

# THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

VOLUME 18, ISSUE 3

August 2017

## Dear Sisters and Misters,

There's a bit of a lull right now after three power-packed months. In May we sponsored a workshop on "Capturing a Sense of Place," at which attendees said they learned a lot from Roger Lubeck, Ph.D.

Things heated up in June with the Bay Area Book Festival. This was our second year to participate and we had a wonderful time. The weather cooperated, many authors and readers were involved, and there were many compliments on the look of the booth, which featured posters of books by authors who were signing throughout the weekend. It was a great social time and we spread the news about our terrific organization.

A few days later, several members of SinC joined MWA to participate in a KQED TV fundraiser. Imagine the surprise of our "California Zephyr Train" writer, Janet Dawson (*Death Deals a Hand*), when she discovered that the subject of the program during which we were taking calls was trains! Janet was surrounded by people from the program who wanted to talk to her about her books. We had a great time and raised some money for a worthy media cause.

The next weekend was the California Crime Writers Convention, held every other year in Southern California and sponsored jointly by SoCal's Sisters in Crime and MWA. It's one of my favorite conferences, short and power-packed. If you haven't been, save your pennies for the 2019 convention. It's really worth attending.



## CONTENTS

- Page 1: President's Message
- Page 3: Upcoming Events
- Page 4: In Case You Missed It
- Page 6: The Interview Scene
- Page 9: My Crooked Path to  
Becoming a Psychologist
- Page 11: How to Win the Bulwer-  
Lytton Fiction Contest
- Page 13: Persistent Friends
- Page 16: How I Created Jill Quint
- Page 17: News from Rita Lakin
- Page 18: Member News
- Page 20: How I Realized I was a  
Pantser
- Page 22: Question of the Quarter
- Page 24: New EC Member

## President's Message, continued

Usually our meetings are on the first Saturday of every month from noon to 2:00 p.m., but with so much happening in June, the Author Showcase was moved to the third weekend in June. Organized by Vice President Diana Chambers, it was held at Book Passage in Corte Madera. The showcase was well attended and we heard readings from some dynamite books. This was a great way to support our authors and to get our books some publicity.

Typically, July is a vacation month, with no events planned, but this July we had a special event. Event planner Heidi Noroozy managed to arrange a tour of San Quentin State Prison. There were about twenty of us attending on a beautiful day. I, for one, was uneasy, thinking this was going to be a difficult tour. To my surprise, it was not only not difficult (except that we walked a lot of miles) but informative and uplifting. We got to meet prisoners who are determined to turn their lives around—even if they are spending the rest of their lives in prison. We got to talk personally with them and hear their stories, their hopes for the future, and what they are doing to make their lives better. Thanks to Heidi for arranging this.

In August many of you will be taking the Dashiell Hammett tour in San Francisco. I've heard so much about this tour, and I hope everyone enjoys it. You'll have to do it without me, because I am going on a much-needed vacation to Vancouver. I'll take pictures!

Meanwhile, have a wonderful summer. See you in the fall!

Sincerely,  
Terry Shames  
President, Norcal Sisters in Crime



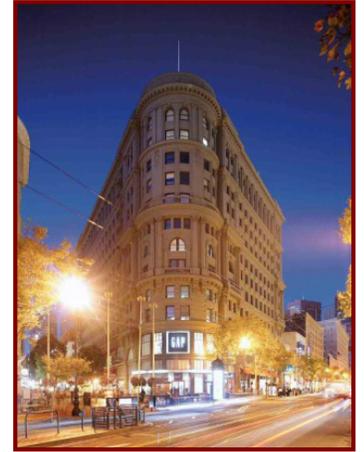
## Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC Norcal Events

**Saturday, August 5, 12:00 – 2:00 p.m.**

### ***Dashiell Hammett Tour***

*Meeting outside the Flood Building, 870 Market St., San Francisco*

Don Herron, an author and editor, will take us on a 2-hour walking tour, pointing out places relating to author Dashiell Hammett's life and work. Sites include his residences in San Francisco and settings from *The Maltese Falcon*. Don has been leading this tour – the longest-running literary tour in the country – since 1977.



*Iconic Flood Building*

**Saturday, September 9, 12:00 – 2:00 p.m.**

### ***Everything You've Ever Wanted to Know about Self-Publishing***

*Berkeley Public Library, North Branch, 1170 The Alameda, Berkeley*

Join Cindy Sample and Heather Haven, two of our successfully self-published members, for what's sure to be a lively and inspiring discussion about self- and indie-publishing. Between them they've put out over a dozen books, which means they've got tons of insight and information to share. You'll learn about the different publishing platforms, what it takes to produce a quality book, how to stand out in an increasingly crowded field and more! Our own Mariella Krause (Marla Cooper) will moderate.

