

# Honey West is prowling Again: Q&A with Author John Frederickson

by Wesley Britton

In 1957, *This Girl For Hire* was the first in a series of novels by Gloria and Forrest (“Skip”) Fickling featuring a female private eye named Honey West. Nine books later, *Honey West* became a half-hour TV drama that ran on ABC from Sept. 17, 1965 to April 8, 1966. During this season, *Honey West* starred the very sexy Anne Francis as Honey, owner of her own PI agency along with her partner, Sam Bolt (John Erickson). This was a couple that made TV history.



In particular, *Honey West* was the first action drama on television starring a female lead, the only other contender for that title being Stephanie Powers as April Dancer in *The Girl From U.N.C.L.E.* Back in those days, Hollywood didn't believe women could carry such a load-- but cunning, feline, savvy Honey West proved them all wrong. For male viewers, she was an eyeful; for women, Honey was a favorite as she could dish it out with the best of any TV baddie. And, to boot, she was outfitted with the finest Bondian gadgets a TV budget could buy. West had tear gas earrings, garter-belt gas masks, immense sunglasses with two-way radio frames, a walkie-talkie in her compact, and a radio transmitting lipstick. She and Sam rode around in a specially-equipped mobile crime lab with "H.W. Bolt & Co., TV Service" on the side. \$50,000 was budgeted for her

wardrobe including a tiger-skin bathing suit with matching cape and an all-black ensemble consisting of leotards, boots, turtleneck shirt, and gloves. Her principal base of operation was her Los Angeles apartment where she lived with her pet ocelot, Bruce the Cat, and had a secret office behind a fake living room wall. Meow.

With all this, it's no wonder *Honey West* remained a beloved character long after her demise on broadcast television. What is surprising is that it took until June 2009 for someone to get out the full story of this watershed moment in entertainment, and the man to take on the challenge was John C. Frederickson. His *Honey West* (Bear Manor Media) is 228 pages of interviews, biographies, production notes, and very helpful reference listings that are what any fan of *HW* would crave.

**What can readers expect from Frederickson's book? Recently, I asked John a number of questions to get behind the scenes of his project. Here's what he had to say:**



**Q: Before we get to your book on *Honey West*, can you tell us a bit about yourself?**

A: I am a historian by profession (PhD), although I write reference books for a living. Now that publishing is dying off, thanks to e-books and the like, I hope to switch over to film producing in the next few years. I would like to make history documentaries and the like for History Channel or Discovery Channel and the like.

**Q: What inspired you to write a book on *Honey West*?**

A: It always struck me as curious that a seminal program like this always lacked proper coverage in the form of a book. What motivated me most of all was the age of the cast--all in their early 80s--which meant that time is running out for interviews without invoking a seance!

**Q: What aspects of the show first got you interested in the series?**

A: Definitely Anne Francis. I was only 12, you know, that impressionable age, and seeing her cat around in that black cat suit made me sit up and notice women as women. It was also a fun show to watch, and I enjoyed the fight scenes with the baddies and screaming matches between Anne and John.

**Q: Had you read the novels before starting on this project? While your book is mainly about the show, what are your thoughts on the original novels—are they worth reading today?**

A: I was too young to read the novels when they came out during the late 1950s, and was too hooked (like most kids of my generation) on watching TV to take the time to read anything. The novels themselves are quite different from the show, much darker, noir-oriented, with Honey West being a capable gumshoe, but a tad looser, morally. Still, the series is famous for promoting the first female private eye, and with stunning success financially, so they constitute more than just a

footnote to the genre. As to reading them today, sure, if you like tawdry detective stuff.

**Q: What kind of cooperation did you get from the participants? How did they respond to a book on this classic series?**

A: Oh, I got great cooperation from all the people I interviewed. I spoke with Anne and John on the phone because I did not want to intrude upon their private lives at this age, but they were friendly, patient, and answered all my inquiries. Just great, classy people.

Gene Lebell and Gloria Fickling were interviewed in person at their homes and, again, just wonderful to deal with. They also enjoyed the book when it came out and thanked me heartily for it, so that really made my day.

**Q: What were your favorite interviews, if it's possible to answer that. I can't help but think talking to Anne Francis was a special treat.**

A: It was a blast talking to Anne. She's from New York City and not exactly a shrinking violet. After all these years I finally scraped up the guts to talk to my favorite actress! But Gene LeBell gave me, pound-for-pound, the funniest interview I ever conducted. He is a professional wrestler and exudes that typical irreverent sense of humor--laid it on me with a shovel. A really neat guy, too, considering the chumps he's always dealt with in Tinseltown.

