

Transcript

Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 55

Virginia Andrews (V.C. Andrews)

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage - here in Berlin and beyond... then we bring you the very best of those stories here on the podcast.

Speaking of podcasts, last weekend was the second ever PodFest Berlin! There were two full days of workshops, events, networking, free ice cream, and live tapings from podcasts in various languages, including one from us. Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire was there with me along for the ride, and we sort of took turns hosting and presenting bilingually in German and English during our event in front of a small but perfectly formed audience.

In this episode you're going to hear my talk from the event at PodFest Berlin. Here's Katy with the introduction:

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE FROM PODFEST BERLIN:

Susan Stone is a long-time radio journalist and audio producer who has worked for most of the big news initials, including BBC and NPR. She is also an editorial and podcast consultant, working with non-profits and creatives. She is going to be speaking today about a writer who—I really blame my cousin Joanna for introducing me to—had a very, very bad influence on my childhood. You'll find out more now. Susan!

[APPLAUSE]

SUSAN STONE ON TAPE FROM PODFEST BERLIN: [SHOWS SLIDE OF BOOK COVER] How many of you remember furtively reading salacious modern gothic page-turners in school? [AUDIENCE RAISES HANDS] Look, the hands are already up! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] You know the ones — the mysterious dark cover with small cutout revealing the image of a naive girl headed for trouble? The bestselling trashy books you didn't want your mother to know you had? With names like *My Sweet Audrina*, *Dark Angel*, and of course, *Flowers in the Attic*. Yes, we're talking about the works of American writer V.C. Andrews.

Her characters are good girls that bad things happen to. Evil grandmothers lock them in attics; they fall down stairs, and fall in love — usually with inappropriate men, like their brothers, or foster fathers. They are poisoned and brainwashed, kidnapped and assaulted, seduced and abandoned. It's trauma as drama, fairy tales with an arsenic bite.

V.C. Andrews books were banned in schools and libraries. They spawned knock-offs and protests, jokes and dedicated fans. For better or worse, these shocking novels launched the sexual curiosities of generations of teens and pre-teens in the US and elsewhere — if the hands are any indication [AUDIENCE LAUGHS, SOMEONE SAYS “YES”].

To this day, there are more than one hundred million of copies of V.C. Andrews books in print; though the majority were actually published after her death and finished or written by a ghostwriter.

But who was the woman behind the horror?

[SHOWS SLIDE] Virginia Andrews was 55-years-old and had long lived with a disability when her first novel, *Flowers in the Attic*, was published in 1979. She adopted an air of mystery, lied about her age, and avoided doing most interviews; though she happily attended book fairs and signings with fans. She carefully chose ultra-feminine flowing attire — often chiffon and jewels — that complimented her blonde curls.

Virginia preferred to stand to type her best-sellers, as she had to otherwise sit stiffly propped at a 45 degree angle at all times. She used crutches or wheelchairs for most of her adulthood, and was often in pain. Rarely left alone by her domineering mother, her daily life held little true romance.

But like Cathy Dollanganger, the teen heroine of the *Flowers in the Attic* series who ends up captive, starved, tortured, and worse by a scheming mother and fanatically religious grandmother, Virginia remembered having a perfectly nice childhood.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Cleo Virginia Andrews was born in 1923 in Portsmouth, Virginia to Lillian, a telephone operator and William Andrews, a sailor. You can see them and little Bill Jr, in that beach photo on the left, and on the right, on the other side, cute little Virginia...holding some flowers, of course...at age 4.

Virginia was a precocious child, excelling at school, particularly in art. She told the story that modernist architect Frank Lloyd Wright visited her second grade

class in Rochester, New York. He looked over her shoulder at her sketch and asked, “Why did you draw a round house with all glass?” To which Virginia replied, “Well, it’s my mother. She always complains that she never seems to have enough windows.” Wright supposedly told her teacher, “A child like that scares the hell out of me.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Is this story true? I don’t know, but it’s a great story!