**Saturday, October 7, 12:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.**

***TBD – keep the date open; details to follow***

**Check our website and our Facebook page for more info regarding events venues and directions:**  
<http://www.sincnorcal.org> [Sisters in Crime Norcal Facebook page](#)

## In Case You Missed It . . .

---

If you weren't able to attend our recent events, here's what you missed.

**May Meeting:** Roger C. Lubeck, President of It Is What It Is Press and Corporate Behavior Analysts, Ltd., led "Capturing a Sense of Place: A Craft Workshop" for a group of appreciative Sisters and Mistresses at the Belvedere Tiburon Library.



**June Meeting:** Chapter members who had recently released their latest mystery novel regaled the audience with readings and giveaways in our twice-yearly Author Showcase, this one held at Book Passage in Corte Madera.



**July Meeting:** Seventeen enthusiastic attendees found our San Quentin Prison tour to be an unusual and memorable experience, led by Lt. Samuel Robinson of the CA Dept. of Corrections and Rehabilitation. You can check out blogs from Marla Cooper ([blog #1](#) and [blog #2](#)) and [Vinnie Hansen](#) for more details.







## Reader as Sleuth: The Interview Scene by Claire Ortalda

---

I did it again. I re-read a Hercule Poirot mystery for the umpteenth time. And enjoyed myself immensely.

What makes Agatha Christie's tales so endlessly fascinating? As a budding mystery writer, I wanted to find out so I did a careful analysis, focusing especially on the **suspect interview scenes** so integral to the "puzzle mystery."

A closer look revealed two reasons these scenes hold reader interest so avidly:

1. There's an awful lot of plot work occurring (deftly conveyed with Christie's usual brevity), and
2. More importantly for reader interest, Christie contrives to keep *us* very actively involved in each scene.

How does Dame Christie *keep the reader an active participant*? Let's look at what is going on in the interview scene.

Previously, of course, the reader has become acquainted with the facts of the case and been introduced to the principal characters/suspects. Poirot has inspected the crime scene or been thoroughly briefed on the facts and, very often, has become focused on what seems a trivial detail at the scene. Or perhaps he has asked an "off the wall" question which makes the police mutter something about Poirot "going gaga" or cast aspersions on his foreign background. But the clever Christie reader would be wise to take note.

Once those preliminaries are accomplished, Poirot turns to the interviews of possible suspects/witnesses. In each interview, the *reader's* mind is occupied not just with:

--what is happening in the scene (action and dialogue which reveal new information)

but with:

--evaluating what the interviewee is saying in comparison with what other interviewees have said (is there a contradiction in terms of time or in terms of their appraisal of another's character, for example?). This is a complex assessment because the previous characters may have lied or been prejudiced.

## Reader as Sleuth: The Interview Scene, continued

---

-- figuring out the character of the interviewee (discerned through appearance and mannerisms: mode of dress, manner of speech) and his or her reactions to certain questions (nervousness, anger, dismissiveness, arrogance, prejudices).

--finding a motive for murder for the interviewee.

--trying to catch the interviewee in a lie or cleverly spotting an incongruity, something that does not fit.

--sorting through timelines and location specifics in an effort to solve the crime ourselves (yes, always we readers are in competition with M. Poirot!).

and . . .

figuring out the crime theory formulating in Poirot's mind—he may ask certain questions and we may or may not understand the reasoning behind them, but sense their importance. What has Poirot surmised that we may have missed?

That's a lot of *reader mental action*, which is why each interview scene is so fascinating to the reader.

The key to such complex interview scenes is Christie's characterization, which has been dismissed as resorting to "types" (boring old colonel from the colonies, ne'er-do-well future heir, etc.).

But what Christie cleverly exploits (and what Poirot is very aware of, too) is the fact that each interview, *from the interviewee's perspective*, especially if he or she is guilty of something, not necessarily the murder, is an *opportunity* to:

--cast suspicion on another or others (what they heard or saw or suspect).

--establish their own benign or at least non-murderous character (a character may admit to being a rogue, but not a murderer, or admit to a lesser crime, such as theft, but not murder).

--establish an alibi.

Let's look at different types of interviewees:

*The innocent with something to hide* – lies on certain points. If protecting self, tries to deflect attention onto someone else. If protecting another, may even try to deflect attention onto self.

## Reader as Sleuth: The Interview Scene, continued

---

*The innocent who is trying to influence an outcome – get someone tried for murder, get the will reversed, etc. – and thus trying to influence Poirot and/or others to a certain action.*

*The guilty – obviously lies.*

*The guilty who did it for a noble cause – may confess to protect innocent accused, etc.*

Thus, the reader is busy matching wits, as Poirot himself is, with each highly-motivated character (and thus, I would argue, not a cardboard character), at the same time trying to discern Poirot's evolving crime theory. *The play between the reader's evolving crime theory and Poirot's, is, in my opinion, the reason why Christie is endlessly fascinating.* Christie's characters are not stupid and always have an angle, Poirot is a self-labeled genius, and we, the readers, are pretty smart, too. Who will prevail? The pages seem to turn themselves . . .

