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*Dramatic Publishing*

# **FBI Girl: How I Learned to Crack My Father's Code**

By  
TAMMY RYAN

Adapted from the memoir  
by  
MAURA CONLON-MCIVOR



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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TAMMY RYAN

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MAURA CONLON-MCIVOR

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(FBI Girl: How I Learned to Crack My Father's Code)

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*FBI Girl: How I Learned to Crack My Father's Code* premiered at The REP, Point Park University's professional theatre company (Ronald Allan-Lindblom, Artistic Director), Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, May 23, 2007, directed by Sheila McKenna.

## Cast

Maura Conlon . . . . . ROBIN ABRAMSON\*  
Joe Conlon, Richard Plumb . . . . . JOHN AMPLAS\*  
Mary Conlon, Elizabeth Dupont . . . . . NANCY BACH\*  
Julie Conlon, Mrs. Flanigan, Adele Romero,  
Robert, Angela . . . . . THEO ALLYN\*  
John Conlon, Mr. Flanigan, Peter Norden,  
Paul Ramsey, Coach Bill . . . . . JOEL RIPKA\*  
Joe Conlon Jr. (Joey) . . . . . MARK TINKEY\*  
Father Jack Conlon, Matt Hershey, Mr. Schlatter. . . . . MICHAEL  
FULLER\*  
Gramma Molly (Muth), Sr. Rita, Sr. Nora,  
Sr. Hortense, Mother Perrenial, Waitress . . . . . MARY RAWSON\*

## Production Staff

Set Design . . . . . Michael Essad  
Costume Design . . . . . Pei-Chi Su  
Lighting Design . . . . . Andrew David Ostrowski  
Sound Design . . . . . Elizabeth Atkinson  
Stage Manager . . . . . Kim Martin\*  
Managing Director . . . . . David Vinski  
Director of Production . . . . . Earl Hughes

*\*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers in the United States.*

# **FBI Girl: How I Learned to Crack My Father's Code**

## MAIN CHARACTERS

(All roles are played by adult actors;  
see note on page 7)

**MAURA CONLON:** ages 8-14; extremely shy, notices everything, wants to be an FBI agent like her dad.

**JOE CONLON:** 40s; serious FBI agent, a private man of few words, dedicated to fighting crime, devoted to his family, especially Joey Jr.

**MARY CONLON:** 40s; “sunny, wind-in-her-hair Mary,” wife to Joe, mother to the Conlon brood, ex-beauty queen who dreamed of being a ballroom dancer, fighting for justice in this world and for her little boy.

**JULIE CONLON:** ages 6-12; Maura’s little sister, under the radar, taking it all in, wants to be like her big sister.

**JOHN CONLON:** ages 4-10; the under-the-radar little brother, sidekick of Julie.

**JOE CONLON JR. (JOEY):** birth-6 years; the baby of the family, beloved and loving, likes to tear up newspapers and drive (pie plates or cars) fast. Has Down Syndrome.

FATHER JACK CONLON: 30s; beloved brother to Joe and uncle to Maura, politically active priest, concerned with social issues, supportive of Maura, works in a troubled neighborhood/parish in Queens, New York.

GRAMMA MOLLY (MUTH): 60s; the Irish grandmother with a brogue, long-suffering and protective of her boys, will talk your ear off.

### OTHER ROLES PLAYED BY MAIN CHARACTERS

JOE CONLON: RICHARD PLUMB

MARY CONLON: ELIZABETH DUPONT

JOHN CONLON: MR. FLANIGAN, PETER NORDEN,  
PAUL RAMSEY, COACH BILL

JULIE CONLON: MRS. FLANIGAN, ADELE ROMERO,  
ROBERT, ANGELA

FATHER JACK: MATT HERSHEY, MR. SCHLATTER

GRAMMA MOLLY: SISTER RITA, SISTER HORTENSE,  
MOTHER PERRENIAL, WAITRESS

### SETTING

Los Angeles 1968-present and other places in the memory of Maura Conlon.

