

NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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AUGUST 2021

Hello, Siblings,

As a fine arts major, back when, one of the key discussions in many of my classes was how a chosen medium—say painting in oils or making a silk screen—carried a unique signature or characteristics and that the meaning/significance of every piece created was inextricably intertwined with the chosen medium.

The phrase “the medium is the message” was coined by Marshall McLuhan in his 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. What McLuhan intended this to mean aside, the basic concept quickly permeated the studio arts.

Resistance was futile. Fighting with your media would only lead to tears. Expecting a silk screen to look like an etching would be silly. Painting with acrylic paints should have a different look and feel than an oil painting.

I eventually moved on from most of my studio art career, but this learning has followed me from career to career, including writing, and even how we conduct business.

For me, a simple example is the difference between using a word processor and writing longhand. Are you someone who enjoys writing longhand? I don’t do it often for fiction, but all of my journals are written on paper, and I feel very different about the process and the content, entranced by the sound of the pen on paper and moving my hands. However, much as I enjoy the experience, I also give a prayer of thanks for word processing. I would never have become a published author without it.



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President's Letter, continued

I was struck anew by McLuhan's phrase when the pandemic hit hard and – desperate for ways to reconstruct meeting in person – we turned to digital meetings. Although not new in the world of high-tech business environments, many people had never used them.

Not surprisingly, it quickly became clear that digital meetings were a very poor substitute for meeting in person when it came to warmth, individual conversations, and the magic of bumping into someone . . . I quickly realized that this new medium was never going to replace many aspects of engaging directly. However, if I took a digital meeting for what it was and not as a replacement, I found a lot to like. It was different, of course, with its own pros and cons, and I needed to accept those for what they were.

Much to my surprise, we gained new members due to using technologies such as Zoom. By establishing events and gatherings that were tailor-made for Zoom, the benefits were clear. For example, our Drop-In Writing Sessions, started by Mysti Berry, followed a simple format of saying hi, writing while on mute, and then saying goodbye. I took those over, and we now offer three sessions a day, Monday through Friday, and usually one session on Sunday. We have a band of loyal attendees who have made new friends and writing connections and produced a number of finished short stories and novels.

I have also had a number of people tell me that they were finally attending our events again after many years of not coming. Almost everyone mentions not having to commute to meetings, of course, but many appreciate the ability to see so many people coming together.

We have been able to attract speakers for our events who could not have participated if we had to pay for their flights, hotels, and so forth. Recently, our attendance has been populated with people from the UK, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and across the US. I know many of our members have also participated in meetings offered by other Sisters in Crime chapters and Sisters in Crime National.

With all this additional exposure and sharing, the SinC NorCal board has been active in making certain that we maintain benefits for our users. Drop-in writing is for members only. Event recordings are in the Members Only section of our website.

A few months ago, it appeared that in-person meetings would be back very soon. It seems we are taking a cautious step back from that, but I am confident the current resurgence is temporary. Meanwhile, we continue to figure out the balance of in-person meetings and digital meetings, including if there is a way to offer events that combine the benefits of both – a multi-media experience!

President's Letter, continued

If you have suggestions about new events or how to improve our events, or if you want to help out, please let us know.

Looking forward to seeing you in person, online, and everywhere in between.

Sincerely,

Susan Bickford (she, her, hers)

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal

SinC NorCal Chapter Member Benefits

Member of our members-only groups.io email list(s)
Monthly member events and gatherings
Your book cover on the Our Members' Books carousel on the website
Listed as a member on the public page of the website
Access to event recordings in our members-only section of the website
Option to be part of speaker events with our Speakers Bureau
Join our daily Drop-In Writing sessions or other meetings set up for members
Find out about events held by other chapters
Showcase events for recent publications, twice a year
Quarterly newsletter
Hanging out with people who love and write Crime Fiction!!
And more . . .

Plus all the benefits of being a member of the national Sisters in Crime organization



**... to our newest members
(joining SinC NorCal from
January 1 through June 30,
2021)**

Barbara Boughton
Virginia Burns
Karen Catalona
Lou Cook
Chris Dreith
Sheila English
Laura Fischer
Deborah Greenberg
Chris Knoblauch
Melanie Mauldin
Josephine Mele
Pamela A. Moore
Kenya Numan
LJ. Roberts
Kristen Tate
Neeraja Viswanathan
Dänna Wilberg
Tanya Wilkinson

Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, August 7, 12:00–1:30 p.m.

Feminism and the Mystery, with Sujata Massey (via Zoom)

Strong, gutsy female protagonists are a stereotype of modern mystery fiction set in the 1970s onward. But before then, women were rarely able to have careers that would put them into a crime-solving context. How do we write strong historical women sleuths who are still believable for their times? Agatha Award-winning novelist Sujata Massey's career as a features writer for the Baltimore Evening Sun played a big role in creating an authentic feeling for her mystery series set in Japan that began with *The Salaryman's Wife* and continued for ten more books. Her interest in cultural conflict and the roles women played in Asian historical events resulted in her Perveen Mistry series, set in 1920s Bombay, inspired by India's first woman lawyer. The internationally-bestselling series is in the process of being optioned for television.

Saturday, September 11, 12:00–2:00 p.m.

Writing Your Best Book Panel (via Zoom)

Who doesn't want to write the best book possible? Join us to find out how. Moderated by Janet Rudolph (Editor of *Mystery Readers Journal*), this panel features S.A. Cosby (*Blacktop Wasteland* and *Razorblade Tears*), Laurie R. King (the Mary Russell/Sherlock Holmes series), Jess Lourey (the Mira James mystery series), and Jacqueline Winspear (the Maisie Dobbs series), discussing the decisions they made that helped them write their best book possible. Sponsored jointly with MWA NorCal, this event promises to provide an abundance of advice, assurances, and anecdotes.

Saturday, October 16, 9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Getting the Best Bang for your Book (via Zoom)

Our all-day promotions workshop will be emceed by our former NorCal VP Mariella Krause. We'll start the day with *Book Promotion 101* insights from writing coach and marketing practitioner Anne Janzer. We'll continue with a *How I Succeeded at Book Promotion* panel with insights from authors Rhys Bowen, Heather Haven, Naomi Hirahara, and Sheldon Siegel. Then we'll deep-dive into author newsletters with Gigi Pandian and Michelle Chouinard, Amazon and Facebook ads with Alex Peche, and book trailers with Lisa Towles. Registration information will be available soon on our website. Cost: \$35 for members and non-members.