Claire Ortalda is an award-winning short story writer and poet evolving into the mystery field. One of her first mystery short stories, "Crime on Hold," was included in the 2016 Guppy anthology, *Fish Out of Water*. Her novel, *The Psychopath Companion*, is short-listed for the 2017 Del Sol Press First Novel Prize, judged by Hallie Ephron. <https://www.claireortalda.com/>



# My Crooked Path to Becoming a Psychologist

by Ellen Kirschman

---

I started out to be an actress. “Acting is physical,” my first drama teacher roared as if he was on stage. “Think of Macbeth roaming the halls of his drafty castle in a reeking bearskin cape. He didn’t wander with furrowed brow in an agony of emotion. He was cold and hungry, his eyes were blurry and his back ached.”

My first acting assignment was to observe people at work. I’m an overachiever. I wanted more. I wanted to become the person I was observing. That’s what drew me to the Majestic Ballroom on Times Square. Down the stairs I went, following the neon arrows and the aging photographs of buxom women with sullen, pouty faces. The manager hired me on the spot. The supervising dance hostess handed me a floor-length strapless tube of stretch jersey with a padded bra that catapulted my bosom into a fleshy shelf. I squirmed into it, trying not to think about the health habits of its last occupant.

My training was short and to the point. “Tease the clients. Promise something while promising nothing. The longer you hold a customer’s attention, the more money he’ll spend, String the guy along until closing time, then have the bouncer throw him out on his butt. Turn in your chits at the end of the week for cash.”

The hostesses were a cast of female archetypes. An avatar of Marilyn Monroe smiled provocatively and shook her pearly blonde wig. Cleopatra assumed a regal pose while clucking disapprovingly at an aging siren with deflated breasts who stood near the door blowing obscene kisses and making juicy smacking sounds to the patrons as they descended the stairs. To one side, a forlorn and disheveled Ophelia talked to no one but herself, her endless babbling an apparent comfort to the steady stream of silent men who paid for her company.

Marissa wore a simple cocktail dress that zipped down the front so that she could run to the dressing room on breaks and nurse her baby under the watchful eye of the child’s grandmother. “Don’t sleep with anyone you don’t love, like those putas,” she whispered to me with the saintliness of a Madonna and the sad traces of firsthand experience.

Our clients were a motley bunch. Morose and somber, some were barely able to make small talk or eye contact. No one seemed to be having any fun except for the occasional drunken frat boy who fell through the door on a dare, laughing and shouting obscenities.

Mike was unlike the soggy-faced shufflers who had been stepping on my toes and breathing in my face. He was young and talkative. “I chose you,” he said, “because you look different from the other girls.” I was elated to be recognized for what I was, not what I was pretending to be. I

## My Crooked Path to Becoming a Psychologist, continued

---

poured out my tale: dedicated-young-actress-embarked-on-a-meaningful-but-dangerous-venture-into-the-skin-trade-for-the-love-of-theater. My confession must have pierced the armor of his anonymity. An eighth note after the music finished, he bolted across the dance floor and made for the stairs. With his hand on the door, he turned and shouted at me, "Hey, you. My name's not Mike."

At closing time Cleopatra rode off in a Cadillac with a man who looked to be half her age. Marilyn Monroe hailed a taxi. The old siren stuck a cigarette in her nearly toothless mouth and headed for an all-night bar. Ophelia skittered off into the darkness. Marissa left with her mother and baby. At the end of the week I tried to transfer my chits to her account, but I was told it was against the rules.

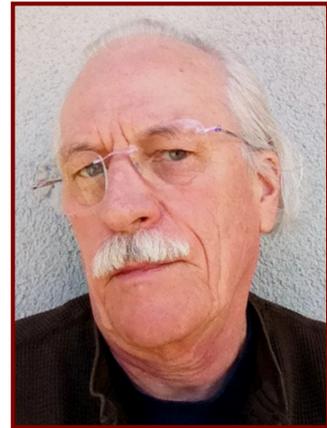
It took me years to connect my brief stint at the Majestic Ballroom to my career as a police psychologist. Granted, police officers and dime-a-dance hostesses are very different and I hope I'm not insulting either when I suggest they share some similarities. Both need to protect themselves emotionally and psychologically from people who want them and reject them in equal measure. The occupational personas they are forced to adopt are tools of the trade, virtual masks that simultaneously crush them and free them to do their jobs. Emotional control is vital to their ability to function in uncertain, potentially explosive circumstances. And social distance is their bulwark against the misery and despair they see every day.