**Q: You've mentioned Gene Lebell a few times—for those who don't know him, can you tell us a bit more about his work and what he contributed to *Honey West*?**

A: Gene LeBell continues on as one of Hollywood's top stuntmen/stunt coordinators, although he is in his late 70s! Although not well known outside the industry, he has a storied career of surprising longevity. He is also a master grappler (full-body wrestling) and a 10th degree Judoka (judo expert).

For *Honey West*, in addition to his coordinating chores, he sometimes dressed in drag and substituted for Anne Francis in some of the full-body flip over shots. Believe it or not, his legs are as sexy--if not sexier--than Anne's! Seriously, Gene is a no-nonsense, Hollywood professional who does not suffer fools gladly--including me--but he was very generous with his time with me.

**Q: What were your major surprises as you went along? Did you discover myths or untruths that needed correcting in print?**

A: I was somewhat surprised that a successful man like Aaron Spelling, who produced the show, would be so damn vindictive towards the Ficklings after they insisted that they be given screen credit for creating the series. Hell, it was their lifework! According to Gloria, he gave positive instructions NOT to accept any scripts or ideas from them throughout the production run. Typical Hollywood pettiness.

I was also surprised to learn that Anne and John were able to work six 18-hour days per week on the set and not kill each other. It was tough, but they thoroughly enjoyed the experience being Honey and Sam.

**Q: Beyond the interviews, what do you think readers will most like about your book? What's "new" they won't find elsewhere?**

A: I write reference books for a living and always try to refer readers to other sources of information that might help. That's why each entry has a small bibliography of magazine articles, books, or websites, that they can refer to for greater depth. This is essential since I always considered this book a primer, that is, an introduction to the series, and not a formal analysis or study. Those can now follow.

**Q: How do you rate *Honey West* in television history? What would new viewers enjoy all these years later if they didn't see the original run?**

A: *Honey West* is groundbreaking TV insomuch as it portrayed the first "liberated" woman on American airwaves, that is, a female protagonist that is successful, self-assured, and not wholly dependant on the male of the species. Anne, a highly accomplished actress, made it look both cool and easy to be liberated circa 1965!

I am also surprised that so many people of my age (mid-fifties!) remember the show fondly, most of the women I spoke with still love Bruce the ocelot! Today the show is somewhat dated from the standpoint of production techniques, and the dialogue reflects the cultural nuances of the day, but it is still fun to watch. Breezy, tongue-in-cheek fun.

**Q: What has been the response to the book since it came out? I'd think the fans have been grateful for this overdue tome.**

A: The book has been basically well-received in the handful of interviews posted online. Sales, however, are sluggish seeing that books no longer sell. People are still glued to that boob-tube!

**Q: Is there any news regarding a much rumored film version of *Honey West*?**

A: I learn from Gloria Fickling that 7th Voyage Productions has optioned the script "Bombshell", which she and husband Skip wrote during the late 1950s. If brought to fruition, *Honey West* here would hew more closely to the streetwise, sexually flip version of the novels, rather than the sanitized, but still very cool, Anne Francis interpretation. Its all still talk at this stage, as you would expect from Tinseltown, and they are casting about for an actress to fill the role, but it would be sweet revenge for Gloria, if made. She and Skip were literally screwed out of every penny they should have earned from the TV show and broadcast

residuals. Moral of the story: NEXT TIME GET A BETTER LAWYER! I wish her the best of luck.

**Q: What are you working on now? Any future projects in the pipeline?**

A: My final book will be an illustrated encyclopedia of 1950s science fiction films. After that, God willing, I will return to Hollywood to get my producer's certificate and churn out history documentaries. Of course, I do not rule out bringing *Honey West* back as a TV show, either--but where in the world will I ever find an actress who can fill Anne's stilettos!

Buy *Honey West* at Amazon or directly from the publisher at:  
[bearmanormedia.bizland.com/id393.html](http://bearmanormedia.bizland.com/id393.html)

**Honey West Novels**

Since we're on the subject on books about Honey West (another is in the works—stay tuned), below is the bibliography of all the Forrest and Gloria Fickling novels that started it all:

1. This Girl for Hire. (1957)
2. Girl on the Loose. (1958)
3. A Gun for Honey. (1958)
4. Honey in the Flesh. (1959)
5. Girl on the Prowl. (1959)
6. Dig a Dead Doll. (1960)
7. Kiss for a Killer. (1960)
8. Blood and Honey. (1961)
9. BombShellh (1964)

Two more novels in the series were published by Pyramid Books after the show's demise:

1. Stiff As A Broad. (June 1971)
2. Honey On Her Tail. (February 1971)