Look for more details for events on our website under Chapter Events.

About 3 weeks before the event, members will receive Zoom and Eventbrite registration info via email.

In Case You Missed It . . .

If you weren't able to attend our recent events, here's what you missed. Members can find recordings of these events in the Members Only section of our website.

May Meeting - Creating a Setting Where Your Characters Can Live and Breathe, with Mary Anna Evans

Writer and university professor Mary Anna Evans told us that the setting of a book or story is one way to make the reader "feel something." But she cautioned that we should avoid static description when we can weave story and characterization into establishing the setting. It is the telling details that are most important to the story. Mary Anna took us through a haiku exercise to practice setting description in few words and read us an excerpt from her novel, *Burials*, from her long-running Faye Longchamp series.



June Meeting - Building Character, with Leslie Budewitz

To popular, prolific mystery writer Leslie Budewitz, "character" is defined as a person or the person's essential nature, often thought of as their moral center, revealed by decisions and choices, especially those made under stress. Leslie recommended a multitude of strategies and resources to get to know your characters before you put them in a novel and even provided us with a handout with key character traits, references (books and websites), and personality classification systems.

July Meeting - Get Your Murder Scene Right, with Judy Melinek, MD, and T.J. Mitchell

Dr. Judy Melinek and her husband, T.J. Mitchell, educated us on forensic pathology and how it can be used in crime fiction. Some of the subjects covered: medical examiners vs. coroners, reportable deaths, cause vs. manner of death, autopsy basics and tools, death scene investigation, time of death, and blunt vs. sharp trauma. The pair also discussed how the job is similar to, and different from, what we see on TV, as well as the biggest errors crime writers make. They recommended several resources for accurate information from specialists and did a reading from their book, *Working Stiff: Two Years, 262 Bodies, and the Making of a Medical Examiner*.



Self-Care for Writers

by Lisa Towles



Do you ever feel like querying, submitting, and constantly searching for a publisher or agent is like always being hungry and rarely being fed? Well, there's more than just a publishing contract that can feed the longing of a writer's soul.

"Happiness comes from what we do. Fulfillment comes from why we do it." - Simon Sinek

Why do you write? Do you work a bleeder of a day job and write novels on the side because you crave a creative outlet? Are you retired from a successful career and finally diving into the novel that's been haunting you for decades? Are you a travel blogger touring the world, or have you always written, since childhood, as a means of escape?



We read a lot about self-care on things like yoga websites, in spirituality magazines, but rarely do I see this guidance slanted toward the writing path. And there's more to self-care than yoga and massages. It's about tuning in and being real with ourselves about our dreams, our capacity, our limits, and our needs.

The writing life comes with lots of perks—freedom, flexibility, creative expression, and eccentricities are more than welcome. But what about the challenges we face, such as loneliness, disappointment, burnout, and overwhelm? Exhaustion, frustration, and unmet expectations? No one ever talks about the emotions we repress to prevent rejections from derailing us. We develop grit and tenacity, and those coping mechanisms are mission-critical survival tools. And rejections aren't without value either because they're evidence of productivity and courage. You can't get rejected if you're not writing and putting your work out there. But what happens to our hearts and souls when we receive a rejection (or hundreds of them) . . . or get nothing back at all? Does something die inside us, or is a new level of persistence born, making us even more unstoppable? Either way, writers need emotional support, and not just here and there. We need it consistently.

Self-Care for Writers, continued

Having a plan for your writing path and future is great. And having the energy and drive to execute that plan is even better. But at some point, your culture of multitasking can easily turn to self-sabotage and overwhelm, resulting in a pattern of ignoring your needs. Ilene Strauss Cohen from *Psychology Today* writes about this in her article, “What It Really Means to Take Care of Yourself” (April 23, 2021). The writing path is often deadline-driven. How far will you go to meet a writing goal? My benchmark is if I need coffee to stay up late enough to write, I’m too tired. Go to bed!

Admit it – the process of creation is exhausting. We need mental rest from the constant, micro-decision-making required for writing and outlining complex stories, not to mention the decisions and strategy needed to navigate the ever-changing publishing landscape. Writing is solitary and often lonely. It’s easy to feel depressed, unworthy, and invisible after a long string of rejections. Many of us write stories and novels in addition to sustaining demanding day jobs, consulting, and family responsibilities. We manage multiple workloads, juggling way too many things, and God knows we haven’t had a vacation in over a year. We need to regularly restore, replenish, and revive our creative spirit. How do we do that?



Self-Care Habits for Writers

1. **Take a break:** Take a day or two off if you’ve been pushing yourself hard and feel burned out, depressed, uninspired, or resentful. Or if you’re stuck and don’t know how to move forward with your story, take two weeks or even a month off to give your mind some space from it. Work on another project or start something completely new.
2. **Take care of your vessel:** Stretch your writing muscles – back, neck, arms, hands – and cover the basics like food and hydration.
3. **Set small, reasonable goals:** That way you can meet them easily, and small successes lift the spirit.
4. **Celebrate your wins:** Even small wins – buy yourself a present.
5. **Acknowledge and grieve your losses:** Talk to friends, family, or your writing connections, or use journaling to validate your feelings, whatever they are.

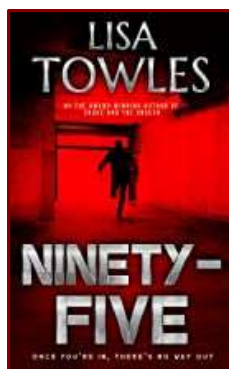
Self-Care for Writers, continued

6. **Say no:** Boundaries are an effective form of self-care because they demonstrate self-respect and awareness of our capacity. Saying no also demonstrates our self-awareness and attunement to our higher needs.
7. **Ask for help** when you need it: From a writing coach, an editor, proofreader, or marketing consultant.
8. **Get more sleep:** So many benefits here, to physical and also emotional/mental wellness.
9. **Fresh air:** Spending time outdoors and in nature is a great way to chill and breathe and give space to your day.
10. **Community:** Don't always write alone. Talk to a writing companion about your writing dreams, your current projects, and your progress. Join a SinC NorCal write-in, a critique group, or find a writing partner. Even during a pandemic, this can be done virtually.
11. **Perfect your writing habitat:** Where do you write? On the floor in the dark with your computer on your lap? Even if your ergonomic position needs adjusting, you can still bring a sense of comfort to your writing habitat with a candle, comfortable slippers, and a cozy chair. When it comes to comfort, details matter! We already keep track of so many of those details with our stories, characters, jobs, and families. Now, it's time for yourself.



