

# Our bodies, our sleuths



## *It's a Mystery*

*When it comes to food and body issues, even the most realistic feminist mystery can enter the world of fantasy. By Sally Kenney.*

One of the reasons I read fiction, and mystery fiction in particular, is to escape. The feminist mystery writers I most enjoy carefully balance elements of fantasy and reality. Their female characters are adventuresome agents of action. While their struggles have a realism I can identify with, these novels also fulfill my fantasies in several respects.

First, the characters take risks—they not only are willing to put themselves in physical danger, they also are willing to challenge injustice, particularly the oppression of women.

I vicariously revel in the way that, compared to those of us making our way in the real world, they seem to be able to choose more battles, make fewer compromises and push the envelope further.

Second, nearly all the characters have escaped the caring responsibilities that shape most women's lives. They lead spare lives.

Although they have a web of connection—producing lovable secondary characters—they are, compared to most of us, relatively unencumbered, usually free of children, partners and familial demands. Some have pets (if only a hamster, like Janet Evanovich's protagonist Stephanie Plum) but, like V. I. Warshawski (Sara Paretsky's sleuth), they can always leave the dog with a downstairs neighbor.

While we might never choose such lives, we do fantasize about them after cooking dinner and picking up socks. The main character's isolation is less a consequence of the constraints of the genre—the lone private dick outside of society—than it is a necessary byproduct of inserting women into this narrative form. For a woman to be able to dash to an all-night stake-

out or hop a plane, she must be childless or have a damn good sitter.

But pure fantasy emerges most strikingly for me when I consider the feminist sleuth's relationship to food—a landmine for most of us in the real world, but not for many feminist mystery protagonists.

Take Nancy Drew, for example. Despite the many dated aspects of this series, it has many virtues, too. Nancy is never plagued by insecurity about her appearance. Any feminine insecurity or fear is relegated to the plump sidekick Bess, not to be confused with the butch sidekick George.

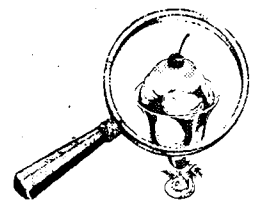
I don't remember Nancy ever saying, "Does my butt look big in this dress?" No, she is too busy snooping, exploring, discovering—fearlessly taking action, not worrying about how Ned thinks she looks. And neither Ned nor the distinguished Carson Drew would ever ask, "Should you really be eating that?" or "Have you gained weight?"

Like Nancy, contemporary feminist protagonists eat without self-consciousness or self-loathing. In a world where 10-year-old girls are dieting, teenage girls are battling anorexia and bulimia, and magazine and TV models become ever more cadaverous, the sleuths' ease with food is fantasy enough.

But there's more: However much the women eat, they never exceed the narrow bounds of acceptable size.

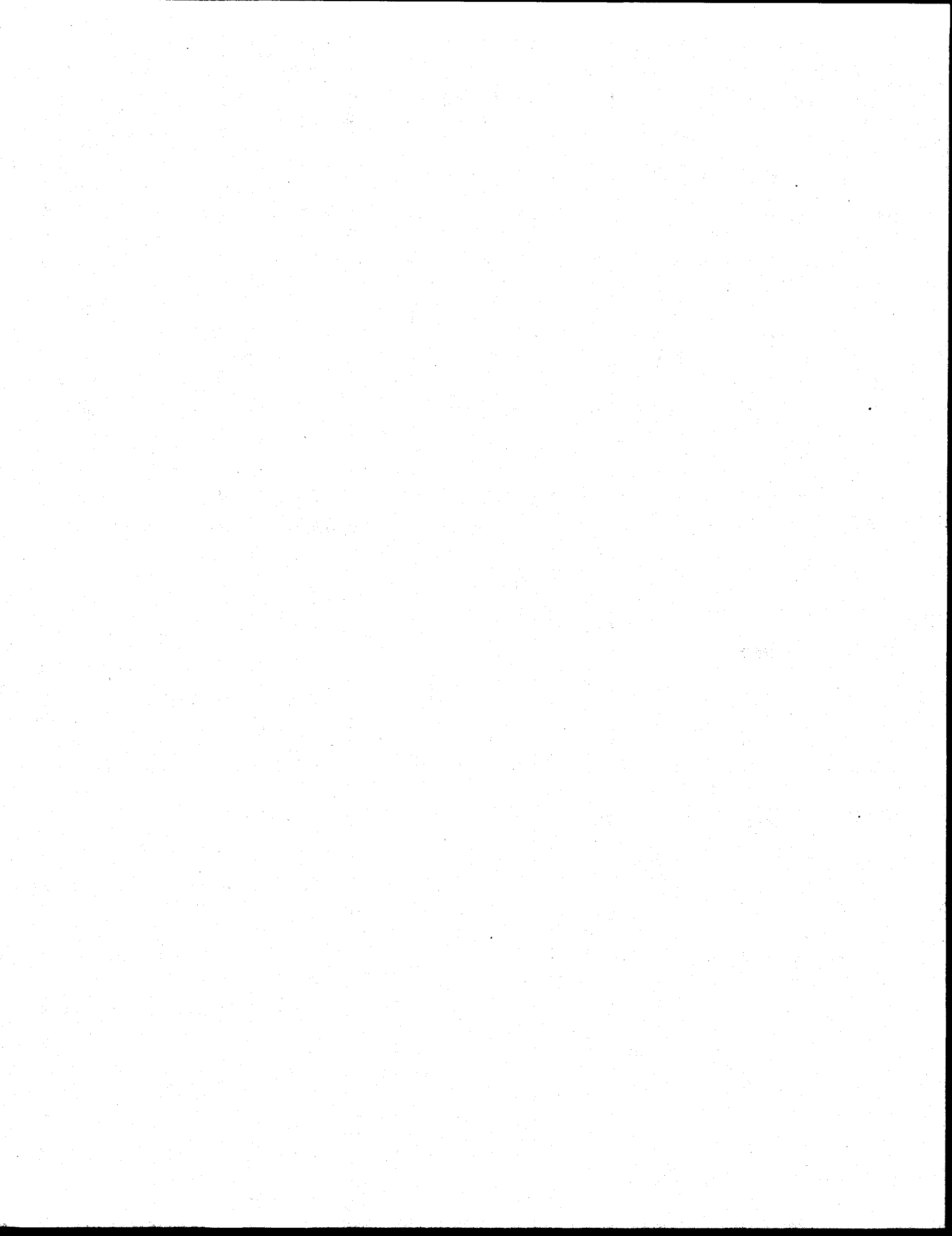
Stephanie Plum, for example, gorges on pizza, hamburgers and her mother's home cooking, but, while she may have to unbutton her jeans for coconut cream pie, she never seems to gain weight. V. I. Warshawski, who tells you what