## NOTES FOR PRODUCTION

ALL ROLES should be played by adult actors.

Although this is the coming-of-age story of a young girl, it is intended primarily for an adult audience. The actress playing Maura needs to play both the preteen girl involved in the moment and at other times the grown woman who frames the play, looking back, commenting on the action along the way. It is hoped that the actress and director would make these transitions clear. The recommendation regarding casting also holds true for the actors playing her siblings, Julie and John, since they also double as adults.

The same is especially true for the actor playing Joe Jr. While it might be interesting to see this part played by an actor with Down Syndrome, it is not what I intended. The actor who played Joe Jr. in the first production had been trained as a dancer, his physicality, combined with his heart and intelligence, created a true, respectful, and sensitive portrayal of Joey Conlon.

As far as DOUBLING, the specific combination has been suggested. If there is room in your budget, you could add two more actors, to share some of the roles, allowing MARY and JOE CONLON, along with MAURA and JOEY to play only themselves. Doubling as specified is recommended, but for very large casts it is possible to cast actors in the smaller roles.

Finally, this is a nostalgic piece. Have fun bringing back the 1960s and 1970s in the design elements. Feel free to depart from realism as needed. The scene design should facilitate a seamless movement of the action.



# ACT ONE

## PROLOGUE

*(A dark bedroom. “Spicy” FBI MUSIC from a 1960’s television show begins as each aspect of the room comes into view. In the center of the bedroom is a bed. To the right of the bed is a window, which is cracked open, letting in the soft night air. Curtains blow gently toward the bed. MAURA CONLON sits on the bed looking through a box full of papers, photographs, files. She finds a small notebook and a flashlight. MAURA speaks directly to the audience.)*

MAURA. The memory of the child always sees by way of the heart. *(She picks up the flashlight and snaps it on.)* I knew with all the certainty of my seven-year-old heart, that the world is a dangerous place...packed full of criminals. *(SOUND of THREE SHOTS fired as if from a TV show.)* It was my father’s job, Special Agent Joe Conlon, to keep them out of the house. It was my job, Special Agent in Training Maura Conlon, to keep him under surveillance. Nothing gets past me. Although I don’t understand everything, I record everything he says and does in the hopes that someday...I might. *(Opens her log.)* There are three rules of investigation every agent must learn. First: notice everything. Second: don’t

call attention to yourself. Third: write everything down. (*Reading from LOG.*) Los Angeles, California, 1968. My stomach is rumbling, because it is time for dinner, but I am on the lookout. From my position, peeking out of my bedroom window, I notice a pattern: (*As she reads from the log, each thing happens.*) At six o'clock sharp, a black car rounds the corner of Jacaranda Drive, makes a left turn onto Margaret Rae Drive and a right turn into our driveway. (*HEADLIGHTS streak across the curtained windows.*) At 6:01 Special Agent Joe Conlon emerges from the car.

(*With the SOUND of a CAR DOOR opening and slamming, a FLASH OF WHITE LIGHT SNAPS like a mug shot onto JOE CONLON. He moves as MAURA describes.*)

MAURA (*cont'd*). At 6:01 and 10 seconds, he removes his black FBI hat and walks towards the house in his black FBI trousers. The sleeves are rolled up on his white, button-down shirt. His black FBI jacket is neatly folded over his arm. He loosens his black FBI tie. At 6:01 and 15 seconds, Agent Conlon enters the premises. If everything is quiet, he heads straight for the ash-blond dresser in his bedroom, where he stashes his comb, ChapStick, and FBI badge in the upper right-hand drawer. In the upper left-hand drawer he stashes his gun, which I NEVER see, but can feel the power it has to fight all evil in the world, vibrating all the way down the hall to my bedroom. (*Picks up the book.*) Where I am reading *The Clue in the Crumbling Wall*, the latest Nancy Drew Mystery. It is not as exciting as the mystery of Joe Conlon, but I

think he will be proud that I am holding a book so advanced for my age. (*Eyes peering at JOE over the top of the book.*) At 6:02, Joe Conlon enters and locks the windows, behind the yellow daisy lace curtains. Twice.