If we can reserve a bit of the energy we usually give everyone else and give it to ourselves, what kinds of magic could result?

Lisa Towles has six books in print, and her latest thriller, *Ninety-Five* will be released from Indies United Publishing in November 2021. Her thrillers have won IPPY, NYC Big Book Awards, and Best Book Awards from American Book Fest. She has an MBA, and she works in the tech industry. Read about Lisa at <http://lisatowles.com> or about *Ninety-Five* at <http://indiesunited.net/lisa-towles>



Living the Fiction

by Heather Haven



Being involved in what you write is one of the keys to being a good writer. But it can get out of hand. When I started the first book of the Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries, *Murder is a Family Business*, the story included finding a kitten. I discovered I couldn't write those scenes without becoming a little misty-eyed. I think a lot of that was due to the fact the feline in the story was based on my cat, Tugger, whom I loved and adored. He's been gone to that great catnip haven in the sky for over eleven years, and I still love and adore him.

Wait. Misty-eyed.



The scene where Tugger was found by our protagonist in an abandoned phone booth in the rain, a frightened, drenched kitty, could never be written with completely dry eyes. This stayed with me no matter how many rewrites. I didn't think much of it at the time, but hoped it was an indication that I was a true writer rather than needing therapy. And I'm sticking to that.

Fast forward. As I was writing the 3rd book of the series, *Death Runs in the Family*, both Tugger and another cat, Baba, are catnapped. In the story, they're put into their carriers, placed into the back of a station wagon, and are being driven to Las Vegas. As I write cozies, they would, of course, be rescued. That was the plan. However, before I could write the rescue scenes, something happened in real life that took me away from the computer. For three long days! I was good the first two. I would tell myself, this is just a story. But no matter how often I repeated the phrase, each time there was this little ping that would strike at my heart.

In the middle of the third night, I sat bolt upright in bed. It was three a.m. I had done nothing but toss and turn. I had to face it. I wasn't going to get any sleep until I did something about the cats. My jerky movements and noisy sighing woke up my husband, who wanted to know what was wrong. I said, "I have got to get those cats out of the back of the station wagon. They haven't had any food or water for three days!" "Whatever you say, honey." Then he rolled over and went back to sleep. You can't be married to a writer for long without learning their ways. So I got up, went to the computer, and wrote the chapters where not only are the cats rescued, but they get salmon, water, and lots of cuddling. Within the storyline it had been probably six to eight hours. But in my heart it had been three long days. I went back to bed at seven a.m. wondering how Eric Knight wrote the story *Lassie, Come Home* and managed to get some sleep.

Living the Fiction, continued

I thought (hoped) this affliction only surfaced when there were animals in my stories. Unfortunately, not so. The fourth book, *DEAD...If Only*, has several chapters taking place on a thirty-foot cabin cruiser in the Gulf of Mexico during a hurricane. Many's the night I would wake up seasick from the ten- and twenty-foot fictional waves pounding the boat. The fifth book, *The CEO Came DOA*, revolves around a Colombian drug called Devil's Breath, a drug which reportedly takes a victim's willpower away and even kills in strong enough doses. You can succumb to this drug through swallowing, inhalation, or skin absorption. In short, pretty versatile, pretty lethal. Naturally, as I was writing this book, we went on a Caribbean cruise that docked in Colombia for a day. I was a nervous wreck. I almost didn't get off the ship. After hubby finally talked me into going ashore, I clung to him like a three-year-old child to a teddy bear. This was a little difficult when one of us had to go to the baño, or bathroom. I'm not sure what I did to international relations, but we took solace in the fact I was only there for one day.

I am currently writing the eighth book of the series, *The Drop Dead Temple of Doom*, set in the Guatemalan jungle. Woven into the story are the Yellow Dart Frog, one of the most poisonous amphibians in the world, and the Fer de Lance viper, one of the most poisonous snakes in the world. I threw in some pumas and jaguars just to round things out. Lately, I have been reluctant to step outside my front door. You never know what's going to pounce.



Heather Haven is an award-winning mystery author. Her series include the Silicon Valley-based Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries, its offshoot, Love Can Be Murder Novellas, The Snow Lake Romantic Suspense Novels, and Manhattan's trail-blazing WWII lady shamus in The Persephone Cole Vintage Mysteries. *Murder under the Bigtop*, a Ringling Brothers' Circus standalone docu-mystery, and an anthology, *Corliss and Other Award-Winning Stories*, round out her work. You can learn more about her at www.heatherhavenstories.com



Unidentified What?

by
Camille Minichino

It's hard to stay grounded these days, even for an earthbound crime fiction writer.

Like me, you were probably glued to the TV as billionaire Sir Richard Branson and five others soared into space. Well, "to the edge of space," to be exact, only ~53 miles high; it's up to Jeff Bezos to go all the way, reaching more than 60 miles. *Editor's note: Jeff Bezos accomplished his mission, reaching an altitude of 66.5 miles).*

Maybe you were thinking they ought to find a better way to spend all that money. They could put it toward curing diseases, eliminating poverty. And how about Medicare for all! Bigger advances to noncelebrity writers! All worthy thoughts, as is the idea that scientific and technological progress is important in the long run.

But my immediate response? I watched the camera shots of the cabin's interior and thought: a perfect setting for a locked-room mystery! How about, *The Case of the Weightless Victim* or *Zero Gravity for the Money*.

Another recent event that brings to mind the opportunities for murder on other planets is the release of US Navy videos from earlier sightings of UFOs, now called UAP. Apparently, "Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon" sounds less threatening than an actual Object hurtling toward us. The distinction also allows for the interpretation that what was seen was hardly a "sighting," but simply the result of sensor errors, spoofing, or observer misperception.



