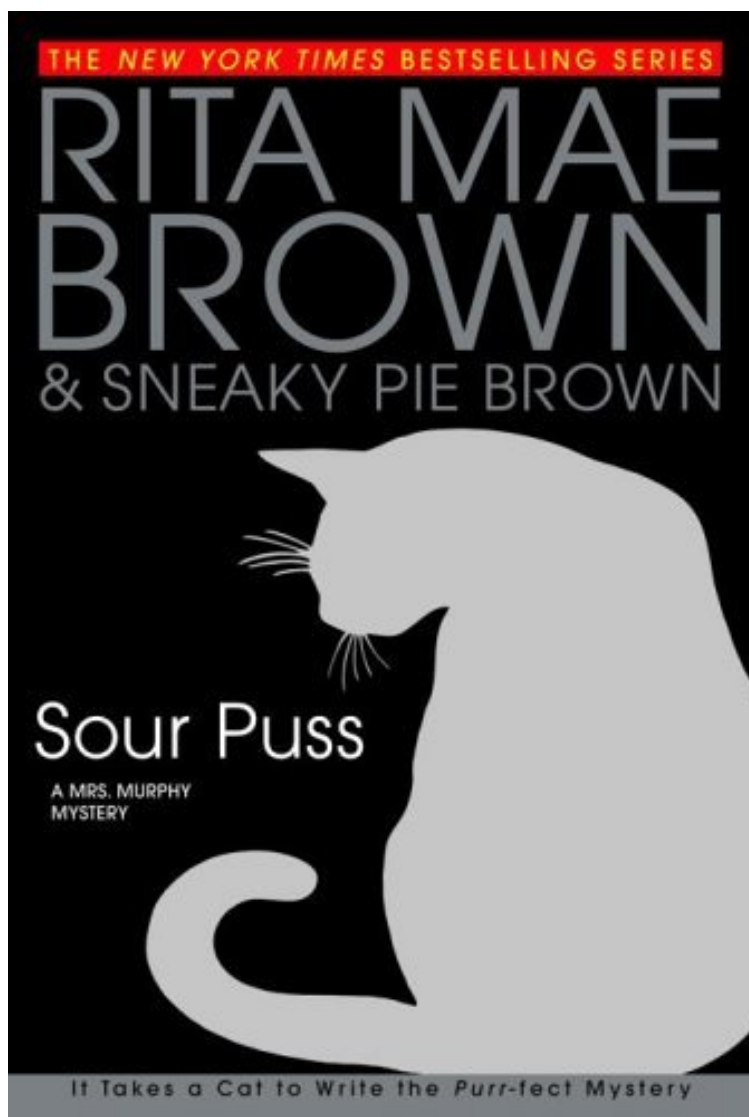


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Sour Puss: A Mrs. Murphy Mystery



Par Rita Mae Brown
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurRita Mae Brown and her feline partner-in-crime-detection, Sneaky Pie Brown, return to the scene of their bestselling crimespicturesque Crozet, Virginia. Love is in the air as spring comes to the small town, but no sooner has Mary Minor Harry Haristeen remarried than she is rudely interruptedby murder. And no sooner does the trouble start than curious cats Mrs. Murphy and Pewter, along with corgi Tee Tucker, sink their claws into the case. After an unexpected rekindling of their romance, Harry and her veterinarian ex-husband, Fair Haristeen, have happily remarried. But the excitement of their nuptials is quickly overshadowed by the murder of Professor Vincent Forland, a world-famous grape and fungal expert who was in town visiting the local vineyards. Within days of giving a lecture on how distilled fungus and cattle diseases are the current basis of chemical warfare, Forlands decapitated body is discovered. After their

initial fright, the residents of Crozet believe that this was a political murder and settle back into their routines until a local is also found dead, killed in the same gruesome manner as Professor Forland. Now residents can't help wondering, is this really the work of an outsider or one of their own? No longer working in the post office, Harry had just planted a quarter acre of grapes, which fuels her natural curiosity over just what the two murder victims knew and had in common. Once the warmth of spring arrives, the grapevines blossom and Harry's furry entourage discovers the first critical clue. But how can they show the humans what they've learned? And how can they or anyone stop the killing? From the Hardcover edition.