The Majestic Ballroom no longer exists, probably replaced by online porn sites. Cleopatra, Ophelia, Marilyn Monroe, and Marissa have gone on to do other things that are, I imagine, less gratifying than the opportunities I have had. It makes me sad that they will never know how much they influenced my life and for how long.

Ellen Kirschman is an award-winning police psychologist, the author of three non-fiction books and the Dot Meyerhoff mystery series. Too dedicated for her own good, Dot should be counseling cops, not solving crimes. *The Fifth Reflection* (launching July 11, 2017), is third in the series after *Burying Ben* and *The Right Wrong Thing*. Ellen maintains a website at <http://ellenkirschman.com/>. She loves answering writers' questions about police psychology, PTSD, and psychotherapy.

# How to Win the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest

by Jim Guigli



---

First, what is it and why should I care?

The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest is a bad writing competition born in 1982 at San Jose State as an invitation/opportunity for you to write the opening sentence to the world's worst novel, just as Edward Bulwer-Lytton did when he wrote in 1930, "It was a dark and stormy night . . ." to open his novel, *Paul Clifford*. Just think if you had written that sentence—you would be world-famous . . . or infamous.

Speaking of world-famous, just type my name into Google or whatever search engine you like. From California to Finland, I am famous . . . or infamous. (There is no such thing as bad publicity.) I have been interviewed on the radio in California (thrice), Sacramento TV (twice—would have been thrice, but there was a last-minute warehouse fire in Roseville—if it burns, it leads). That's what you get when you win the Bulwer-Lytton Contest, as I did in 2006. The other reasons to enter are:

1. You can improve your own writing. If you study what is bad in writing, you will be working with the mirror image of good writing.
2. The opening sentence of your novel is arguably the most important sentence you will ever write.

But I promised to tell you how to win. Sorry, I *did* win, and even *I* don't know how I won. The judges aren't talking, and I'm just guessing. I assume I won because that year I was lucky enough to have a weak field of competition and my sentence, like an aging hooker buried in makeup at last call, caught someone's eye. You can see all of the entries when you visit my website and click on the Bulwer-Lytton tomato: <http://www.jimguigli.com/>

I entered 64 times that contest year. Go can't beat perseverance. Go write.

But as a judge every year since 2007—all Grand Prize Winners are invited to judge—I can tell you what I like and don't like, but don't send me your entries because I'll have to recuse myself.

## How to Win the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, continued

---

What I like: Sentences that could be actual opening sentences to a novel, as opposed to one-line jokes going nowhere. When you read that opening sentence, you should be thinking, *I want to know what happens next!*

What I don't like: Sentences that are obvious copies of past winners. Study the past winning entries, but don't copy them. Points for originality, and laughs.

Your sentence should be neither too short or too long (less than 60 words is good) and not too risqué. Remember, if you win, your sentence will be read on the radio many times, by people with short attention spans.

My shortest entry was 8 words, and my longest was 123 words. Neither was selected for recognition.

And last, this contest is about bad writing. Rather than trying to be clever, imagine an amateur writer, a person eager to write, but with limited powers of vocabulary, imagination, and description. This person could be humble or arrogant. Write that sentence as though you were this person. As a judge, I'll be looking for your entry.

Finally, my winning entry:

*Detective Bart Lasiter was in his office studying the light from his one small window falling on his super burrito when the door swung open to reveal a woman whose body said you've had your last burrito for a while, whose face said angels did exist, and whose eyes said she could make you dig your own grave and lick the shovel clean.*

Jim Guigli began writing in his sixties after retirement, entering the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest in 2005. His first published fiction longer than one sentence is *Bad News for a Ghost*, now available exclusively on Kindle. <http://www.jimguigli.com/>

# Persistent Friends

by Sabrina Flynn



---

The deck vibrates underfoot with a deliberate hum. The ferry plows through swells, and a wet grey hurls itself at the windows below. Somewhere in that fog, in that dreary wet cold, there is an invisible starting line. In some distant part of my mind, I think of a blinding white page, and the unknown first sentence of every novel ever yet to be written.

It's an invisible line that every writer must cross.

A voice booms over the loudspeaker. "Thirty minutes to take off! If the boat sinks . . . just swim to shore!" Everyone laughs. Some a bit higher than others—a nervous release of fear.

As the heaving Golden Gate emerges from the grey, a group of five huddle together and start to pray. I don't think God is going to intervene in this foolhardy thrill. With silicone caps and three millimeters of neoprene, they look like a rookery of seals. It's the last animal I want to resemble under the Golden Gate Bridge, so I'm wearing my pale skin, and a safety yellow silicone cap.