Paranormal mysteries abound, as do ghostly hauntings—for example, Al Capone has been known to appear to disrespectful visitors at his funeral plot in an Illinois cemetery. But there are not many stories, fiction or nonfiction, that involve a UFO or a UAP as protagonist. Strangely, the few I've found, such as Stuart Gibbs's *Space Case*, about a murder on the moon, are middle-grade books.

Unidentified What? continued

Is it harder for adults to believe there's life on other planets than in ghosts wandering our own? Does "suspension of disbelief" end at that 60-mile marker?

I wonder if a trip to Roswell, New Mexico, would inspire a crime fiction writer.

In its Visitors Guide, Roswell wants to assure you there's more to the town than aliens. And yet, statues and images of a green "man" with those black leaf-like eyes are everywhere. The Welcome to Roswell sign on the road to town sports an add-on that looks like the O in UFO as we've come to know it. In the gift shop you can buy from a large assortment of UFO-themed items, including a dog bandana honoring Roswell, the "1947 UFO Crash Site."



If that doesn't inspire space-based crime fiction, I don't know what will.

Space trip anyone?

Camille Minichino has a Ph.D. in physics from Fordham University and teaches science at Golden Gate University and writing throughout the Bay Area. She has published more than 25 novels, as well as many short stories and nonfiction articles. Under her own name, she has published the Periodic Table Mysteries featuring retired physicist Gloria Lamerino, as well as the standalone, *Killer in the Cloister*, featuring Sister Francesca, and the nonfiction book, *How to Live with an Engineer*. As Margaret Grace, she writes the Miniature Mysteries, featuring Geraldine Porter and her 11-year-old granddaughter, Maddie. As Ada Madison, she has published the Professor Sophie Knowles Mysteries. And as Jean Flowers, she has launched the Postmistress Mysteries, with the third in the series released in July 2017. Camille is a Past President of SinC NorCal. Book #3 of her fifth series, the Alaskan Diner Mysteries by Elizabeth Logan, was released on June 1, 2021.

<http://www.minichino.com/>



Writers' Work: Nightmares and Fever Dreams

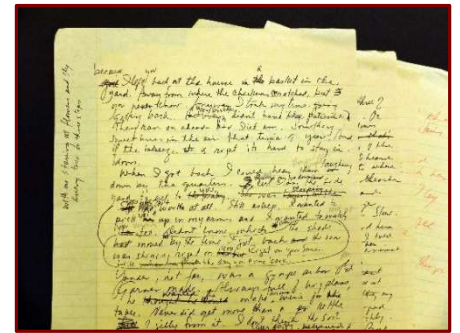
by Faye Snowden



When I was a younger writer, I'd make sure my work in progress was safe before checking for my wallet. Stacks of old manuscripts, diaries, and letters took up valuable space in my home. I threw nothing away. Away from home, images of fire or floods destroying every bit of writing I'd ever done plagued my dreams. When roaming the city with my laptop looking for good places to write, I ran disaster scenarios in my head. What if someone tried to snatch the backpack containing my laptop from me? Would I fight to the death?

Back then, the answer seemed obvious. It wasn't because I thought the writing was great. It's that I thought the writing was me; the words made me whole. What a nightmare it would be for any writer, I thought, to lose all that work. Or would it?

On Christmas Day in 1993, a wayward fireplace ember started a blaze that devoured the New York home of celebrated author Toni Morrison. Two weeks before the fire, Morrison won the Nobel Prize for literature. She received news of the fire immediately after the award ceremony. Morrison laughed about what she described as a "sneaky fire" in a 2015 NPR interview with Terry Gross. She had lost some manuscripts, and her children's report cards, she tells Gross, and an old jade bush that "...went up in a snap". Morrison lamented how she mourned that jade bush. Though we may have empathy for the report cards, and other memorabilia, writers and scholars focused on those manuscripts, especially *Beloved*, a novel considered to be literary, but with a plot born from murder. What a nightmare to think that earlier drafts were gone.



Beloved Draft



Ann Petry

Fifty-five years earlier, a pharmacist named Ann Lane left her home in Connecticut to move to Harlem with her new husband, George Petry, even though Old Saybrook had been home to her family for four generations. Once in Harlem, Petry studied the lives of her neighbors with a scientist's discipline. She noted how they lived and how they loved, what brought joy or caused pain. She saw every wound racism,

Nightmares and Fever Dreams, continued

sexism, and poverty left on their tired but hopeful spirits. Having written since she was a teenager, it was in Harlem that Petry traded her pharmacist coat for the pen once and for all. In 1946, *The Street* was published. The book was an instant hit, selling a million and a half copies and translated into French, Spanish and Japanese. Since the initial publication, the novel has repeatedly receded into the background before being rediscovered once again, the most recent edition published in 2019.

The main character, Lutie Johnson, is a single mother living in a rundown building on the street. Her desires are simply articulated as are the barriers keeping her from achieving them. She wants to escape the poverty and despair of the street. She wants a safe place to raise her son. Described as a stunningly beautiful woman, Lutie spends most of the novel dodging the clutches of men who think they deserve her just because they desire her, and a neighborhood snake-eyed madam who wants to exploit Lutie's beauty. Like Morrison's *Beloved*, murder is the fulcrum on which the entire tale turns.

Though Petry's writing couldn't be more different from Morrison's lyricism, she is still able to evoke empathy with the icy preciseness of her prose. Take a passage describing Lutie's terror as she ascends endless stairs to see her new apartment, the lecherous landlord close on her heels:

She didn't have to turn around, anyway; he was staring at her back, her legs, her thighs. She could feel his eyes traveling over her – estimating her, summing her up, wondering about her. As she climbed the last flight of stairs, she was aware that the skin on her back was crawling with fear. Fear of what? she asked herself. Fear of him, fear of the dark, of the smells in the halls, the high steep stairs, of yourself?

The reader can almost feel the landlord's hot gaze as he watches Lutie climb.

Similar to Morrison in circumstance but not in volume (most of Morrison's manuscripts survived the fire, including *Beloved*), a majority of Petry's papers were not only destroyed, but purposely sabotaged. Imagine – shitty first drafts, old manuscripts, letters, diaries, marginalia, and research notes – gone. There was such a paucity of information remaining of Petry's life work that her daughter had to become a literary detective to find enough material for a biography.

The author wasn't a victim of fire.