Extrait Chapter One

"Mary Minor, wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance, in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love him, comfort him, honor and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only to him, so long as ye both shall live?" "I will," Harry answered in a clear voice. The Reverend Herbert Jones, in his sonorous tone, then asked, "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" Susan Tucker, next to Harry, said, "I do." Fair, smiling, repeated what he had memorized. "I, Pharamond Haristeen, take thee, Mary Minor, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth." Perched on the balcony ledge, Mrs. Murphy, Harry's tiger cat, and Pewter, the roly-poly gray cat, observed intently. Tucker, the corgi, sat on a bench next to Mildred, the organist. "Finally," the dog sighed. "They're right for each other." Mrs. Murphy had cat's intuition about such matters. "They tried it once, the second time should be the charm." Pewter wished the ceremony would speed along, because she was eager to attend the reception. The extravagance of foods thrilled her far more than contemplating human rituals. "If you think the farm runs along like a top now, you just wait until Fair puts his back into it. He's strong as an ox." Tucker had always loved the six-foot-five-inch veterinarian. The feeling was mutual. "Does this mean we won't be sleeping on the bed? I mean, do we have to put up with their thrashing around and all that moaning and groaning?" Pewter cherished sleep almost as much as food. "Why would it be any different now, Pewts? Flop on the end of the bed and when they're done then go up and sleep on the pillow," Mrs. Murphy replied. "Well, if they're married maybe they'll be doing it more, you know?" Pewter considered human physical intimacy an irritation. Then she giggled. "Or less." "Won't be any different, except he'll be more relaxed. He's worked so hard to win her back. He'll be happy. Harry really is his great passion." Mrs. Murphy watched as Herb blessed the rings. "Is Fair her great passion?" Pewter cocked her head. Neither Mrs. Murphy nor Tucker said anything. After long thought, Tucker finally responded, "That's a hard question to answer." "See, I don't think he is, even if she is marrying him," Pewter blurted out. "Look at Miranda and Tracy. He's loony about her and she swoons every time she looks at him. I mean, BoomBoom and Alicia, besotted with each other. Cow eyes, you know. But I never see that in Harry." "Too rational." Tucker understood Pewter's point. "Oh, we've all seen Harry toss reason to the winds. Not often, granted, but she can lose her temper or let her curiosity get the better of her. Judgment flies right out the window." Mrs. Murphy, too, pondered Pewter's observation. "She loves him. She wouldn't be standing there in that pretty dress if she didn't love him. She's," Mrs. Murphy paused, "diffident. Our dear mother gets more excited about ideas, about building a shed or planting redbud clover than she does about people. She likes people well enough and, like I said, she truly loves Fair, but her passions aren't about people. But he knows that. He knows just what he's getting." "Guess so. They've known each other since before kindergarten." Tucker noticed Miranda wiping her eyes with a Belgian lace handkerchief. She also saw Paul de Silva holding Tazio Chappars's hand. He obviously was wildly in love with the young, talented architect. Alicia and BoomBoom didn't hold hands, but she saw Alicia give BoomBoom a handkerchief, as the Junoesque blonde was crying, too. "Funny, BoomBoom crying, since everyone blamed her for the breakup of Harry's marriage even though they were separated," Tucker remarked. "No one can seduce a man who doesn't want to be seduced. Fair was wrong and he paid penance. I say we forget the whole thing. Harry finally has." Mrs. Murphy was glad that Harry and BoomBoom had reclaimed a friendship out of painful circumstances. "Guess BoomBoom and Alicia can't get married, huh?" Pewter twitched her tail, massive boredom setting in along with a grumbling stomach. "They can, sort of, but the state doesn't recognize it." Tucker shifted her weight on the bench, which made Mildred Potter, the organist, pat her on the head. "Why do people get married? We don't. It's such an expense, a big public display, and it costs a bloody fortune. Can't they just pair off and be done with it? Think of all the chicken and salmon and tuna and catnip you could buy with that money." Pewter honed in on her passion. "This wedding isn't that expensive, because it's a remarriage." Tucker was getting hungry herself. "Ha. The reception is going to cost about six thousand dollars. Probably more once the bar bill comes