Heat bleeds fastest from the head.

I stand on deck, outside in the cold, while the chatter of two hundred swimmers rises above the engines. It's easier for me this way. The wind bites, and the fog creeps into my bones, but the sea promises relative warmth in comparison. Or so I hope.

I watch my fellow crazed humans. I can spot the first timers from the old. The uninitiated look sick, while the old hands might as well swap Lycra for silk and cocktails. I'm somewhere between, gazing at the infamous "potato patch" where 400 billion gallons of water rushes through the Golden Gate every day.

"Last time I swam this," a woman leans over to say, "the fog was so thick that we couldn't see the bridge." I'm lucky this day. The bridge is as visible as a giant steel lap lane. I only hope no one decides to end their life by landing on a swimmer today. I shake the thought from my head. No. Don't think about that.

My gaze travels to the water, and the voice of a retired fisherman echoes between my ears, begging me not to swim this race. "I've had a sixteen-foot Great White cuddle up to my boat under that bridge."

## Persistent Friends, continued

---

I glance around at all the long-limbed neoprene seals and feel selfishly optimistic about my odds of survival. *But what about my sunblock?* I sniff my arm. *Do sharks like coconut?*

*What did I sign up for?* Doubt and Fear – I’m well accustomed to those obnoxious voices. They are a writer’s most persistent friends. But here, on deck, I’m not alone. The energy of two hundred crazy people on a boat is as contagious as a gaggle of writers getting high off each other’s creativity. It’s a regular feeding frenzy. I grimace at the comparison.

The rumble of the engine dies – the finish line is as indistinguishable as the start. I can’t help but compare the unknown to writing. I’m familiar with this, too. It’s the blank white page, a mocking little cursor, and the end of a book that is no more in sight than the beginning.

The deck clears. Swimmers begin donning gear as the doors are thrown open. A gust of cold wind sweeps through the cabin, and those swimmers who were huddled inside gasp in shock, squinting through the water droplets – angry waves with white caps. An SF policeman zips by on a wave runner. He dips his hand in the water, jerks it out, and mimes shivering in his full uniform and life jacket. More laughter. And then the steady cry of “Go! Go! Go!”

Five seconds to jump. Those who hesitate are yanked aside. But no one hesitates. Not on this swim. Only the foolhardy sign up for the Golden Gate. Two swimmers jump at a time, leaping out of both doors and into the sea, eight feet below – two hundred willing passengers abandoning ship.

Bodies shiver, and some brace for the inevitable – their turn. Every wasted minute sweeps the ferry and swimmers farther off course. There’s no place for thought. No place for doubt. No place for –

“Go! Go! Go!”

I jump.



Exhilaration surrounds me. The murky chill shocks my skin to life. I kick to the top, try to inhale, but instinct warns me to wait. I let my body take charge, waiting for the wave to finish slamming into my face. Breathe.

There is no rhyme or reason in the grey – no easy swells – only a confusion of lost waves. I follow the line of yellow caps. It’s simple. As simple and as difficult as a writer plunging into a first draft. We give that mocking cursor our crudest finger and follow a thread of words, arranging twenty-six letters into reason.

## Persistent Friends, continued

---

We make our own rhythm; I do the same.

I slice through the waves, letting them bump and batter me in the ocean-sized washing machine. I barely reach the knot of swimmers bobbing behind a line of kayakers when the horn bellows. Swimmers take off with full force kicks. A blow to the rib, one to the thigh, a foot to the face. I tuck my head in close as I swim, swallowing down the fear of being kicked unconscious.

Pummeled by feet and waves, and sapped by the cold, I drop away from the lead pack. Adrenaline soon wears off. Doubt creeps in. Fear raises its head in the form of ominous shadows lurking in the murk.

*Duunnn dunnn . . . duuuunnnn dun . . . duuunnnnnnnnn dun dunnnnnnnnnnnn dunnnnn*

But no . . . the cold will get me first. And I'm overwhelmed by a more urgent matter—the simple yet paramount task of breathing. Cold saps my strength, waves batter my body and crash down my throat.

This is the wall. The very same that separates writers from authors. Finishing. I'm alone in a grey sea. In a maze of muddled letters, fighting for every breath, for every word. The temptation to raise my hand and have an SF policeman zip to my rescue is as tempting as getting out of my chair when writing becomes too tedious. Excuses, too. "I don't have time" might as well be swapped for "I might drown." And better yet, no one will ever know I didn't finish. I'll get a free ride on a wave runner, and be praised for trying.

I'll know—I'll know I didn't finish. I'll know that I left a story undone.

I turn that catchy horror song into my own. I hum louder as I swim. I'm the shark, and I set my sights on a distant swimmer in neoprene. He's mine.

