
Ancient History

Life of Nina Reilly

Courtroom Snapshots

MaryBlog

Pam's Poetry Blog



BIOGRAPHY OF PERRI O'SHAUGHNESSY

Perri O'Shaughnessy is the pen-name for two people, Pamela and Mary O'Shaughnessy, sisters. The authors' pseudonym is an homage to Perry Mason, the man who never met a guilty client, and a melding of our two first names, Pamela and Mary.

O'Shaughnessy is our paternal family name.

Our dad, Roger Charles O'Shaughnessy, was a genial Irishman born on the hard scrabble streets of St. Louis, Missouri, with ambition that became hard to achieve when he married at twenty-one and had four kids soon after. He always wanted to write a book. He wanted to be a lawyer, too, and Pam remembers him studying for a home law school course in the evening after work in our tiny kitchen.



Six foot two, charming, exasperating in the same way our brother became, he whistled and sang his way through life. Dad never finished law school. Instead, he worked in the private-sector aerospace industry as a staff engineer, and much later at the Department of Defense. That never stopped him from joking around, being playful, intelligent and challenging, and trying for more in life. He even ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 1964.

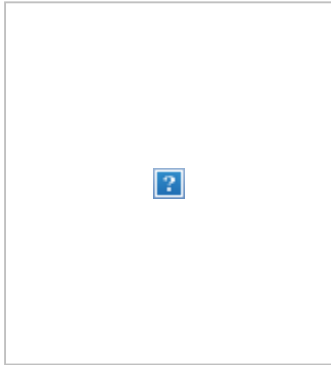
Our dad lived mystery. He looked like George Reeves, television's Superman, although taller. When we were young, he told us he really was Superman. Later he revealed (influenced by the novels of Ian Fleming he so loved, we suspect) he was not Superman. He was a spy. As teenagers, we derided his tall tales, but here's a strange truth. After he died at fifty-three, when Pam and brother Patrick were cleaning out his desk at work they found a thriller called *Trauma* by somebody name "P.J. O'Shaughnessy" in his office desk. He had written to us all sometime before that he was working on a book. Was this another example of his classic Irish blarney? Mary thinks

so. Pam thinks not.

Our mom, Helen June O'Shaughnessy, born in Isola, Mississippi, a petite red-blond, had a large, smart, supportive family. All of her six siblings finished college but she left after two years to marry. ("Too much learnin' and not enough earnin'," Grandma used to sigh, remarking upon her remarkable kids.) After her own children had all started college, while working full-time as a court clerk in Santa Ana, Mom attended night school for four years. She graduated from law school at fifty, ironically achieving Dad's main goal in

life. Practicing solo for some years, specializing in wills and family law, she also spent some years in practice with Pam in Monterey.

Our brother, Patrick, handled reception duties in their office, until he, too, went on to law school, the Monterey College of Law. Our sister, Meg, possibly hoping to untangle the troubling mysteries of our family, along with helping other desperate people, finished a graduate degree from Cal in psychology.



Mom loved mysteries and brought home sacks of them from junk stores and auctions in our early years. She always had a creative personal project going, and even began a novel many years ago with our dad. Someday we'll get that scanned, too. Meanwhile, you can find a link to some of her writing, an essay on Rex Stout's character, Nero Wolfe, [here](#). She also brought home old poetry books, novels, and practical readers, which we devoured like candy.

In addition, she collected every book published by Agatha Christie, Rex Stout, Ellery Queen, and Erle Stanley Gardner. She always said her worst fear was a neighbor that would drop by for coffee. She would rather read and pursue her own interests when she found some rare free time.

We moved every year and sometimes more often, whether we needed to or not, and our parents came up with a million rational-sounding reasons -- Dad could commute more efficiently; they loved being near the ocean, the ocean air aggravated our sister's childhood asthma; Orange County had too many conservatives, etc. -- but their reasons never seemed entirely plausible. Mary claims our parents adventure-traveled that way, since aside some occasional road trips to the ocean, Vegas, and the desert, they couldn't afford big holidays. Pam's theory is that financial problems probably triggered a lot of the moves. We'll never know as Dad and then Mom passed away without filling us in. We explored this mystery a little in our novel *Keeper of the Keys*.

(Pamela, pictured right.)



