



DIRECTOR'S SPOTLIGHT

Gunn; Menon (above)

# BANK SHOT

A rising young director finds intensity and gravitas in a claustrophobic tale set in the financial world

Timing favored director Meera Menon (*Farah Goes Bang*) in the making of her second feature, the financial thriller *Equity*. Her first film caught the eye of Alysia Reiner (*Sideways*; *Orange Is the New Black*) and Sarah Megan Thomas, actor friends who had just founded the production company Broad Street Pictures, dedicated in part to making movies from more female perspectives—raising Hollywood's Bechdel test-score average, as it were.

Reiner and Thomas want to play onscreen, in Menon's words, "complicated, interesting women who operate in gray areas." They get their wish in *Equity*, their inaugural project, in alliance with scriptwriter Amy Fox (another friend from New York City's theater world) and a whole roster of coproducer-slash-advisers based in the heart of the financial industry—women whose résumés name-check Barclays, Goldman Sachs, Citibank, Lehman Brothers, and several redoubtable hedge funds.

Anna Gunn (*Breaking Bad*'s Skyler White) infuses *Equity* with quiet desperation as Naomi Bishop, an investment banker who shepherds tech IPOs to market—and who needs a big triumph to save face in the wake of an unsuccessful previous effort. Thomas plays her comparably angst-ridden junior colleague, Erin, who may or may not have her boss's back. Aside from her male mentors and colleagues, Bishop has to contend with an on-and-off lover (James Purefoy) who works in her firm's hedge-fund division and may be trying to pump her for a little inside dope for a key client. Add in a federal prosecutor (Reiner) who's sniffing around for just this kind of trouble, and you have a recipe for corporate paranoia that *Equity* stirs up with chilling élan.

Menon grew up in New Jersey and attended Columbia University, then went to USC's film school; she's elated at the buzz around *Equity* but is already on the hunt for her next project. "There are so many genres that you haven't seen women at the forefront of," she says. "Like the spy movie—where is the female James Bond? So many stories have historically been told through a male perspective that you could bring the *Equity* treatment to."—B.D.

# ESCAPE ARTISTS

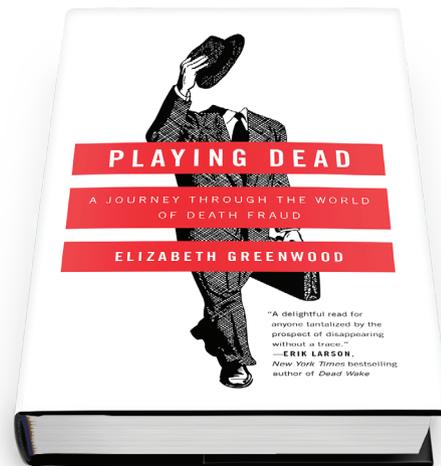
A new book uncovers death fakery. Guess which sex does it more?

By Keziah Weir

In the wikiHow article "How to Fake Your Own Death: 11 Steps," the first step, under an illustration of a woman animatedly pondering her faux demise, encourages self-reflection: "Does your situation really warrant a death-fake? Can you just move away? Are you being melodramatic?... You should only do this if you keep feeling that faking your own death is the only way to start over or escape, and you have no viable alternatives." All hope is indeed lost? Proceed to step two.

This entry is just one of the many macabre tidbits Elizabeth Greenwood uncovers in her uncanny first book, *Playing Dead: A Journey Through the World of Death Fraud* (Simon & Schuster). Inspired by a friend's joking suggestion that Greenwood fake her own death (as an alternative to paying off her endless student loans; *spoiler*: she gets as far as a death certificate), *Playing Dead* is an investigation into the bizarre lives of those desperate (and hubristic) enough to appear to die, only to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of their former lives. Despite its morbid underpinnings—there's something inherently depressing about anyone wishing to end her own life, even if it is only an act—Greenwood's book is mesmerizing. "Faking death," she writes, is "a way to bridge the chasm between who you are and who you want to be."

Over the course of her research, she discovered another chasm: that "pseudocide" is "a heavily male phenomenon." Frank Ahearn, professional disappearance consultant and coauthor of another *How to Disappear* book, told Greenwood that between 2001 and 2012, he



aided in the vanishing of about 50 clients; more than half were men "with money problems: They had come into money or had lost it all," while "his female clients had violence problems: stalkers or abusive husbands." It's difficult to talk about without making sweeping gender-based generalizations, but it seems clear that Greenwood has inadvertently hit upon a strange but stark difference between men and women. Perhaps men fake their deaths more often because they are still, unfortunately, more often tasked with monetary responsibility. (At last, the wage gap has a flip side!) The cinematic nature of a faked death simply lends itself well to money woes in a way that merely disappearing does not. When I talk with her, Greenwood puts a finer point on it, saying that faking a death requires an intense narcissism, the ability to compartmentalize, and the drive to seek a quick fix—in her words, "the evil tropes of masculinity spun out to their greatest expression."

In 1984, a young female computer science student disappeared from her German hometown. A year later, a convicted murderer confessed to killing her. Twenty years later she was found living, without any documents or a bank account, in Düsseldorf, unbeknownst to any of her friends or family. She wasn't avoiding debt, or a prison sentence; she didn't collect life insurance. "Maybe women fake their deaths just as much as men," Greenwood writes. "They just don't get caught."

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