Her drawings were so accomplished— she already understood perspective and other advanced principles — that she was supposedly sent to college-level classes — at the age of seven, sitting on telephone books to see over the desk. (Is this story true? I don’t know! Great story! Etc.)

She helped take care of her new baby brother Eugene, she read a lot, she checked out as many books from the library as she could carry — her father only had 3 at home — including “the Bible, and Tarzan.” Her beauty and intellect received constant compliments from family and friends; her parents treated her to lovely clothes and toys.

Things got bumpier in 1929, after the stock market crash. The family relocated to Portsmouth, moving in with Lillian’s parents, because they had to. But Virginia excelled in her new school, skipping grade three, and later grade six.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Here she is looking lovely at 15, just a few years after she entered high school. She was two years ahead of most students her age.

Life was full of promise - Virginia dreamed of success, marriage and family — in that order. At fifteen, she won an essay contest and acted in school plays. She lost herself in books like *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. But it wasn’t always sunny. She recalled:

*“In those days, nobody told you about anything. You were in the dark about sex. I was a pretty girl. It wasn’t so much that friends of my brothers were interested in me. Their FATHERS were interested in me. I couldn’t talk about it. I wanted honesty, and no one gave it to me. Instead I was handed fairy tales. So I went to the library and got out a book.”*

A false step on a staircase changed Virginia’s life forever. She twisted her hip trying not to fall, which seems to have aggravated an undiagnosed case of a kind of arthritis. Left in extreme pain, sitting at a desk or walking to school was excruciating. So she left in the middle of her senior year in 1940.

Virginia developed painful bone spurs. Surgeries followed, which mostly made things worse, and she spent time in a full body cast. That long stay at the University of Virginia Hospital brought her the story that would launch her writing career decades later. Reportedly, a doctor she grew infatuated with told her that he and his siblings had been hidden away in a house as children in a family bid to regain an inheritance. (Again, is this true? Who knows?)

She left hospital more hurt than healed — some of her bones fused while in the cast, permanently limiting her mobility, leaving her essentially homebound from about the age of 18. The information about Virginia's condition is a little vague, I'm afraid; she often hid or embellished the truth about it throughout her life.

Her parents were devastated at what had happened to their beautiful, talented daughter. Mother Lillian took it especially hard, developing an obsessive protectiveness tinged with shame, at times telling people Virginia's condition was a result of being pushed down the stairs by jealous schoolmates.

A cousin recalled visiting Virginia on the front porch of the family house, which was surrounded by trees for privacy, and Lillian saying, "Let's not allow anyone to see my 'afflicted daughter.'" Virginia often wore dresses that covered her wheelchair, or draped the chair with luxurious fabrics.

At the time, disabilities were rarely discussed, and almost never seen in public. And neither was Virginia. So, what *could* she do?

Her artistic talent endured, so she started art correspondence courses. Eventually she was able to support her family doing commercial illustrations, selling pictures in galleries, and painting portraits for wealthy locals. There's one of her artworks on that side [GESTURES TO SLIDE]

In 1957, her father William died, leaving mother and daughter in a bind. Lillian couldn't drive, and had no job, so they moved closer to brother Eugene — first to Missouri, then Arizona, then Georgia. As a guest in family homes that often had stairways that further limited her mobility, Virginia felt isolated and depressed.

It's unclear how she supported herself during this time. She lost many painting clients, but she may have invested in the stock market. She also got a small disability payment and designed and sewed clothing, but fit wasn't easy.

Meanwhile, Lillian grew more controlling and restrictive, her temper flaring, unhappy to be reliant on family to drive her places. She bossed Virginia around,

a woman now in her 40s, and treated her like a child. Things came to a boil in Georgia while the two were staying with a cousin called Pat.

Pat was nineteen years younger than Virginia, but they had a strong bond. They'd been going shopping, to the movies, and out for dinner. It was heaven for Virginia, who longed for independence and fun, she hadn't even tried on a pair of shoes in a store since she was sixteen — Lillian always bought all her clothes - she wasn't allowed out of the house. Her mother was angry, and pushed up Pat against the wall — she ordered them to leave. Eugene helped the two relocate back to Portsmouth, Virginia, where they no longer have to rely on others.