Sheer determination keeps me going, striving until my muscles burn, and my core goes numb. It keeps me typing, too. When my brain feels like a bucket of chum and my hands cramp, reaching towards that last word—striving towards that final dot.

Sabrina Flynn lives in perpetual fog and sunshine with a rock troll and two crazy imps. She spent her youth trailing after insanity, jumping off bridges, climbing towers, and riding down waterfalls in barrels. After spending fifteen years wrestling giant hounds and battling pint-sized tigers, she now travels everywhere via watery portals leading to anywhere. Author of two series: Ravenwood Mysteries and Legends of Fyrsta. <http://www.sabrinaflynn.com/>

# How I Created Jill Quint

by Alec Peche

---



I began writing mysteries after leaving the health care industry. My most recent position was that of hospital CEO, a job I thought too controlled by regulations to be a good model for my protagonist. Through the years in my role, I led many a project to improve the quality of patient care, including attending root cause analysis where a committee of clinicians debriefs a bad outcome or near miss to learn from it. I got to know my pathologists through this process and decided to make my lead protagonist a forensic pathologist.

My next question was how to get her on the scene of a variety of murders. I decided that she would hang up her scalpel early and head into retirement to grow grapes and make wine. My city of Morgan Hill has more than ten wineries so I have good material in the area. When I began imagining her life, it was in the Napa region, but then I had her growing my favorite wine grape—Moscato—which comes from the Central Valley. This grape needs very hot days to manufacture its sweetness, so now I have Jill about an hour outside of Fresno—a vague area in my head.

I had her called in on a few death cases to offer a second opinion and from there she evolved into eventually getting her private detective's license.

On a final note, I gave my protagonist a love interest, and I wanted an artsy guy. So I invented a man who is famous for the wine labels he creates and the swag the wineries have to distribute to customers. About six months after my first book was released, the *Wall Street Journal* did an interview with a woman who was a wine bottle label artist. I felt chagrined not to have realized that this was a very real occupation. Now, whenever I visit a winery or brewery and the owner is around, I'll ask how they make decisions about their wine labels.

Alec Peche is the California author of six books in the Jill Quint, MD Forensic Pathologist series and two books in the Damian Green series. Both series are soft-boiled mysteries. The latest book, *Willow Glen Heist*, was published 3/1/17, and the setting is a MacGyver-like character living on Red Rock Island in SF Bay. He assists a retired San Jose Police Department detective with a cold case bank heist in Willow Glen neighborhood. <https://www.alecpeche.com>

## News from Rita Lakin

---



more than 850 archived.

If you are interested and want to enjoy in-depth interviews of many well-known icons, go to this link: <http://emmytvlegends.org/>

For those of you who might want to watch my interview, I will be featured in a few months from now. I will contact you when the video is posted on the WGA site.

Rita Lakin spent 25 years in TV as a writer of series, movies, and miniseries, finally becoming producer/show runner on her shows. *The Only Woman in the Room*, her memoir of those years, has recently been published. She is also known for writing comedy mystery novels featuring Gladly Gold and her zany geriatric partners in crime-solving, starting with *Getting Old is Murder*. She won first place for her IMBA bestselling *Getting Old is a Disaster*, and the same novel won the Left Coast Crime Lefty for most humorous mystery published in 2009. Other nominations include Writers Guild of America, MWA Edgar, and the Avery Hopwood awards from the University of Michigan. Visit [www.ritalakin.com](http://www.ritalakin.com).

## Member News



---

### ***New Releases***

*Dead Storage* by Mary Feliz, book #3 in the Maggie McDonald Mystery Series, on July 18 by Kensington's Lyrical Press

*Record of Blood* by Sabrina Flynn, book #3 in the Ravenwood Mysteries, on August 8, independently published

*Vaccines: History, Science, and Issues* by Tish Davidson, on June 30 by ABC-CLIO/Greenwood. It is a library resource for high school through adult readers interested in information that is both factual and non-technical so they can make good vaccine-related decisions.

*Another Number for the Road* by CJ Verburg, book #2 in the Cory Goodwin Mystery Books series, on May 18 by Boom-Books

The German edition of Simon Wood's *Deceptive Practices* comes out on August 15 under the title *Rache Ist Bitter* (aka Bitter Revenge).

*Bone Slice* by Bette Golden Lamb and J.J. Lamb, book #7 in the Gina Mazzio RN Medical Thriller Series, on August 6 by Two Black Sheep Productions

*Wake Up to Toaster Cakes* by Lynda McDaniel, June 13 by Lynda McDaniel books. The book includes 37 gluten-free, low-carb, sugar-free recipes for healthy and easy breakfasts (or snacks)—straight from the freezer to the toaster.