She wielded the flame herself by destroying most of her own papers. She redacted some, and to others added misleading information to confuse what she thought of as prying eyes. The woman who had studied the residents of Harlem and offered them to us in her most celebrated novel said she felt about people she didn't know invading her privacy "...as though I were a helpless creature

Nightmares and Fever Dreams, continued

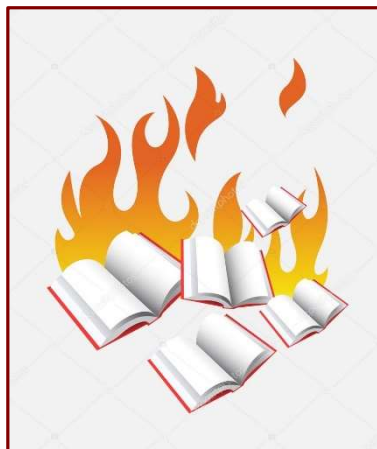
impaled on a dissecting table for public viewing” (Cloutier, Literary Hub). Other than what she had published, she had no interest in saving her papers.

Now that I’m older, my allegiance lies more with Petry, though not for the same reasons. I no longer define myself by my writing. I feed the recycle bin with my old paper manuscripts when I find them lurking in the deep corners of my house. They were just part of the work, a means to an end. Now I understand why the most loss Morrison felt as a result of the fire was for the report cards, and the destroyed jade bush.



Ann Petry, Later in Life

Faye Snowden writes noir mysteries, poems and short stories from her home in Northern California. Her short story, “One Bullet, One Vote,” was selected as one of the best American mystery and suspense stories of 2021. Novels include the Richard T. Marvel detective series and the Louisiana Killing series featuring homicide detective Raven Burns. The novel *A Killing Rain*, will be out next year. Faye has a master’s degree in English literature and has been awarded several writing fellowships. She is a member of Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime, where she serves as Board Secretary for SinC National. She has participated on many writing panels, appeared as a guest lecturer in several university writing classes, and taught IT courses at the university level. Learn more about Faye at her website, www.fayesnowden.com.



Member Profile: Lou Cook

Nineteenth in a series to introduce our members to each other



Lou Cook recently joined SinC Norcal and is working on her second “Rabbit Noir” mystery, set in San Francisco. Welcome, Lou!

Stiletta: You’re new to Sisters in Crime. What motivated you to join?

Lou Cook: In the early 1980s, I returned to school to study interior design. Among three possible choices, Mount Vernon College was reputed to have the best interior design program in the Washington, DC area. I decided to go there, even though, for me, it had one big count against it: it was an all-women’s school. Why was this so terrible? Perhaps because I’m a product of the 60s (born in 1954) and remember the struggles to make schools such as Harvard, Yale, and other all-male schools open to women.

To my surprise, I loved the all-female environment! There were a lot of “non-traditional” aged students, returning to school after the kids had left home. They were very serious about studying, unlike the “traditional” aged young women. The all-women, all-ages environment made for a stimulating learning and social environment.

Consequently, when I discovered SinC, I didn’t hesitate. As members have already discovered, there nothing more fun than a roomful (or Zoomful) of lady writers! What a great group of women!

Stiletta: When and why did you decide to try your hand at writing a book?

LC: As my cousin Tom often remarks, we’re late bloomers. I did start writing at around 11 years old, but no one took me seriously, so I didn’t either. I took some (poor) creative writing classes in college, both at University of CT, Storrs, and at Reed College. At Reed, a thesis paper is part of senior year requirements to graduate. I arranged to do a creative thesis, rather than some boring old research thing. That fell apart, I dropped out of school, and went into radio for a few years.

The years flowed by, as they do. I wrote, now and then, for myself, usually poetry, and a few essays. Then Bunzini entered my life. He thinks quite a lot of himself, and he’s right. He’s The Rabbit, I am not. He began to expect things and we worked out a system. He makes “suggestions,” I do the work.



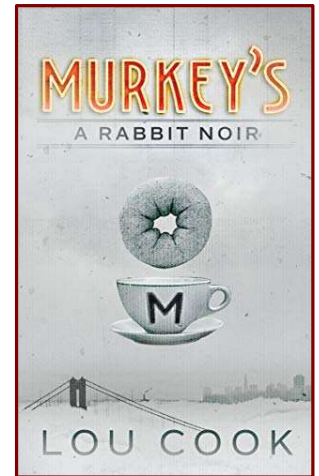
Mr. Bunzini

Member Profile: Lou Cook, continued

I wrote the first short stories during lunch breaks at my downtown desk job. Pretty soon, personal websites became a thing. Bunzini wanted a website, so I finally made him a website. Then, of course, there had to be something to put on the website. I pondered what to do. I thought of Charles Dickens. He had published his books as serials. Why couldn't I publish a chapter a month?

Three chapters into *Murkey's*, I figured why. For one thing, I'm not Charles Dickens! For another, I needed to learn how to figure out how to put the plot of a book together. I decided I had better write the whole thing first, then show it to the world. The years flowed by, work and life happened, but I kept writing. Finally, in 2019, *Murkey's* got out in the world.

Stiletta: Your first mystery, *Murkey's, A Rabbit Noir*, has been described by readers as "Pynchon meets Chandler meets L. Frank Baum" and "a delightful romp through the waterfront underbelly of San Francisco." How would YOU describe it?



LC: Rabbit Noir is fun and mystery and life on the foggy San Francisco docks as lived by The Rabbit, his spider pal, and their buddies: a hamster, a big dog, a goofy dog, a second rabbit, two pelicans, a reindeer. For Bad Guys, there are three moose. There is an essay on Rabbit Noir, found either on my website or on my Medium page.

Stiletta: What inspired you to write this book? Is it going to be a series?

LC: I guess it's obvious that none of this would have happened without The Rabbit. It is said that you need to find your subject. For me, that is true. The Rabbit is motivation, encouragement, and focus. There's nothing like a Rabbit, with a personality comparable to actor Edward G. Robinson, in your face, declaring, "Get to it, Bubb! Time to write!" His motto: B is for Best!

Recently, I finished the first draft of the second book in the Rabbit Noir series, *Guys and Donuts, Rabbit Noir 2*. I'm currently having fun refining plot turns and twists. When I start doubting, I can't explain how phenomenal it is to have Bunzini tell me to stop it and get back to work.