During this period, Virginia made the shift from painting to writing. She said in a 1986 interview: "*Painting was messy. I was allergic to the turpentine so one day I said why put up with all these smells when writing is so neat? So I picked up a copy of The Writer's Handbook and started out.*" [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] There she is at her little red typewriter. Typing at night in her room, sometimes standing at her desk for eight hours, she wore holes in her shoes.. She submitted romance confession stories like "I Slept with My Uncle on My Wedding Night," under a pseudonym [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]— Adrienne Vale is one she's known to have used. She *didn't* share her work with her mother. For years these efforts led to rejections, and although she claimed to have published three Gothic romances without an agent during this time, no one has ever identified them.

Virginia always said she wrote her first treatment of *Flowers in the Attic* in a frenzy in just two weeks, based on that story she heard in the hospital as a teen.

She approached several agents with it before her pitch found success with Anita Diamant in 1978. Anita's young assistant Humphrey told a friend about the 98-page manuscript when they were in the New York Subway on their way to see Patti Smith at CBGBs. [AUDIENCE MEMBER SAYS OOH] Street cred! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] He called it "awful and fabulous." That friend, Ann Patty, was a new editor at Pocket Books, a paperback division of Simon & Schuster, looking for her first acquisition; she was also the 25th editor to see the book [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and the first not to reject it, despite its stilted prose. Ann Patty bought the world rights to *Flowers in the Attic* for \$7,500 and 6% royalty (about \$30,000 today). Within a month, Virginia sent back a 600 page version.

Accepting the advance was a gamble — it meant Virginia would have to stop receiving benefits, as she couldn't get them if she earned more than \$3,300 a year, or \$13,500 of today's dollars.

It was a gamble worth taking though, with a million dollar return. Even if it meant being renamed ‘V.C. Andrews’ by publishers who didn’t want to “alienate male readers.” Now I do know that she was labelled ‘Virginia’ in the UK and Australia to some extent, so this may have been more of a US approach.

So — *Flowers in the Attic*, the story of four Dollanganger children — who here has read *Flowers in the Attic*? [AUDIENCE RAISES HANDS] One, two, three. Ok, so I guess I’m going to have to explain it. Oh, dear.

It’s the story of the four Dollanganger children—Chris, Cathy, Carrie and Cory—imprisoned in a house for years by their abusive mother and sadistic grandmother. With its dark forays into abuse and incest, and a side of poisonous donuts, it reached the *New York Times* Best Seller list in just two weeks, and stayed there for at least fourteen. Critics were caught unaware by its popularity, and many were harsh, with one calling it “deranged swill,” and another saying, “It may be the worst book I ever read.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Now, since some of you haven’t read the book, I’m going to have to read the opening paragraph for you [READS BOOK PROLOGUE]:

It is so appropriate to color hope yellow, like that sun we seldom saw. And as I begin to copy from the old memorandum journals that I kept for so long, a title comes as if inspired. *Open the Window and Stand in the Sunshine*. Yet, I hesitate to name our story that. For I think of us more as flowers in the attic. Paper flowers. Born so brightly colored, and fading duller through all those long, grim, dreary, nightmarish days when we were held prisoners of hope, and kept captives by greed. But, we were never to color even one of our paper blossoms yellow.

So, that’s about enough of that! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Just add some rats, some sex, some violence, and you get the picture.

Though this was clearly not written for teens, the book was particularly popular with young women, young girls even, who saw themselves in the tragic Cathy. Of course the book was promptly banned by many school districts for its troubling plot lines.

However, a sequel was already in the works. For the next several years, a new V.C. Andrews book came out and sailed up the charts, each selling more than the one before. *Petals on the Wind* in 1980, *If There Be Thorns* in 1981, and *Seeds of Yesterday* in 1984 — which was the the top-selling fiction paperback

that year. These all continued the story of the Dollanganger family, moving forward and backward through their twisted history.