in. That's a lot of tuna," Pewter said. "There's more than tuna at stake for humans. Marriage establishes paternity so a man isn't putting a nickel in another man's meter." Mrs. Murphy laughed. " 'Course, now with DNA, paternity can be established in ways that don't please all men. You play, you pay. They can no longer claim the baby isn't theirs." She paused. "The whole marriage thing is so ingrained in society that they can't really do without it. Doesn't even matter if they have children. It's something you've got to do." "Like death and taxes." Pewter giggled. "Aren't you glad you don't have to go through all this rigmarole?" Tucker sighed. "I'm happy Harry is marrying Fair, but it is exhausting." "Who wants to be human? If there is reincarnation I'm coming back as myself." Pewter puffed out her gray chest. "My, my, don't we think a lot of ourselves." Mrs. Murphy slyly batted at Pewter. "Oh, and you'd like to come back as a caterpillar?" Pewter sassed. Mrs. Murphy lashed out, a real whack. Pewter struck back. "Hey, hey, you two!" Mildred cautioned them, because it would be a long tumble down into the congregation. Just as Herb uttered, "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder," the people gathered below were treated to a hissing fit of such volume that a few heads tilted upward. Harry cast her eyes to behold the spectacle of Pewter giving Mrs. Murphy such a swat that the tiger cat slipped over the side of the balcony, hanging on by her claws. "Dear God," she sighed. "Little pagans," Herb whispered, which made Fair laugh. With heroic effort, Mrs. Murphy hoisted herself up onto the balcony railing. Pewter shot off the railing, hit the organist's bench with all fours, endured a reprimand from Mildred and a yap from Tucker as she leapt onto the keys, which produced a mass of discordant notes throughout lovely St. Luke's Lutheran Church. She then soared off the organ as Mrs. Murphy, in hot pursuit, gained on her. Up to the last row of the balcony, down to the exit, thundering down the carpeted stairs, Pewter skidded across the highly polished vestibule floor, knocking over the lectern with the red leather visitor's book opened. The book hit the floor. Mrs. Murphy left a few claw marks as she scrambled over the book. Pewter then turned a ninety-degree angle, bolting down the center aisle of the church. Boom Boom reached out to grab her, but Pewter eluded the bejeweled hand, as did Mrs. Murphy. The two crazed felines headed straight for the nuptial pair. Tucker had sense enough not to stop either cat. She watched with fascination, as did Mildred. "You're a good doggy," Mildred crooned between her laughs. "Yes, I am." "I will kill you. I will kill you on Harry's wedding day!" Mrs. Murphy shouted. "Gotta catch me first." Pewter, realizing she was the center of attention, was loving the limelight, quite oblivious to the discipline that might follow. Herb bravely continued, and as he was pronouncing Fair and Harry husband and wife he rolled his eyes skyward, imploring the Lord not only to bless those two humans but to bless the two cats in quite a different way. Pewter ducked under Harry's train. Mrs. Murphy wiggled right under. Pewter then emerged from the back of Harry's train with such force that Fair held on to her as Herb ended the ceremony with ". . . that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting. Amen." Before Fair kissed his bride, they both watched Pewter land on the altar. She crouched behind the large gold cross. Mrs. Murphy landed on the altar, as well, the two towering floral displays on either side of the cross swaying unpredictably. The cats fought each other on either side of the cross. Fair whispered, "Honey, let me kiss you before they wreck the place." He kissed her and she kissed back, and when they broke the kiss, they just laughed until the tears came to their eyes. By now everyone was mesmerized, and it was dawning on Pewter that as much as she adored all these eyes upon her there might be hell to pay. "She started it!" Pewter bellowed. "I did not, you fat fat water rat!" Mrs. Murphy aimed a precise blow across the top of the cross. Rushing in from the back to the side of the altar were Herb's cats, Elocution, Cazenovia, and Lucy Fur. "What are you doing?" Cazenovia called to the warring kitties. "You'd better stop or there will be blue murder," Lucy Fur, a sensible type, admonished. "I'll kill her for sure!" Mrs. Murphy, livid, agreed to the murder rap. The three church cats positioned themselves in front of the altar. Elocution very sweetly pleaded, "If you don't stop, Poppy will get awfully upset. Come on." She loved Herb. Mrs. Murphy, her back to the congregation, turned to look down at the three cats. Then she looked at all the people. She'd forgotten about them. "Holy shit!" She leapt down. "See, not only did she start it, she's a blasphemer." Pewter rejoiced in this moment. With three strides of his long legs, Fair walked up and scooped Mrs. Murphy, ears flat against her head, into his arms. "Pewter, you get out from behind the cross," Fair commanded. Harry lifted her train, joining her husband. "Pewter, come on now. We'll forgive you if you come off the altar. Remember, forgiveness is Christian." "Do it." Cazenovia added to Harry's plea. Pewter slunk out from behind the cross. "I am innocent." "That's what they all say." Fair laughed as though he understood Pewter's meow. Bride and groom, each carrying an extremely naughty cat, walked down the center aisle as Mildred hit the keys. Miranda, the lead singer in the choir of the charismatic Church of the Holy Light, said as the bride and groom walked by, "My delight is in the Lord; because He hath heard the voice of my prayer." "Happy that they're finally married, honeybun?" Tracy held