JOE. I have something to ask you.

MAURA. Nancy's just about to crack the case.

JOE. I am asking if you want to hit some balls down at St. Bede's field in fifteen minutes. (*He waits a millisecond then turns and walks away.*)

MAURA. His invitation comes like a dandelion that I wish upon, its feathers blowing in the wind. But he never asks twice, so I don't waste time. (*To JOE.*) Can I be in charge of the mitts? (*JOE reaches into his pocket and hands her a small key. She turns, holding it up to the audience by the tips of her fingers.*) The key is silver like the fish Mom cooks Friday nights, and it fits perfectly, popping the trunk of Dad's FBI car with a loud snap. Heat rises from the inside of the trunk, releasing a serious smell, blue, like the cannons exploding in the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland. There are four baseball mitts. Dad's black and oily one stitched with white shoelaces, mine, that says Micky Mantle on it and Julie and John's, two shrimpy junior mitts. Swimming in the creases of the leather mitts are golden shells, hundreds of them everywhere, piled in mounds, filling the entire trunk. The shiniest one stares up at me. (*As she reaches into the trunk to pick one up, we hear BANG BANG BANG. We see THE SHADOW of JOE shooting a silhouette of a man with a bulls-eye on his chest.*)

JOE. Do you want to play or not?

*(She drops it, grabs the mitts and meets JOE at the field where he is standing impatiently, with a bat and ball, his hand out waiting for the key's return. She gives him the key and he pockets it. He turns, heads for home plate, she shadows him, so quietly he doesn't know she's there, mirroring his every move until he turns around and nearly takes off her head with the bat, she ducks.)*

JOE *(cont'd)*. Come on, we don't have all day, get out in the outfield.

MAURA. Can I ask you something?

JOE. Make it quick. *(He lights up a cigarette.)*

MAURA. Those gold things in the trunk. Are they bullets, Dad? *(JOE puts the lit cigarette in his mouth, holding it tightly between his lips, squinting as he lifts the bat to his shoulders and performs the actions MAURA describes.)* I inhale deep into my mitt, it smells of criminals and cannons, fathers and baseball. I watch through the holes in the glove as Dad throws the ball up in the air and swings. He hits a high fly ball. I try to catch it, as if my life depended on it.

*(As soon as JOE hits the ball the lights BLACKOUT on him. THE FLASHLIGHT SNAPSHOT flashes on MAURA, frozen with her arms out stretched, face up, squinting into the sun. BLACKOUT.)*

**SCENE ONE**

*(The living room of the house on Margaret Rae Drive. EVERYONE except MAURA is sitting on the couch: JOE CONLON reading the Los Angeles Times, MARY CONLON, nine months pregnant and MAURA's siblings, JULIE and JOHN. MAURA is sprawled on the floor, still wearing her mitt. The TV is on. They are watching The F.B.I., nearing the end of this week's episode. EVERYONE watches the screen with focused, revered attention.)*

MAURA *(reads from her log, making notes)*. Eight p.m. Sunday night. The whole Conlon family piles into the TV room to watch their favorite show, starring the tannest movie star in Hollywood: Efrem Zimbalist Jr. *(Facing the TV.)* On the wall, hanging over the TV watching us watch, are two portraits. The first is the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who we all know. The second is a picture of J. Edgar Hoover, my dad's boss. His eyes are serious, like he has not had dessert for twenty years. *(The MUSIC from the TV signals a commercial.)* Dad? Um, Dad? Can I ask you a question? *(Silence. She waits, then launches in.)* Do you have to go on car chases and jump over buildings and handcuff gangsters like Inspector Erskine? *(JOE glances at his daughter, then snaps open the newspaper.)* That's okay, Dad. You don't have to answer me with your voice. I know FBI agents communicate in code. Just signal me with your eyes. *(He glances at her over the top of the paper, back to the paper.)* I guess that information is top secret, huh?