In 1982, for a change of pace, a stand-alone book with an even more disturbing premise was released. *My Sweet Audrina* is about a young girl whose family decides to deal with the aftermath of her gang rape in the woods by convincing Audrina the attack actually happened to her dead sister of the same name who never actually existed. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Naturally, it was a massive hit. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

A twist of fate had once again changed Virginia's life. She was becoming a millionaire in her mid-50s, with legions of fans and press requests, and invitations to Hollywood, London and Paris.

The newfound attention generated both pride and concern from mother Lillian, who never read Virginia's books, and was scandalized to hear that incest was a topic in them. Navigating the media was also difficult for the women, who had tried to divert attention from Virginia's disability for decades.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Hey, it's *People* magazine with Carly Simon on the cover! Virginia's Andrews' first major interview was almost her last. She was really upset by how she was photographed by celebrity and human interest magazine *People* for their October 1980 report. Her wheelchair was plainly visible, and she looks uncomfortable. Plus, she was described as an invalid — and even worse, 56 years of age (which was accurate). [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

She told others she 30 years younger. And she often concocted dramatic tales for prying journalists who wanted to know if, like, Cathy in *Flowers in the Attic*, she'd had a murderous grandmother or fallen in love with her brother — no, and no. Although she did identify with her captive heroine in other ways. In Douglas Winter's 1985 book *Faces of Fear* (where she appears alongside horror legends including Stephen King and Clive Barker, but is the only woman in the book), she agreed that her disability played an important role in her fiction, saying:

*"Suddenly, you are not in control anymore. You are made helpless by circumstances that you don't have any say about. It's not just dealt to you. I always felt that if I had done some terrible thing, this would be a punishment; but I hadn't done anything yet. I thought, 'Why don't you give me a chance?'"*

*"So it does affect you, and that's why I write. When I wrote **Flowers in the Attic**, all of Cathy's feelings about being in prison were my feelings. So that, when I read them now, I cry."*

Throughout her life, Virginia remained girl-like with a love of frills and sparkles, treasuring dolls and porcelain figurines. She stayed close to her much younger cousins, often coaxing them into intimate conversations about who they were dating, and what they did with their boyfriends sexually. Research, I guess?

Because, rarely left alone by her mother, it's likely she never had a romantic relationship, at least a consummated one... Though she enjoyed crushes and flirting when success expanded her life and social circle. These seem to have been largely with her attorney and stockbroker, so it's unclear if the attraction was mutual or polite business.

As her star was rising, her health was taking a new turn. Virginia had an inoperable lump in her breast, but kept this illness secret from most. The family never heard anything about treatment or diagnosis; instead, letters leading up to her death mention only possible pneumonia and fatigue.

Virginia also didn't inform her agent, with whom she negotiated a new contract — a \$3 million advance for two books — in October 1986. At the time, Virginia was struggling to finish *Dark Angel*, the sequel to her 1985 blockbuster *Heaven*, the story of a poor young woman sold by her father. This one was *actually* based on a true story — a memoir editor Ann Patty bought for Virginia as source material.

In October 1986, she also found time to visit the movie set of *Flowers in the Attic*.

So, in the midst of filming the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, horror king Wes Craven had written a screenplay for *Flowers in the Attic*, but it was deemed too graphic — that woulda been iconic! It wasn't done by Wes Craven. The 1987 film also doesn't include the incest theme, by the way, but there's still plenty of melodrama. It stars Kristy Swanson, the original Buffy the Vampire Slayer, as Cathy, and Louise Fletcher, — Nurse Ratched from *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* — as Grandmother Olivia. Here's a clip about it from tv show *PM Magazine*, with Virginia giving what may be her last interview.