A favorite book is *Secrets of the World's Best-Selling Author: The Story-Telling Techniques of Erle Stanley Gardner*, by Francis L. Fugate and Roberta B. Fugate. The title is a little over the top, but the content is solid. Included is Gardner's wonderfully intricate outline of character types and detailed plot options. It's out of print, but available.

Stiletta: Tell us more about your inspirations for your animal characters, Bunzini and Webster?

Member Profile: Lou Cook, continued

LC: This is my excuse: when I was growing up, my Mom made up voices for some of our stuffed toys. In particular, her skill matured when my younger sister was small. Mom made up a voice and character for my sister's Raggedy Ann, and "Raggsey" became a part of the family milieu.

Bunzini's story is mentioned above. Webster came on the scene one evening when I was at the Safeway on Market Street in San Francisco, shortly before Halloween 1996. I was contemplating a glorious display of hand-puppet spiders, when I looked down at my hand and saw one of them had jumped into it. Who could resist? Not I! My original plan was to send Webster to my parents in Maine, where a jumping toy spider had been worn out by the grandkids. But Webbs and Bunz became such good friends, the plan was scrapped, and he remains a California spider.

I wrote a story about it, elaborating somewhat on the facts, which can be read on Bunzini.com, under the "A Short Story" tab. The short story of Bunzini and his entrance into my life is laid out in *Bunzini Comes Home*, available on Amazon.



Webster

Stiletta: Tell us about your work as a deckhand on San Francisco ferries.

LC: Working on the San Francisco Bay ferries is one of the best things to happen to me. After graduating from MVC, I worked as a commercial interior designer in Washington, DC. I continued to do so after moving to SF. Sitting behind a desk all day never suited me, but I didn't know there were options.

I discovered the ferries after I took a job in a small architectural office in Marin County. I began riding my bike to the Ferry Building and taking the "reverse commute" ferry to work. That ferry ride became the best part of my day – a small vacation twice a day. After a few of life's twists and turns, I finally figured out I could WORK on the ferry and get paid to be out on the water all day. I never looked back.

As for the work, 95% of the people I work with are great, and that makes the workday a pleasure. They are from all over the U.S. and the world, and from all kinds of experience. Working on boats and on the water, in all kinds of weather, suits me. It's hard physical work, so I keep in shape (this is important because in my 20s and 30s I had back problems – I was told by one doctor that I would "never iron or vacuum again" – but that's a whole 'nother story)! We get a lot of training, including the boats, the engines and other systems, medical, as well as navigation and weather.

Member Profile: Lou Cook, continued

Along with the work, I got interested in the history of the Bay and the Bay Area. Some of the real history plays a part in my book. I have worked with a number of people who grew up around the Bay. Some of their stories, stories that won't make it into any official histories, have become part of *Murkey's*. I also had fun making some stuff up. I'm a big fan of noir, and foggy docks and mystery are a natural combination when you know an "Edward G. Robinson" Rabbit.

Stiletta: You also enjoy photography – what are your favorite subjects and where do you post them?

LC: There are two favored subjects: first is my rabbit, Bunzini, and his buddy Webbs, the intellectual spider. Then there are the other "Guys" that have parts in the story. Plus, there many others, filling up my sofa at home. Read about "What Is a 'Guy'?" on Bunzini's website, Bunzini.com (of course)! My husband and I have done formal studio-style photo shoots with them (lighting, sets, everything). I also do casual snapshots, many of which are on Bunzini's Instagram page, BunziniEmpire.

The other subject I love is the San Francisco Bay. The true beauty of the bay is best experienced out on the water. It is different every day, all day. The changing weather and light provide unlimited opportunities to just enjoy the sights, or to take a photo of something that will never look that way again. My favorite time is when the fog rolls in over the Marin headlands or through the Golden Gate and dances around with the sunlight.

Stiletta: I understand the book *Cinderella* started your reading life. Please tell us how that happened.

LC: Before I could read, my sister, four years older, was learning. That made books "a thing" for me. I wanted in. At first, because of the repetition, I memorized the book she was learning to read. "Sandy ran down the street. He looked and looked. He wanted a home." Boring illustrations, boring story.

But, our small Connecticut town has a local bookstore, The Hickory Stick Bookshop, that we frequented. It's still in business. That is where I caught sight of *Cinderella*, cunningly placed on a low shelf near the door. I was completely entranced by the pictures. It was love at first sight and is the first object I truly lusted for. But Mom said no. I followed her around the bookstore, begging. No, no, no.

Then I had a brilliant idea: I promised, promised! to learn how to read, if only Mom would please, please let me take *Cinderella* home. My plan worked! Was I happy! I pored over those illustrations and did learn to read. I still have the book, though it is rather worse for wear after going through the hands of my three younger siblings.

Stiletta: What is your preferred writing environment?

Member Profile: Lou Cook, continued

LC: It has to be quiet. I like to write in one of two environments. In bed, with my laptop on a board angled up with a pillow, and a hardcover book for the mouse; or at my desk, where I have a large screen I connect to my laptop.

I use the second screen for open thesaurus pages, open research pages, photos, or the Scapple program. Scapple lets you make bubble diagrams, a skill I used for space planning in my interior design days. I think visually, and it is invaluable for working out plots, background ideas, plot changes and adjustment (which I'm doing right now), and keeping track of where you've been and where you need to go.

Stiletta: Tell us about your 2-minute radio spot on SF radio station KALW's "New Arrivals."

LC: I worked in public radio for several years, in Portland and Eugene, Oregon. I still love to listen. Recently KALW started a short (very short) little bit called New Arrivals. It gets inserted between programs and highlights local authors. I wrote and asked to be included and was accepted.

They have you record yourself on your phone in a quiet closet. You introduce yourself and have 45-55 seconds to read a bit from your book. It is a painfully short amount of time, but I took out a sharp ax and chopped up a scene from Murkey's to get it to fit.

Super helpful was the SinC video I had just watched. The author (Mary Anna Evans) did a fun exercise using haiku, and as I was chopping my scene to bits, I remembered to think "haiku." That really helped select the words I didn't "need" but keep the scene from falling apart. Thank you, SinC!!

If anyone is interested in contacting KALW, I can pass on the contact person's info.

Stiletta: Is there anything you would like to tell aspiring authors about self-publishing?