### ***Public Appearances***

Rhys Bowen invites you to a launch party for the new Royal Spyness novel, *On Her Majesty's Frightfully Secret Service*, on August 1, 7:00 p.m. at Book Passage, Corte Madera. Rhys will be on the road August 2-11, making appearances in Houston, Ann Arbor, Scottsdale, Southern California, San Francisco, and Healdsburg.

On August 1-3, Carol Verburg will be speaking and signing her two newest books, *Zapped* and *Another Number for the Road*, in Cape Cod, MA.

On August 3-6, Shelley Adina will attend the Ghost Town Writers Retreat in Georgetown, CO (<http://ghosttownwritersretreat.com/>) and will speak on three panels: "Steampunk Worlds: Do I Have to Set My Book in Victorian London?" with Mario Acevedo, "Writing the Weird West," and "Steampunk Library: Where Did All These Books Come From and Where Does Mine Fit?" She will also co-host a tea party during which she will wear a hat shaped like a teacup.

## Member News, continued



---

Judith Newton, author of *Oink, A Food For Thought Mystery*, will be part of a She Writes Press Mystery Tour as follows: August 4, 7:00 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 5604 Bay Street, Emeryville; August 5, 7:00 p.m. Book Passage, 51 Tamal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera; August 7, 7:00 p.m., Dog-Eared Books, 489 Castro Street, San Francisco; August 8, 7:00 p.m., Books, Inc., Town & Country Village, 855 El Camino Real, Palo Alto; August 12, 2:00 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 1040 N. El Camino Real, Encinitas.

On August 5 at 2:00 p.m., Camille Minichino will launch her 25<sup>th</sup> mystery novel, *Addressed to Kill*, (by Jean Flowers) at Book Carnival in Orange, CA. There will be cake!

On August 26, Shelley Adina will present “The Business of Writing” from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. at the California Writers Club: Fremont Area Writers, at Round Table Pizza, 37408 Fremont Blvd., Fremont. Content will include business models (from hobbyist to S-Corp), alternate income (can you make money writing back-cover blurbs for others?) and literary estate planning (what to do with the empire when you’re gone).

Pat Canterbury invites you to join her on September 9 at the Elk Grove Library from 12:30 to 4:00 p.m. for a mystery panel that will include (in addition to Pat) Nan Mahon, Elaine Faber, Michele Drier, and Virginia Kidd. Pat’s mystery novel is *The Geaha Incident* (September 2016).

### **Awards**

*What Gold Buys* by Ann Parker, the fifth book in her Silver Rush historical mystery series, has been nominated for the following: Macavity/Sue Feder Memorial Award for Best Historical Novel; Will Rogers Medallion Award (Western Romance). Winners for both awards will be announced in October – Macavity at Bouchercon and Will Rogers at a special ceremony in Fort Worth, Texas.

Jim Guigli’s short story, “Looking for Mishka,” a Bart Lasiter story, won third place in the Short Story Non-Published category at The Public Safety Writers Conference in Las Vegas in July.



# How I Realized I was a Pantser

by H.S. Stavropoulos

---

Some people need maps, and some just have a great sense of direction. The writing spectrum contains writers from outliners to pantsers. Pantsers are those who “write by the seat of their pants.” Basically, they write. Period. In contrast, an outliner composes a complete outline of the story from beginning to end, prior to writing.

Once I traveled to southern China by train from Hong Kong. When my travel companions and I stepped off the train and exited the station, we all consulted a map to find the route to our hotel. The rest of the group started one way and I went in the opposite direction. After a few feet, they called to me, and I told them they were headed in the wrong direction. They marched over to me and pointed at the map to convince me they were correct. They were holding the map up in the orientation specified by the mapmaker. I turned the map upside down, showed them all the major landmarks in front of the station, then pointed to those landmarks on the now realistically oriented map. They put away the map and followed me to the hotel. One of them asked when I had been to China before. I told him this was my first time.

I have an excellent sense of direction. I also notice the details around me as guideposts when I travel.

When I first started writing seriously, I had an idea for a series of books. I took classes and read many craft books on writing. I found the three-act structure and set about to outline my first book. I crafted character profiles—I knew everything there was to know about each of my characters: favorite foods, best friend, and sworn enemies. The setting was equally catalogued; I took hundreds of photographs, even recordings of background noise. Read every book on the area—studied flora and fauna, read newspapers, blogs, travel guides of the town in which my books would be set.

It felt like work. Still, this was the right way to do it, I thought, so I soldiered on.

I set down to write. I crammed the story I envisioned in my mind into the setting I researched, inserted the characters I developed, and orchestrated scenes into that three-act structure exactly when each should happen. The setting was a painted cardboard backdrop from a grammar school play. The characters, shadow puppets. All the work of outlining choked the life—and fun—out of writing the story. I abandoned that book and the next two in the series.