CLIP FROM PM MAGAZINE:

TV HOST: Watching from the sidelines this day was author V.C. Andrews. She was an unknown when she wrote *Flowers* eight years ago. Since then, the phenomenal success of the book and six later novels has made V.C. Andrews a legend in the publishing world. Sitting near the set, she told us she didn't have far to look for plot ideas.

VIRGINIA ANDREWS: You read the newspapers. The things that are done to children. That's where I get them from. They really happen.

TV HOST: Although suffering from cancer, Andrews was still able to make a brief cameo appearance in the film. She dressed up as a maid and stood in the background of one of the scenes, washing a window. Andrews told us it can be rough watching a film crew watch the words you wrote into sounds and gestures.

VIRGINIA ANDREWS: I hope it turns out to be like the book. But yet I have the feeling it's not. But still, I think it's going to be a fascinating movie.

TV HOST: If there's a theme to *Flowers*, it may be how hard it is for children who are growing up to understand why their parents do what they do.

[FILM CLIP KIRSTY SWANSON AS CATHY]: Why are there no pictures of us? Why are there no pictures of Daddy?

TV HOST: The movie is about two teenagers trying to discover why they and their baby brother and sister are locked up in the attic

VIRGINIA ANDREWS: When I first started writing, I wanted to write about the psychological side of why people do what they do to people they love best.

TV HOST: We hate to end on a sad note, but V.C. Andrews won't be able to see the movie based on her book *Flowers in the Attic* because she died shortly after that interview, which was taped in Massachusetts. She died of cancer and she had kept her illness a secret even from her family and her publisher.

SUSAN STONE: Virginia Andrews died December 19, 1986, at the age of 63, with seven best-sellers under her belt. But V.C. Andrews did not. As master of the popular 'child in jeopardy' genre that was still ripe for pillaging, the author's name was too valuable. Enter: V.C. Andrews, Mach 2. [SHOWS SLIDE] There he is, yeah.

Prolific horror writer Andrew Neiderman, who shared Virginia's editor and agent was hired to pick up the V.C. Andrews mantle after turning in a computer-assisted treatment for a *Flowers* prequel, which turned into 1987's *Garden of Shadows*.

You may not know him from schlock titles like *Night Howl* and *Brainchild*, though his book *Devil's Advocate* was made into a well-known film with Keanu Reeves. Note that the pull-quotes on some of these books actually come from V.C. Andrews — is that V.C. Andrews number one or number two? I don't know.

Neiderman is in his 36th year of writing V.C. Andrews books, generating up to three a year. The real V.C. Andrews, Virginia, had less than a quarter of that time to write her seven books, and conjure up iconic status. There are now about 100 books under the V.C. Andrews name.

And there's still interest in the unpublished work Virginia left behind when she died; she once claimed she had 63 works in progress, but who knows? Those documented include a 900-page medieval romance, *Castles of the Damned*, and an equally long book titled *The Obsessed*, which she said in letters was set for publication but never appeared, a fictionalized autobiography called *One Under a Parasol*, destroyed by Virginia when it was rejected by publishers, and a sci-fi novel, *Gods of Green Mountain*, released as an e-book in 2004.

As it turns out V.C. Andrews had fans at the IRS, as well. In a 1993 lawsuit, the US tax agency decided Virginia's pen name was valued at \$1.2 million, and her estate liable for the accrued tax. A judge ruled the value to be more like \$700,000. Nonetheless, it was said to be the first time a court decided that a dead person's name is taxable. Neidermann, who calls himself "The Most Successful Ghost Writer in American Literary History," and editor Ann Patty were also involved in some kind of legal wranglings.

But Virginia's legacy blooms on. *Flowers in the Attic* was reprised as a film in 2014 (starring Heather Graham, and Kieren Shipka from *Mad Men*), and later became a stage play, penned by Neiderman. [SHOWS SLIDE]

In February 2022, The Lifetime cable channel bought the rights and licenses to the full V.C. Andrews Catalog. A veritable V.C. Andrews cinematic universe awaits us — the VCU? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

That same month, Andrew Neiderman released his biography of Virginia Andrews, called *The Woman Beyond the Attic*, published by Gallery Books. Neiderman had access to letters and archives and interviewed family members, but the book doesn't achieve the gothic drama Virginia managed to live and write. It's a bit thin, and it actually ends with more than 100 pages of Virginia's unpublished novel, *The Obsessed*. So, as he finished her work after her death, in the end, she also finished his.