JOHN. How come Maura gets to have her baseball mitt on? (*JOE's eyes snap over the newspaper at MAURA.*)

JULIE. I'm hungry. Can I have a Cream-a-ling donut?

MARY. You've had your dinner and ice cream for dessert.

The show is almost over, then bedtime. For everyone.

JOE. What is your baseball mitt still doing in here?

MAURA. Billy Romero says FBI kids get nabbed all the time.

MARY. No one's going to get nabbed.

MAURA. Dad's the best FBI agent EVER.

JULIE. When you have lunch with Inspector Erskine tell him his show is better than *Captain Kangaroo*.

MARY. Your father will be sure to do that.

JOHN. I want my mitt.

JOE. Why don't you put that mitt back where it belongs? (*The commercial is over, FBI MUSIC signals the epilogue. JOE puts down newspaper to watch.*)

MAURA. It's time for the "Ten Most Wanted"! (*MAURA starts breathing into her mitt in her excitement as the SOUND builds.*)

MARY. Maybe you shouldn't watch this part, Maura.

MAURA. But this is my favorite part! (*MAURA continues breathing into the mitt, starting to hyperventilate.*)

JULIE. John's touching me with his foot.

JOHN. She's leaning on me!

MARY. Sit a little closer to me, John.

MAURA. Armed and dangerous, does that mean with golden bullets? Dad?

JOE. The inspector means you should play it smart, or you'll get hurt.

MAURA. What does playing it smart mean?

JOE. It means what it means. I can't tell you what it means.

MAURA. But...if I don't know what it means, how will I know if I'm playing it smart?

JOE (*after a pause*). Avoiding dangerous areas is one way to play it smart.

MAURA (*stares at him, then repeating slowly with meaning*). "Dangerous areas..." (*Long pause, then in a quiet voice.*) Uh, Dad. Dad? What are...dangerous areas?

MARY. This could be what's been giving her those nightmares.

*(MAURA grabs her notebook and mouths the words as she writes "Dangerous Areas." Then, EVERYONE focuses on the TV as the "Ten Most Wanted" plays, flashing the faces of criminals on the screen.)*

MAURA (*to the audience, in between hyperventilating*). I force myself to look the criminals in the face. Number ten looks hungry, like he could eat you like a Cream-a-ling donut. Number nine has scars and bruises and a crooked nose. Eight's eyes are watery and silver like steak knives. Seven's smiling, like he's got a secret he's never going to tell. Six, five and four are a little blurry...three is... (*She continues watching through her mitt, getting lightheaded.*)

JOE. What in God's name is she doing with that mitt? (*He gets up and grabs the mitt out of her hand just as MAURA is about to pass out, shutting off TV.*) I've never seen a house like this in all my life.

MAURA. But, Dad, he said, armed and dangerous! How do you avoid dangerous areas if your job is to capture dangerous criminals? I don't want you to get hurt!

MARY. Maura, come on now, don't let your imagination get the best of you. No one is going to get hurt. Now, bedtime! (*MARY lifts herself and her huge belly out of the couch and immediately has a contraction.*)

JOE. Now put this where it belongs. (*He throws the mitt to MAURA and starts to walk out of the room.*) Never in all my life.

MARY. Joe, I think we're going to need Mrs. Flanigan to sit with the children. (*JOE pauses at the doorway. MARY smiles at him. JOE reaches for his keys.*)

MAURA. Being a special agent's partner allows you to also speak in code. Mom's is not as confusing as Dad's. It always leads to bedtime and a kiss good night. Joe Conlon's code gets more complicated when an agent working undercover, with the same name, arrives with a code none of us can read.

## SCENE TWO

(*JOE CONLON returns with a bassinet, which he places in front of MAURA. He moves upstage to join MARY at the kitchen table, although instead of sitting, he paces.*)

MAURA (*looking into the bassinet*). His skin is light and soft like Jell-O. His eyes are blue like robins' eggs. And his hair—is red like a clown's. Mom says, it figures, he's the most Irish looking of the bunch. But her eyes are red when she says this. (*MARY picks up the baby,*



*feeding him quietly. MAURA watches her, then turns to watch JOE who is silently staring into his coffee cup. The PHONE rings.)*

JOE. Here we go again.

