was very compelling, and I found myself wondering what would happen to a man's emotions and his soul if his 9-to-5 consisted of fighting this crime, not as an assassin, of course, but as an undercover operative. The novel evolved out of that.

BW: Could you talk about the need for heroes and how romance novels fill this need?

PC: I think romance novels have been one way for women to deal with gender issues and fears surrounding gender. Among those issues are rape, domestic violence, double standards in sexuality, and so on. Romance novels offer a space for women to explore ways of grappling with these issues. Readers watch the heroine sort out her life and enjoy the release of her victories in creating a better existence for herself.

Heroes in romance novels often take the shape of men who seem scary at first but in the end turn out not to be scary. I've always thought romantic fiction addresses a fear of men that seems imprinted on women's DNA. Now, of course, heroines are stronger and often save the hero's butt. The hero is less of a big scary lord of the manor and more of a partner. But the hero almost always starts out as a perceived enemy who is transformed (either perceptually or literally) into a loving partner. The big, bad wolf is actually a misunderstood good wolf.

Also, I think that women these days carry so many responsibilities. In romance, men pick up some of those responsibilities. There's not a

heroine in romantic fiction who's facing financial difficulties or physical danger at the end of the book. Happily ever after means not only love and sexual fulfillment, but safety and abundance.

BW: What was some of the research you had to do to write this novel?

PC: How about the research I didn't get to do? There's a scene in the book where the hero takes five rounds to the vest to save the heroine's life. I wanted to know what it felt like to get shot while wearing Kevlar so that I could describe his experience, so I tried to arrange for some gun-nut friends of mine to pop me with a .22. They refused, claiming that it's not uncommon for a round to penetrate Kevlar and that they didn't want to kill me. Whatever! They did, however, offer to beat my ribs with a baseball bat, which they said was a rough approximation of what it feels like. I was displeased.

As for research I did do, I spent a fair amount of time researching gang life, learning to read gang graffiti and so on. I couldn't have the journalist heroine figure out right away that the murder she'd witnessed was related to sex trafficking, or the book would have been very short. So I sent Tessa off to explore a drive-by angle, which required me to know something about the Denver gang scene. As it turns out, there is some relationship between street kids and trafficking, so it went together quite seamlessly.

I also did some gun research, as well as research into police operations. Julian is on loan from the FBI to the Denver Police and is having to adjust from being Special Agent to cop, so I had to know what kinds of tensions might arise from that. Like knowing 10-codes—which Julian doesn't. He resorts to swearing.

BW: Tessa receives a tutorial on shooting guns. What is the basis of this part of the story?

PC: That chapter is based largely on my own experience in an NRA self-defense course. I was challenged by columnist Ari Armstrong to take the weekend-long course as a way of relieving what he saw as my ignorance about guns. I learned a lot that weekend, but it was tough for me. Having once been attacked by knife-wielding men in my own home, I found pretending to defend myself against attackers to be a bit too real. The last exercise—pretending to shoot an attacker who's running at you—was too much for me. I completely lost it and spent the last half hour locked in the bathroom sobbing. A lot of what Tessa learns is what I learned, except that she freaks out when she hears the sound of a high-caliber weapon being fired because it takes her back to the murder she's just witnessed.

Incidentally, the book is dedicated to the two police officers who saved my life the night I was attacked — Lt. Tim McGraw and Sgt. Gary Arai. I had the great privilege of having lunch with them and giving them each a copy of *Hard Evidence*. It was such an emotional moment for me that I almost couldn't sign their books. My hands were shaking so badly.

BW: What are some of the real locales used in the book and what are some of the fictional locales?

PC: The book is set in Denver and Aurora, focusing primarily on the Colfax corridor. I've already gotten one letter from a reader who pointed out that there's not a gas station on the corner of York and Colfax. I told her that there must be one somewhere nearby, and she let it go at that. I

did a book signing in Aurora, and the women were thrilled to have a novel set in their part of town.

Gzel, Russia, is a real place, also. I wanted to find a small town outside Moscow, so I typed "small town outside Moscow" into Google and got Gzel. I found it on a map to make sure it was real, looked at some pictures, and that was that.

The newspaper is fictional, although a couple of journalist friends and I filed incorporation papers on that name some years ago hoping to make it a reality.

BW: Something you explore in great detail in this book is the notion of sexual commodity. Many of the women in the book are prostitutes. Julian infiltrates a club where guys can pay to have sex with underage girls. There are rapes and mock rapes. Even the hero, Julian, makes a joke about having paid for Tessa on Page 207. Is it rare to have so much talk of sexual commodity in a romance novel?

PC: Prostitution, often in very romanticized contexts, has always been a part of romantic fiction. A virgin has no choice but to enter a brothel and lucks out by being chosen by a good-hearted rake who eventually marries her—that sort of thing. Given the vocational choices available to women through much of history—virgin, wife or whore—it makes sense that women would sort through these archetypal roles in the therapeutic medium of fiction. Beyond that, there's an element of fantasy involved when you invoke sex as a commodity that's attractive to a lot of people of both genders.

BW: How much of a role do you feel sexual commodity plays in human sexuality?