I'm glad it sparked my curiosity about the unusual Dead Lady behind those infamous paperbacks, but I think Virginia deserves a better biography. There are loads of scathing reviews of it on GoodReads, including one by Ann Patty, who had also planned to write a memoir about working with Virginia. And you can find a great wealth of V.C. Andrews articles, essays, and archives online, mostly curated by dedicated fans.

*Flowers in the Attic* was named one of the UK's 200 Best-Loved Novels in a 2003 BBC poll, and one of the US's Top 100 Beloved Books in a 2018 PBS reader vote. In Australia, the book won the 1993 BILBY award—that stands for

Books I Love Best Yearly—Children’s Choice award, [AUDIENCE GROANS] thankfully in the older readers category.

The book has sold countless copies, and been translated into 25 languages.

And this very evening — July 16th, 2022 — episode 2 of the newest *Flowers in the Attic*-inspired tv series premieres in the US. [SHOWS SLIDE]

*Flowers in the Attic: The Origin* [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] stars Kelsey Grammer (aka Frasier), Kate Mulgrew (*Star Trek*’s Captain Janeway), and Max Irons (son of Jeremy). It draws directly from *Garden of Shadows*, the work that tells the backstory of wicked grandmother Olivia.

Now, to end — why is this weird and wonderfully horrible story still with us? How did an adult novel become a teenage touchstone? Part of it might be that it came out as a relatively inexpensive paperback, with an eye-catching cover design. And that for kids, its sex scenes made it a ‘dirty’ book worth passing around.

But also, *Flowers in the Attic* came out at a time when child abuse and domestic abuse was becoming more widely discussed and reported about in the news. Many readers say it actually helped them process trauma. Virginia recalled:

*“There are so many cries out there in the night, so much protective secrecy in families; and so many skeletons in the closets that no one wants to think about, much less discuss. I tap that great unknown. I think my books have helped open a few doors that were not only locked, but concealed behind cobwebs.*

*The face of fear I display in my novels is not the pale specter from the sunken grave, nor is it the thing that goes bump in the night. Mine are the deep-seated fears established when we are children, and they never quite go away: the fear of being helpless, the fear of being trapped, the fear of being out of control.”*

Virginia’s editor Ann Patty went one step further in a 2013 interview:

*“Why is it so good? Because it captures the truth of being a captive....When the hostages came back from Iran, in an interview, one of them said that the only book that gets it right is **Flowers in the Attic**. Virginia was a hostage, as most teenagers feel like hostages to their parents. That’s the power.”*

I commend Virginia Andrews for her determination, for her unconventional path to success as an older woman, for supporting her family while managing her

disability, for channeling her pain into creativity and forging connection with so many people through her writing. And I apologize to my 10-year-old self for letting her read those books. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you everybody! I hope you enjoyed that and weren't too traumatized!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yeah, I'm amused to find that there's a whole little group of women our age who have read these books and we're all very embarrassed about it now. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Susan!

SUSAN STONE: Yeah! So thank you everybody for coming and we're just going to say that The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Our theme tune is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: And I'm going to say, thank you to Daniel Stern and Podfest Berlin for welcoming us here today. And thank you to Geronimo Schmid for technical support and recording. And thank you to all of you for coming!

SUSAN STONE: And thanks to all of you out there for listening!

You can find some great pictures of Virginia Andrews and her books and the other works they've inspired on our website, [deadladieshow.com/podcast](http://deadladieshow.com/podcast), as well as on our social media channels, @deadladiesshow. Do you remember reading these books? Let me know!

We'll be back again next month with another fabulous Dead Lady!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

\*\*\*\*\*