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ZJ CZUPOR'S MYSTERY MINUTE: ON TOUR WITH DEAD WRITERS

ANSWER: Helen Kieran Reilly (1891-1962) was born in New York City and is considered one of the pioneering women writers of detective fiction to focus on police procedurals. In addition to the thirty-one novels which featured NYPD detective Christopher McKee, she wrote four stand-alone mysteries, and three under the pseudonym Kieran Abbey. She graduated from New York's Hunter College where her father served as its third president from 1929-1933. She married Paul Reilly (1882-1944), a nationally syndicated cartoonist, who fell on tough times in the Great Depression. He eventually produced easels for educational books and brochures as part of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration.



They mostly lived in Westport, Connecticut with their four children, numerous cats, and a parrot.

In addition to her husband's artistic talent, Helen's family was creative and successful. Two of her four daughters, Ursula Curtiss (1923-1984) and Mary McMullen (1920-1986), also published mysteries. Ursula published twenty-two novels including Voice out of Darkness (1948) which won the Red Badge Mystery Prize (1948) for best new mystery. Mary published twenty novels and won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best first novel, Strangle Hold in 1952.

Helen's brother, John Kieran (1892-1981), was a panelist on the popular Information Please radio series which ran on NBC Radio from 1938-1951. He was a sportswriter for The New York Times and credited as the first to use the term "grand slam" in tennis. He wrote 13 nonfiction books including an anthology of his favorite poems and an autobiography. Helen often wrote of young society women in jeopardy, and about ordinary people in distress during the Depression. Her writing took readers into backstreets and nightclubs. She was interested in science and technology and took pleasure in describing the details, rigors, and skill sets of police work involved in solving a crime. Her police officers were hard working men of good character devoted to public service. In addition to her observations of police headquarters at 240 Centre Street, she had a penchant for architecture and clothing styles of the era.

Helen didn't win any awards, but she did serve as president of Mystery Writers of America in 1953. She continued writing her crime novels right up to her death in 1962 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she lived with daughter Ursula. She was 4' 8" tall and friends described her as "feisty," "salty," and "witty."