MAURA. I'll get it!

JOE. I got it. *(He answers the phone and talks in low whispers, then puts the phone down and stands over MARY.)*  
He wants to talk to you.

MARY. Do you mind feeding him?

*(JOE is silent as he picks up the baby and tries to feed him. MAURA is by his side, absorbing everything.)*

MAURA *(trying to give helpful information to JOE)*. His tongue is thicker than most babies'. That's what the doctor says. He'll be able to drink better when that condition goes away.

*(JOE looks at her, says nothing, brings the baby to MARY, hands him off, pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, lights one. MARY takes over feeding the baby, the phone cradled in her neck. She murmurs one-word answers to the doctor. The air is thick with unspoken tension.)*

MARY. Yes. That's right. Yes. I understand.

MAURA *(suddenly bursts into song and spins)*. "The Hills Are Alive With the Sound of Music!" *(She keeps spinning.)*

JOE. Stop that, you're going to make yourself dizzy. This one. Never in all my...

MAURA (*falls to the floor, she can't keep her head up*).

But it's not me—it's the world that's spinning— spinning out of control!

JOE. In all my life.

(*JULIE and JOHN come charging in.*)

MAURA. Shhh! Mom's talking to the doctor. Again. (*They all stare to look at MARY, who murmurs once more.*)

MARY. Yes, Doctor. Thank you. (*MARY hangs up the phone. The KIDS turn to her, waiting for some news. More silence, then MARY wipes her eyes, blows her nose.*) Maura, will you and Julie lay out your St. Bede's uniforms for tomorrow, with your brown sweaters? (*MARY brings the baby back to the bassinet, lies him in it. The KIDS watch. MARY looks up, sees them staring at her, tries to hide her sadness, smiles at them.*) School tomorrow.

MAURA. I think I'm going to throw up. Can I stay home and help you with the new baby? (*The PHONE rings again.*)

JULIE & JOHN. I got it!

JOE. I got it. (*They watch him answer the phone. MARY catches his eye. JOE turns his back on them as he talks.*)

MARY. How about a little music? (*MARY turns on the console; a show tune comes on, then sitting she sees the KIDS staring at her.*)

MAURA. Want me to bake you a chocolate cake on my Suzy Homemaker?

MARY. Maybe tomorrow, after school. Did you put out your uniforms, like I asked? (*She picks up the baby again, looks at him, smiles, buries her head in his*

*tummy, then lifts her head, laughing.)* Someone needs to be changed, I think. Joe, I'll be right back.

*(JOE hangs up the phone, and follows her into the other room. The three KIDS sit on the couch and wait. The PHONE rings a third time, they all jump up but MAURA reaches the phone first. LIGHTS OUT on JOHN and JULIE, a LIGHT FLASH/SNAP SHOT ON MAURA.)*

MAURA. Hello? *(She immediately pulls the phone away, holds it to her stomach, then back to her ear.)* Yes...Sister...Rita. *(Tries to call, but can only whisper.)* Mom...

*(MARY enters and MAURA holds the phone out to MARY, who looks at her puzzled. MAURA shakes her head, horrified. MARY puts the baby in the bassinet and takes the receiver.)*

MARY. Hello?

*(LIGHTS UP ON SISTER RITA, a kindly, pre-Vatican II nun with a brogue.)*

SISTER RITA. Mrs. Conlon, this is Sister Rita of St. Bede's speaking. Maura's second-grade teacher.

MAURA *(looking into the bassinet, talking to baby JOEY).* That's my teacher on the phone.

MARY. Yes, Sister.

SISTER RITA. Let me first say that Maura is perfectly behaved at school. An absolute angel. Although, she is... very quiet.

MAURA. And I know what she's saying.