LC: Without self-publishing, I doubt I would have ever written anything as long as a book. Asking for help is not my best skill, but if it's up to me, I can do it. That goes way back to the doctor who changed my life, back when back pain was a major issue. After seeing several doctors who had nothing but bad news, I finally found one who told me, "There is nothing I can do for you. You'll have to do it yourself." My first thought was, "Well, if it's up to me, I can do it."

I'm a solitary person. Perfect for a writer, right? And I am a TMA (Too Many Aptitudes). I am interested in learning just about everything. After I wrote the book, I took it one step at a time. With a lot of internet searches, I found very helpful advice. I also found some duds, but pretty soon you learn to figure out who knows what they are talking about. I haven't had time to look into what SinC has, but there are some interesting resources here, too.

Member Profile: Lou Cook, continued

I figured out copyright, ISBN numbers, getting a cover done, how to format and self-publish ebooks and paperbacks on Amazon. I got the first hard copy back (so exciting), made several rounds of corrections (with the help of friends) until it was as close to perfect as I could make it.

I then moved on to getting it into IngramSpark. This was so bookstores (hopefully) could order it. For that, I hired a person to do the formatting. Boy, did that take a lot less time! I figured by then I knew enough about the process that I could have an educated conversation with someone. And I was so thrilled when our local bookstore, Bird & Beckett Books and Music in Glen Park, did order copies! Super exciting to see my book in a store! And the owner, Eric, is a wonderful, knowledgeable person. Stop by! It's a great little hidden SF neighborhood and the bookstore is two blocks from BART.

Someone told me once that the secret to getting up a really long hill is to not look too far ahead. Instead of being overwhelmed by how high the hill is, just take it one step at a time. It works.

Stiletta: What else would you like your fellow SinC NorCal members to know about you?

LC: I am looking forward to meeting more members, online and, fingers crossed, live and in person. After more than a year off due to Covid cutbacks, I have just started back to work on the ferries, sailing out of Pier 41 in San Francisco. Maybe I'll see some of you on the Bay while you are sailing to Sausalito for lunch or heading to Angel Island for a hike and the beautiful views.

If you are interested in reading more about work on the ferries (as well as some other subjects I've written about), I have some essays on Medium.

Along with his website, bunzini.com, Mr Bunzini has a Facebook page. There is a group shot of all the Guys filling up our sofa there. His Instagram page is [BunziniEmpire](https://www.instagram.com/BunziniEmpire), where you can see photos of the Guys in action. There is a Lou Cook Author page on Facebook, and my Twitter handle is @Lou4Cook, and of course there is LinkedIn.

Lou Cook was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.
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Member News



New and Upcoming Releases

Fatality with Forster by Katherine Bolger Hyde, book #5 in the Crimes with the Classics series, was released July 6 by Severn House.

Gigi Pandian's impossible crime short story, "The Locked Room Library," was published in the July/August 2021 issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. It's her EQMM debut, and the story leads the issue. You can read an excerpt of the story on the EQMM website at: <https://www.elleryqueenmysterymagazine.com/current-issue/story-excerpt1/>

Susan Bickford's short story, "Quarry," is in the SinC Guppies anthology, *The Fish That Got Away*, released June 9 by Wildside Press.

Jenny Carliss' short story, "Manny's Angel," appears in *Avenging Angelenos*, the anthology from our sister chapter in Los Angeles, released June 10 by Down and Out Books.

Lisa Towles signed with Indies United, an independent publisher, in June for the release of her new standalone thriller, *Ninety-Five*, due this November.

Dead Code by Glenda Carroll, book #3 in the Trisha Carson series, will be published October 27 by Indies United Publishing House.

Now You Don't See Me by Alec Peche, the first in a new paranormal thriller series featuring Michelle Watson, CIA case officer, was released July 15 by GBSW Publishing.

A Gingerbread House, a standalone thriller by Catriona McPherson, was released in ebook in July and will be released in hard copy on August 3 by Severn House.

Stolen Thoughts, a thriller by Tim Tigner which was released on May 1, is the follow-up to *The Price of Time*, which Amazon lists among the 100 Most Read Books on Kindle in 2019.

The Fog Ladies: In the Soup by Susan McCormick, book #3 in the San Francisco Cozy Murder Mystery series, will be released on October 4 by Wild Rose Press.

Murphy's Slaw by Elizabeth Logan (aka Camille Minichino), book #3 in the Alaskan Diner Mystery series, was released in June by Berkley.

Mary Adler's short story, "To Every Season," is in the SinC Guppies anthology, *The Fish That Got Away*, released June 9 by Wildside Press.

Member News, continued

New and Upcoming Releases (continued)

God Rest Ye, Royal Gentlemen by Rhys Bowen, book #15 in the Royal Spyness Mystery series, will be released on October 5 by Berkley.

Public Appearances (in person or virtual)

If you're in Las Vegas on November 12, look for Alec Peche signing books at Bally's. It's 20Books Vegas 2021 "Author Signing Day," featuring 250 all-genre authors on the Vegas Strip.

Susan McCormick will discuss her Fog Ladies cozy mystery series at the Capitol Crimes Book Club event on August 10, 7:00 p.m. (via Zoom). You can register at <https://capitolcrimes.wildapricot.org/>

Training Delivered

Margaret Lucke will be delivering her Mystery Writing class for Berkeley Extension this fall. The course explores the art, craft and business of writing crime fiction in its many forms, including detective stories (from cozy to hard-boiled), thrillers, and suspense. It is being offered online so you can attend no matter where you are. Classes will be held at 10:00 p.m. Wednesday evenings starting September 15. Details and registration can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/MysteryWriting2021>.

Amy Peele, who writes the Organ Transplant Mystery series, makes presentations to Academic Medical Centers around the country with big organ transplant programs. The transplant staff enjoys some moments of creativity sprinkled into their intensely dense clinical lives. Sessions have included UCSF, University of Michigan, and University of Kentucky, and she presented at NYU and the University of Iowa in July.

Awards and Recognition

Congratulations to Rhys Bowen for winning the Agatha for Best Historical Novel for *The Last Mrs. Summers*!

Congratulations to Ann Parker, who **won** the Foreword INDIES Bronze Award for Historical (Adult) Fiction! And for being finalist for the Will Rogers Medallion Award in the "Maverick" category. Winners will be announced at a ceremony in Fort Worth on October 23.