her hand. "Yes, but my prayer was those two bad cats would get caught," Miranda replied. The reception, held at the farm, exceeded everyone's expectations for a perfect April day. Small tables set up under the trees each had a lovely spring-flower arrangement. The food was truly superb, and Patricia Kluge and Bill Moses supplied all the wines from their Kluge Estates Vineyard. Over two hundred guests came to celebrate this glorious day. Even Mrs. Murphy and Pewter were forgiven as Harry fed them bits of turkey, ham, roast pork, and salmon. She said to Fair, "No one will forget our wedding day." He'd just given Tucker a whole sweet potato as people toasted the bride and groom. "I know I won't." It was all seemingly perfect.

Chapter Two

The heaven-sent warmth and sunshine of Sunday, April 16, Harry and Fair's wedding day, evaporated on April 17 as a cold front swept down from Canada, bringing glowering skies, a drop in temperature, and cool showers. T. S. Eliot wrote, "April is the cruelest month." It is doubtful he had agriculture in mind when he penned that immortal line, the beginning to one of the most famous poems in English letters, but any farmer in Virginia can tell you he was right. A sixty-eight-degree day can be followed by a blizzard. This Monday, while not blizzard weather, proved cold enough for scarf, gloves, Barbour coat, and Thinsulate-lined work boots, all of which Harry wore as she checked the mares and foals. The mares, bequeathed to her and Fair by a friend who died quite young, unexpectedly, each delivered beautiful foals. Harry could never have afforded the stud fees. She marveled at how correct the three fillies and one colt were as they nuzzled up to their respective mothers. Most couples marry in June; October is the second-most popular month, and the Christmas season is also popular. Since Harry worked the farm and Fair, a vet, specialized in equine reproduction, April was the best choice. The crush of delivering foals at two in the morning abated for him; the press of farm chores remained relatively light. Harry walked the paddock fence lines. So many horse injuries are fence-related. Checking the fences every day was part of her routine. The health of her animals came first. Tucker trotted behind Harry. Mrs. Murphy and Pewter stayed in the barn, the excuse being that the mouse population had mushroomed out of control. The reality was that Pewter didn't like cold and Mrs. Murphy wanted a good gossip with Simon, the possum living in the hayloft. Also living in the hayloft was Flatface, a great horned owl, and Matilda, a huge slumbering blacksnake. In Pewter's defense, she did perch on the tack trunk in the heated tack room, peering down at the cleverly hidden mouse hole behind the trunk. Her whiskers swept forward in anticipation of seeing a mouse snout appear. So far, the mice, smelling her, elected to stay put. In the hayloft, Simon, a kleptomaniac, displayed his latest treasure for Mrs. Murphy. "Doesn't it sparkle?" He proudly pushed forward a little clear tube of iridescent sunscreen. "Where'd you find that?" "In the old bucket full of the natural sponges." "Hmm, Harry must have dropped it last summer. She rarely uses sunscreen. She should but, well, she gets busy and forgets those things." "How was the wedding?" Mrs. Murphy declined to relate her participation in the ceremony. "Harry was a beautiful bride. Just seeing her in a dress was worth the trip, and Fair wore a morning suit, which makes him more handsome, if that's possible." "He is a handsome fellow. How come they didn't take a honeymoon?" "Ha," Mrs. Murphy laughed. "Harry told Fair that every day with him was a honeymoon, besides which they'd been married before so why not just press on? I think they'll take a little vacation midsummer. Anyway, Simon, it was pretty good. I'm surprised you didn't come out for the party yesterday. Lots of little tidbits on the grass." From the Hardcover edition. From Publishers Weekly

The 13th Mrs. Murphy mystery from bestseller Brown and her feline collaborator (after 2005's *Cat's Eyewitness*) opens with the comic-opera remarriage of series heroine Harry Haristeen and Fair, Harry's veterinarian ex-husband, reintroducing at length some familiar characters before turning to the novel's main focus: the vagaries of the burgeoning wine industry in the Virginia Piedmont. The prospect of having your own label or selling at a profit to another winery is too good to pass up, and even Harry and Fair have put in a quarter acre of Petit Manseng grapes. But someone is trying to scare off the competition, and the disappearance of a respected expert in the mutation of toxins sets Harry's talking pets Mrs. Murphy and Pewter and corgi Tee Tucker on the sleuthing trail. When a longstanding feud between rival vintners leads to murder, Harry has to read the clues before attrition gives us the answers. Brown provides a captivating look at grape growing and the passionate dedication it requires. (Mar.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.