PC: It's the original basis for human interaction, isn't it? Sex has always been about so much more than just having an orgasm or reproducing. It's about survival, safety, and power, as well. Cave woman is hungry, sees Cave Man with big antelope, trades a piece of herself for a piece of meat. Traditional marriage is a very nice way of sanctifying and romanticizing that same basic arrangement. Through traditional marriage, a woman escapes being labeled as a whore because she reserves her sexuality for one man, who in turn provides food, shelter, and protection. Look at the trophy wives who trade living lives of meaning for marriage to well-off men. Don't tell me that their trade—sex and superficial beauty in exchange for a pampered existence—is anything other than commerce.

Is it unromantic for me, as a romance novelist, to say this?

BW: Would you say it's unrealistic to have a novel in which sexual commodity doesn't exist?

PC: I think the novel would have to be portraying a very romanticized sexuality if it didn't point in some way to the fact that sex often entails trading more than body fluids, so I guess, yes.

BW: Hard Evidence is part of an ongoing series that began with Extreme Exposure and the story of another journalist Kara McMillan. As a journalist, which character do you feel more of a connection with: Tessa or Kara? What is the basis of this connection?

PC: Kara is tougher than Tess. She's also a single mother, like me. But Kara doesn't have a girly bone in her body, nor does she allow herself to

be vulnerable.

Tessa, on the other hand, is very girly and, though not wimpy by any means, is a bit more vulnerable. I can be girly at times, as my pink boxing gloves and pink iPod and pink leather purse with rhinestones attest.

So I think journalistically I'm more like Kara and internally I'm more like Tessa. Right now Tessa's my BFF.

I've got a serious Hard Evidence hangover. I keep writing Julian and Tessa into Unlawful Contact—and it's not their book!

BW: Hard Evidence begins with the line "Coffee was Tessa Novak's heroin." How much of yourself do you see in Tessa regarding this opening line?

PC: That sentence is me. I wrote that sentence, then jumped up and ran out to get my triple-shot grandé vanilla latte. You know you're a coffee addict when the baristas across the county know you by name and you know the hours of each and every coffee shop within a 30-mile radius. But I am now the proud owner of a French press, so I can get my fix at home.

BW: All kidding aside, you do explore the use of drugs, both recreational and medicinal, in the book. Is this edgy terrain for a romance novel?

PC: Yes, it is. Most of the time, drugs in romance novels are limited to whatever the bad guy puts in the heroine's drink. You don't get lots of novels that openly reference street drugs like heroin, coke or ketamine.

Truthfully, I expected my editor to tell me that Hard Evidence was too violent, too filled with profanity and drug use and too dark. I kept telling my agent that I thought it would be rejected, but I just couldn't bring myself to tone it down. I wanted the book to tell a love story, but I wanted it to tell that story in a realistic, gritty way.

My misgivings were fueled by a conversation that went like this:

My editor: "What's your next book about?"

Me: "Women being sexually abused in prison."

My editor: "That's just too dark. You had some other topic didn't you? Write about that."

Well, that topic was human sex trafficking. I knew she didn't remember what it was, and I figured if women being abused in prison was too dark, selling teenage girls as sex slaves wasn't going to be perceived as cheerful. But she loved it, and I'm so glad that I didn't back off or tone it down. It really helped to prove to her that I could handle very complicated, edgy subject matter and still produce a story that's romantic, sexy and uplifting.

BW: Where are you taking us next in the series?

PC: The next book is about women being sexually abused in prison.

I wrote a proposal in July and my editor loved it. I went from proposal to offer in a week, so clearly she's comfortable with the idea of my writing dark, edgy stories now.

The title is Unlawful Contact. It tells the story of Tessa and Kara's close friend, Sophie Alton, another I-Team reporter. She's taken hostage by a convicted murderer while at the Colorado State Pen. The convict, Marc Hunter, uses her to escape prison and turns out to be a lot more than she thought he was.

The suspense plot revolves around a series of disappearances and deaths involving women who were at one time locked up in Denver Women's Prison

I learned how to break out of handcuffs for this book. I have my own little shim and now break out of my police-issue cuffs while I'm writing. It keeps me from biting my fingernails.

BW: This novel has a definite urban feel, complete with a hip-hop soundtrack.

What role did music play in writing this novel?

PC: Music was pivotal to writing this story. Music always gives me inspiration when I'm writing. I develop playlists for each novel and am always hungry for new music.

In this case, I got a hold of a CD mix by Aurora hip-hop artist Joe Thunder. It includes tracks by D.O. The Fabulous Drifter, Black Pegasus, Kim Jong Il and others. I fell in love with the music and the rhythms. Not only did the music fuel the writing in an emotional sense, unleashing a swell of creativity, but it served as one of my sources for the more urban vocabulary that fills the book. The fact that the recordings were made in Aurora felt perfect, too.

I have to say my kids found it pretty strange to have their mom bouncing around the house spitting rhymes: "I got them diamonds pressin' up against the wood grain wheel / When you see your pimp shinin', bitch, tell me how you feel."

One of my sons loves Elvis. He wanted me to turn down the hip-hop, and I wanted him to turn off Elvis. So it's good that I can fight with my teenager about music. Parents are supposed to do that, right?

Respond: letters@boulderweekly.com



© 2007 Boulder Weekly. All Rights Reserved.