**When not drinking coffee, reading mysteries, surfing or rock climbing, Sally Kenney teaches women and public policy at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.**



**It's a mystery issue!** In addition to our regular column by Sally Kenney, you'll find more about mysteries in this issue. Let this symbol be your clue.

**Mystery, to 14**



### Mystery, from 13

she eats (and wears) in excruciating detail, may wonder whether her middle-aged body can continue to take beatings (literally), but she never agonizes over middle-aged spread.

Kinsey Millhone (Sue Grafton's abecedarian hero) thrives on an unhealthy diet of Big Macs, peanut butter sandwiches and Hungarian goulash, and she is never tormented by self-doubt about her own attractiveness—just bemused, like Holly Winter (Susan Conant's dog-loving sleuth), about her inability to understand the rules of the girl stuff.

Why are there so many unrealistic female body images in otherwise feminist mysteries?

Carolyn Heilbrun (who writes mysteries under the pseudonym Amanda Cross) explained it this way: She created Kate Fansler as tall, elegant, and effortlessly thin, she said, in order to free her to act in the world unencumbered by body neurosis—the female malaise—as well as to create a pleasurable identification with the reader of what we would like ourselves to be.

So we have Mallory (Carol O'Connell's anti-hero), who is drop-dead gorgeous; as a sociopath she has no insecurities about anything. Patricia Cornwell's forensic sleuth, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, is never caught eating a Snickers when she misses meals due to the performance of autopsies. Nor does she blimp up because all she does is work, or succumb to the pear-shaped destiny of her Italian genes.

To every pattern there are exceptions.

Unlike the protagonists described above, Judge Deborah Knott (created by Margaret Maron) does worry about her weight, struggling to stay a size 10; conversely, Barbara Neely's Blanche, on or off the lam, is comfortable with her less-

than-tiny self.

Two female characters who most display the realism rather than the fantasy of women's bodies are Nina Fischman, a New Yorker, Jew and housing lawyer, and Callahan Garrity, Atlantan, ex-cop and housecleaning entrepreneur.

Both appear in engaging series, written by Marissa Piesman and Kathy Hogan Trochek, respectively. (Both also present a compelling picture of the possibilities

of the adult mother-daughter relationship.)

Callahan fights against age, weight and, most important, breast cancer. Her mother, too, is beset by age and health-related physical limitations.

Nina fights against her Eastern-European body type. Her wry narration of her own "body issues" is inseparable from her own witty angst about

everything in her life, from her relationships with men to whether she should continue to practice law. The reader is left with the sense that Nina, rather than becoming paralyzed because she doesn't conform to the beauty ideal, is cleverly unmasking the absurdity of it.