Congratulations to our chapter members who are nominated for Macavity Awards—specifically the Sue Feder Memorial Award for Best Historical Mystery: Rhys Bowen for *The Last Mrs. Summers*, Catriona McPherson for *The Turning Tide*, and Ann Parker for *Mortal Music*. Winners will be announced at Bouchercon.

Question of the Quarter



Have you given your characters any of your own skills, talents, hobbies, or professions (or those you wish you had tried)?

I gave Emily Cavanaugh, the protagonist of my Crime with the Classics series, my love of literature and of knitting and my knowledge of Russian. Her career as a professor of literature is my "road not taken" – what I might have done had I not started a family right out of college. Julia Morgan Wainwright, the protagonist of my short story "Trouble at Tor House" for the *Fault Lines* anthology, takes my love of architecture to a much higher level as an architectural historian. And the protagonist of my current WIP is a reference librarian – another career I might have enjoyed. ***Katherine Bolger Hyde***

Yes, I have. I was a journalist for better than 20 years and my protags in the Amy Hobbes Newspaper Mysteries and The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles work as editors in the print media. And Roz Duke, the protag in the Stained Glass Mysteries, is a stained glass artist, a hobby I'd love to take up. ***Michele Drier***

My mystery series features Dot Meyerhoff, a police psychologist. There's a lot in the books that is autobiographical and the stories are inspired by actual clients I know from my forty years in the field. On the other hand, Dot is younger, thinner than I am. She never gives up, which is a trait I have. But trust me, if I did what she does – breaking and entering, impersonating a public official, and assault with a deadly weapon – I would have lost my license. Her romantic interest (book #4 comes out in a few months so you can learn how that works out) is a doppelganger for my husband, Steve, whose entire life I plagiarized for the character of Frank. ***Ellen Kirschman***

I give my characters jobs I think would be fun: secondhand book dealer, personal shopper, collection curator at a free clothing project. Maybe not the cleaner at a caravan site (vacation trailer park), but even that would have its moments for someone as nosy as me about other people's lives. I just wrote about a student transport assistant (in *A Gingerbread House*) and enjoyed working out how to decorate a bus seat for a blind child's birthday. Bells and feathers, I reckoned. ***Catriona McPherson***

Definitely. At first it was to follow literally the "write what you know" mantra, so Dani O'Rourke is a professional fundraiser, art lover, and SF resident who loves Santa Fe, New York, black tie events, and a cat. The French village mysteries came later. By then, I was ready to include my love of France and all things French, and my taste for quirky but endearing people. ***Susan Shea***

My first novel's protagonist is better with numbers than with men – a skill/no-skill pair that I shared with her for a long time. I'm now slightly better with men, thanks to a very patient husband. She's a fraud investigator, and research for the book nearly convinced me to change my profession. ***Mysti Berry***

Question of the Quarter, continued

Absolutely! Lee Alvarez, the protagonist of the Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries, is a wannabe ballet dancer and does a barre every morning. How I wish I had the gumption to do that! Plus she's a black belt in karate. I mean, really? What I wouldn't give for both those skills. Of course, I did give her my love of animals, particularly my love of cats. That was easy enough for me to do, too! **Heather Haven**

Absolutely! I subscribe to the "write what you know" school, thus cyber security, law enforcement, and lawyers make frequent appearances in my fictional worlds. My father was an artist and I dabble, so the art world is another area I tend to include in ways large and small. **Robin Stuart**

Yes, I'm a birder. So I made Jeri Howard's dad a birder. He's a retired university professor who got into it after retirement. This figures into two Jeri Howard books, *Bit Player* and *The Devil Close Behind*. In *Bit Player*, Jeri goes to Lee Vining near Mono Lake looking for someone and runs into her father, who is there on a birding outing. In *The Devil Close Behind*, he is going on a birding trip to New Orleans and his traveling companion can't go, so he persuades Jeri to go with him for a vacation. It was a good way to get Jeri to NOLA, where she gets involved with a case. **Janet Dawson**

When I created Jess Randolph, the star of my two private eye novels, *A Relative Stranger* and *Snow Angel*, I gave her a talent I only wish I had. I come from a family of painters and designers, but I didn't inherit the artist's gene. While I love art and get excited by color, form, light and shadow, I'm clumsy when you put a paintbrush or pencil in my hand. Jess is the artist I'd love to be, expressing herself with paint in a way I can do only with words. She considers art to be as much her profession as her detective work, and she sees no contradiction between her two careers. For her, they are both ways to seek the truth. **Margaret Lucke**

Updating SinC NorCal Bylaws

In early August, members will receive a copy of our updated chapter bylaws in their email. Changes will be marked, prefaced by a short document explaining the changes.

After one month, we will send out a survey, asking members to approve the changes.

Most of the changes are due to the evolution of how we meet and conduct business. For example, we no longer have meetings where we hand out paper ballots and vote in person.

Also, we wanted to have more consistent definitions of the Executive Committee (President, VP, Treasurer, and Secretary) and the Board and reflect how we are organized while still allowing for evolving our board member roles and processes in the future.

Please take some time to look through the changes and feel free to ask questions.

All about YOU!

Make the most of your membership. Your Executive Committee members are working hard to present the most interesting, educational, useful and entertaining programs to our members. We invite your participation regarding ideas for speakers, events, and potential meeting locations, as well as articles for *The Stiletta*, our quarterly newsletter.

Please contact **Ana Brazil**, Events (anabrazil (at) sbcglobal.net), with meeting and venue suggestions and **Margie Bunting**, Newsletter (mbunting (at) sbcglobal.net), with newsletter article suggestions and submissions.

SinC NorCal Executive Committee

President: Susan Bickford – susan (dot)bickford (at) gmail.com

Vice President: Michele Drier – micheledrier (at) att.net

Secretary: Claire Ortalda – clairemystery (at) sonic.net

Treasurer: Ana Manwaring – anamanwaring (at) gmail.com

Membership: Malena Eljumaily – malena (at) omnicode.com

Events: Ana Brazil – ana (at) brazilcamp.org

Speakers Bureau: Susan Kuchinskas – susan (at) kuchinskas.com

Newsletter: Margie Bunting – mbunting (at) sbcglobal.net

Past President: Diana Chambers – [diana \(at\) dianarchambers.com](mailto:diana@nianarchambers.com)