Born in St. Louis, Missouri, before starting school, Pam lived in the Mississippi Delta, where our maternal grandfather was a cotton broker, and Colorado. Later, while our parents shared a cabin in Berkeley with our uncle (Dad's brother) and aunt (Mom's sister), Mary was born at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland, California. Soon after her birth, the whole extended family decamped to Los Angeles, where you could find steady work.

Younger brother Patrick and sister Meg were born in the southland. Still, the moving continued, now bounded by the Los Angeles metropolitan area: downtown Los Angeles, Topanga Canyon, Whittier, Downey, Norwalk, Redondo Beach, Placentia, Yorba Linda, Fullerton, and on and on. We got used to stuffing our allotted two boxes and never treasuring things too much.

And we all became insatiable readers. Pam remembers reading a book a day for years, from *Ivanhoe* at ten to *Ulysses* at twelve. We read whatever came into the house: John D, MacDonald, McGuffie Readers, the Detective Book Club books, Tolstoy. Pam read the whole Tarzan series by Edgar Rice Burroughs during the summer of sixth grade, courtesy of a neighbor boy, and Mary read them one summer at the beach in Oceanside when Mom took the kids to a shady used book dealer who sold the old novels without covers.

(Never buy these, dear readers.)

Mary read *Rebecca* at twelve along with *The Human Comedy* by Saroyan, starting a pattern she continues to this day. She reads mysteries, mainstream fiction, serials, but also can't resist a good, thick, meaty chunk of literature. She also reread many favorites every summer: everything by the Brontës, *The Girl from Frozen Bend*, *Rilla of the Lighthouse*...

(Mary, pictured right. Credit: Ardyth Brock.)



Pam's high school teacher in Whittier once issued a poetry memorization challenge. Pam memorized a thousand lines of poetry, which she has been reciting ever since: Poe and Blake, and many poets long forgotten now, such as Walter Savage Landor. "And each silken, sad, uncertain rustling filled me, thrilled me with fantastic terrors never felt before..." She practiced reciting to Mary, who also remembers many of the same lines many years later.

Mary studied and did her homework in school. Pam decided early on that homework was unnecessary. She loved to wing it. When college time rolled around, they both won scholarships to any school in California. Pam moved to her grandmother's and started Whittier College. This school being a classic bad fit for a hippie poet, she dropped out to sing in a band, eventually going to Europe and working as a payroll clerk there. She quit after a year to travel. To survive, she sang in bars, perfecting "California Dreaming," a big hit in Ivangrad.

Due to an impetuous promise made to our parents, Pam returned to the U.S.A. to finish college. And at seventeen, Mary moved in with Pam into a tiny apartment above a garage on Obispo Street in Long Beach, California.

Both worked many hours as billing clerks for Coast Bank through a couple of years at Cal State University at Long Beach. Here Pam explored poetry, played the blues, and studied art. Mary discovered acting frightened her, astronomy daunted her, and Russian in college was much harder than it had been in high school. She worked as a waitress one summer at a harbor café for six weeks before being fired. We fondly recall her coming home from work dog-tired, her apron pockets jingling with the tips which meant a decent meal for a change.

A can of tuna then cost 25 cents. A pound of hamburger was under a dollar. Our rent on the one bedroom apartment was \$85 a month, and we made minimum wage, \$1.65/hr. Calling friends demanded a trip to the Thrifty Mart pay phone on the corner. (They had an indoor booth. Hard to believe.) Every coin counted.

Mary transferred, graduating from UC Santa Barbara with a degree in English, *magna cum laude*. After graduation, Pam landed a job as a federal Civil Rights Investigator for the U. S. Government in San Francisco. Following two years of this rewarding work, she took the Law School Entrance Exams. All those years of indiscriminate reading helped her score.

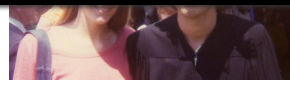
Accepted by Harvard Law School, she moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts to live the frugal student life again, joined after by Mary, who found working in Santa Barbara post-B. A. required a Ph.D. unless she wanted to return to waitressing. Pam graduated on a rainy day, both parents and sisters in attendance.