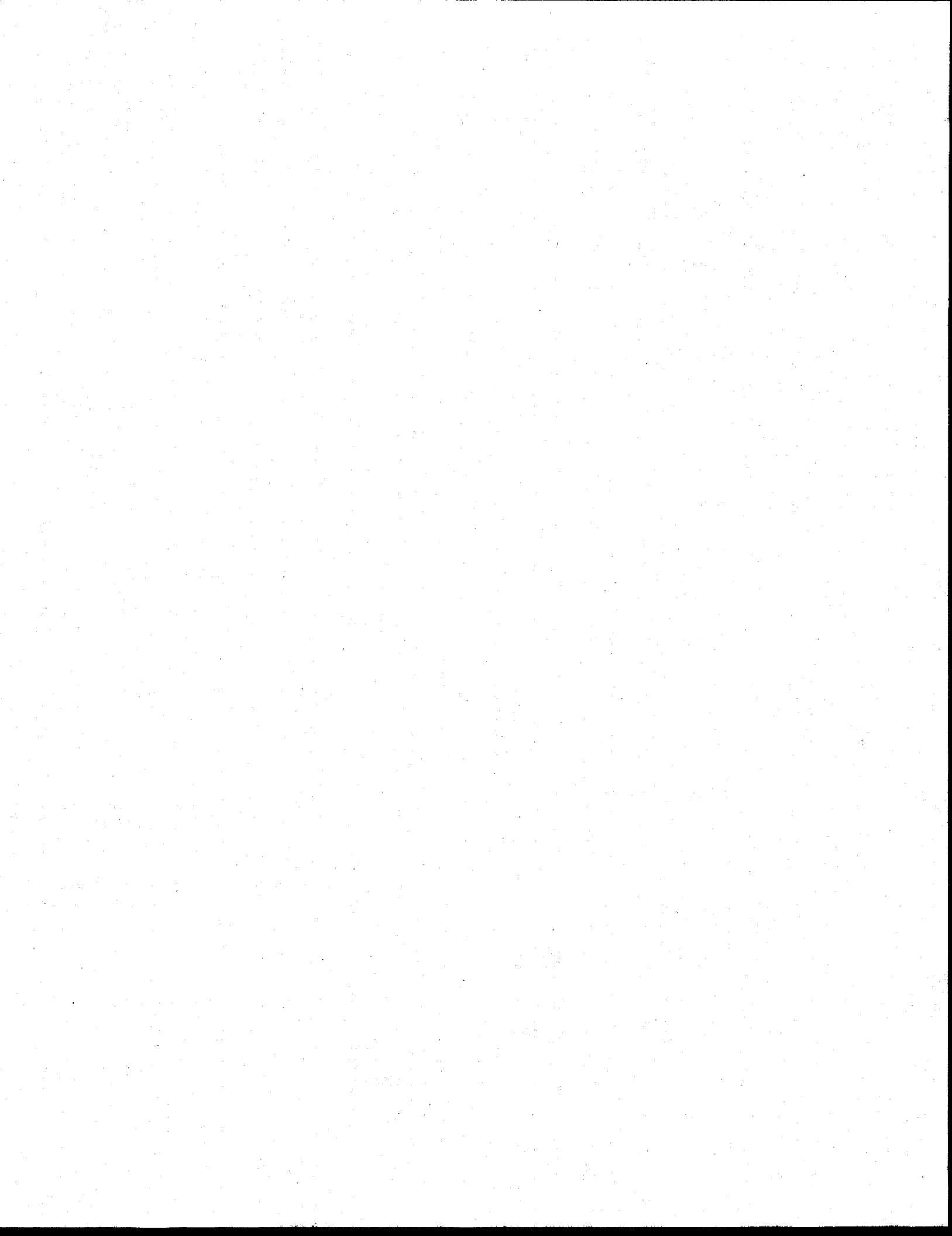
We may enjoy the escapism offered by heroes who combine youthful slimness with great metabolism (female action heroes who eat bad but evade cellulite). We may also enjoy the escape from the quagmire of body obsession and self loathing that seems to be the female condition of our time. But the real heroes, perhaps, are the women who are the agents of active lives, free from self-consciousness, who do not have effortlessly perfect bodies.

♦♦ Weigh in on this discussion. Tell us about your favorite feminist mystery characters and their relationships to food. How realistic, or fantastic, are they?



Sally Kenney, pictured on the left with her friend Laurie, fights winter weight gain by walking vigorously to and from her hot tub in Minneapolis. It's a *skim latté*, okay?

**"I don't remember Nancy Drew ever saying, 'Does my butt look big in this dress?' No, she is too busy snooping, exploring, discovering—fearlessly taking action, not worrying about how Ned thinks she looks."**

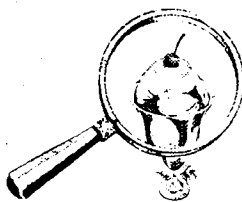


# My Fantasy Photo Album

Sally Kenney is a mystery lover, but she is surprised by the number of slender sleuths in feminist mysteries. Here, through some adroit cutting and pasting, Sally engages in a little body-image fantasy, herself.



Yippee! Sally's just learned that her favorite authors have new books out! She's pictured here taking a quick break from reading.



Because of her busy professional life, Sally always keeps her surfboard handy (a *must* in Minnesota) so she can dash out when surf's up.



In order to work in extra activity, Sally often takes the long way up to work. (Note bicep definition, also detachable braid, an important hairstyle innovation for the active professional.)

The bodies in these photos are drawn from a wonderful women's sports clothing supplier, Title 9 Sports. While Sally likes the company's sportswear, and admires its promotion of an active lifestyle, she sometimes finds the captions a little over the top!

➤ **Let the secret out.** Tell us—in words or pictures—about *your* body-image fantasies. There's a little mystery in all of us!