Mary took up freelancing, working first as a production designer on "Where's Boston?" This multimedia show played for years at the Prudential Center and later at Faneuil Hall. A major client was Cambridge Seven Associates. Various later multimedia projects for this firm and others sent her to places like the Virgin Islands, Washington D. C., and New York City. Wearing borrowed clothing, she directed a *National Geographic* photographer while in her twenties. She learned visual editing, sound editing, and storytelling, and she learned to be a good mother, the exact opposite of her exact opposite.

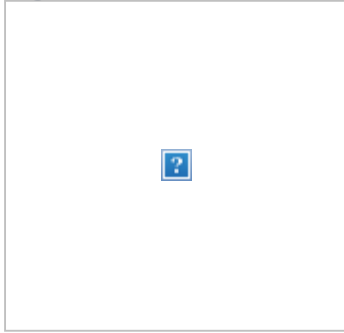
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accept the job offer in California, not the one in Boston or in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He's now a "Distinguished Engineer" at Genentech, Inc. in South San Francisco. They've been married more than two decades.

After law school, two trips trekking and mountain climbing in the Himalaya, and a stint at UMass Boston, Pam took her first real law job at a small firm in Carmel, California. There was plenty of work defending pot growers in Big Sur, handling divorces and whatever else came through the door. When Mom got her law degree, she and Pam formed the Monterey California firm of O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy which must have been one of the first mother-daughter law firms around.



Pam practiced law in Monterey, San Pablo, and Lake Tahoe for sixteen years before the success of the Nina Reilly series prompted her to leave the profession. Pam, a small-town general lawyer with plenty of courtroom work, married a land surveyor named Mike and had a son. She claims Tahoe offered the most fascinating cases because of the gambling, free-flowing sex, and money, and huge numbers of people passing through, not to mention the grandeur of the mountains and lake.

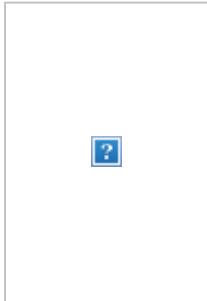
Mary and Brad have three children. They settled down near San Francisco and haven't moved much, unlike Pam, who continued the odyssey our parents had begun. Pam moved to New York to Hawaii and back to Tahoe, among many places. She also now lives in northern California.

Around 1993, Mary and Pam began writing together. Pam had plots and poetry, and Mary had studied creative writing even in the years after college.

Our first manuscript, written over several years, featured a paralegal named Nina Reilly who worked for a law firm in Carmel, California. It landed us a wonderful agent, but by then we had moved on and written something smoother and better developed. For ages, that first Nina Reilly novel gathered dust. In between working and raising families, we wrote a second book together. With the help of that amazing and estimable agent, Nancy Yost of New York's Lowenstein-Yost Associates, Inc., Perri's second try sold. In this, Perri's first published novel, *Motion to Suppress*, Nina Reilly runs from a bad marriage to South Lake Tahoe, putting out her shingle, and like Pam, taking whatever cases walk through her door.

We've had many requests over the years for a peek at that first story of a young Nina. Well prepare yourself for *Show No Fear*, now available in paperback.

We have written thirteen other books together, including one collection of short stories. Pam has also independently had her poems published (see below), and published a book of [poetry](#).



We currently live an hour away from each other. We are as close as ever. Our kids are grown. Pam, single again, continues with poetry, singing the blues, and exploring this wide world. Mary, still happily married to her adventurous partner, travels too much, continues to study the art of the novel, and worries endlessly about her family.

Looking back, we have lived our parents' dreams. Our brother Patrick became a much-loved lawyer in the Salinas Valley, helping farm workers and the underrepresented as a partner in the law firm of Rucka, O'Boyle, Lombardo, McKenna. He also wrote a mystery which we hope to publish someday. We lost him in 2004. Our sister Meg, a school psychologist in Reno, Nevada, has also turned her creative and competent hand to fiction.

We'd like to think we are charming and inventive as Dad, as ambitious and optimistic as Mom. They both loved the law and writing and singing, and we do too. We honor those hardworking, lovable, creative, frustrated people, and so many others like them, raising families, reaching higher than any Mississippi cotton broker, southern piano teacher, poor Irish Army chef, or Kansas dry goods grocer ought ever to imagine, except here in the U.S.A.

Admin