Maybe I just wasn't a good writer. Maybe, I wasn't a writer at all.

## How I Realized I Was a Pantser, continued

---

Then another idea sparked my imagination. This time, scenes played out in my mind. I just wrote them down in whichever order they came. And the story worked, characters came alive and did things I would never have put into their character profiles, and setting became not just a backdrop, but the only place in the universe where this story could take place.

I wrote like a pantser.

I enjoyed writing. The creativity, the discovery. I felt the same excitement I felt when I read a good book, thrilled by what would be on the next page. Then I got to *The End*. I read books on editing, asked questions, read blogs, and set down to work. But, the story was sound, the characters multi-layered, and the plot had excellent bones.

I was a pantser!! But more importantly, I was a writer.

Just like on that trip to southern China, when I didn't need the map but my travel companions depended on it, I realized writers can create their stories in different ways and still get to *The End*.

Now, after many years of being a pantser, I believe the difference between pantsers and outliners is when they do their outline. Outliners do the work up front, then follow their map. For pantsers, their first draft is their outline. But either way is the right way to write.

H.S. Stavropoulos writes stories infused with a Greek-American flavor. She was born and raised in a small Greek village in the middle of Oakland, California. A walk on a beach on a Greek island inspired "The White Flip-Flop," published in *Fish Nets: The Second Guppy Anthology*. Helen was a finalist for the 2017 Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense. She is past president of SinC Norcal and a member of The Guppies, Romance Writers of America, and SFRWA.

**For more about plotters (outliners) versus pantsers, keep reading below as other Sisters and Misters respond to the Question of the Quarter.**

## Question of the Quarter



### ***Are you a plotter or a pantser?***

---

I started as a pantser. But my editor wanted a chapter synopsis to approve the book and also to see glaring flaws. That meant I had to write the book, then do a synopsis! Over the course of 13 books, I have switched to being a plotter. My first draft is now the synopsis, where I can look for the glaring flaws in pacing, clues, and plot myself, switch chapters around more easily, and add elements when I see the need. So much easier than writing the complete book and having to make corrections after the fact since the synopsis is smaller. ***Priscilla Royal***

I'm definitely a plotter. I begin by thinking about what I want the book to say and what its moral universe is going to look like. I do a diagram so I can sketch out the 3-act, 8-sequence structure that is used in many screenplays. When I use it, I know that I'm going to have turning points in a regular fashion. I also plot which scenes are going to be big turning points and make a list of scenes that I know I'll have to have. I like structure—it gives me confidence! I also do a ton of character work, mapping out desire and conflicts, etc. I research the setting and take pictures and do research on whatever else I need to—like wine making for my next book, *Terroir*. I was an academic and can't help myself. But this time around, I found myself saying, "If I keep on researching, this book will never be written." So I started writing the first scene and the characters began to grow on their own. I wrote twelve more scenes that way and now I'm back to plotting again. Maybe I'm in a transitional stage! ***Judith Newton***

I'm a pantser. For my one series I determine the geographical location and how I'm going to kill someone, then I start writing. For the other series, which is set in one location, I determine what the cold case is going to be and what happens to the teenager in the story line, then I write. ***Alec Peche***

A pantser almost always—because if I knew what was happening next, in particular the end, I would get very bored and probably not finish writing the book. I want to be as surprised by the dénouement as I hope my readers will be. ***J.J. Lamb***

100% pantser. The couple of times that I plotted, instead of a book, I created a 3-page story because I was more worried about getting to the next bullet point than I was about telling a story. ***Elin Barnes***

I'm both a plotter and a pantser. I start with an idea that is not fleshed out enough to outline. I will have a few major elements in mind, and start writing partial scenes until I have enough to see what the structure/outline will be. As I continue to flesh the story out, I become a pantser as ideas show up that fit with what I already have. ***Jim Guigli***



## Question of the Quarter, continued

---

I'm a plotter through and through. It probably comes from being primarily a nonfiction writer. Wherever it comes from, the idea of starting off with a blank screen not knowing the who, what, how, where, and some idea of the why of a mystery paralyzes me. I admire people who can cheerfully take off in the direction of a story and follow wherever it leads, but I'm not one of them.

*Tish Davidson*

I do both. That makes me a "plotzer." *Ellen Kirschman*

Writing a book is like hiking to a distant mountain for me. I know where I'm going, but I have no idea what I'll encounter along the way. I let the characters lead me over the ravines, rivers, and twists and turns of writing. And I allow the story to direct each and every step along the way. Writing is simply an adventure. *Sabrina Flynn*

I am a plotter. How can anyone writing mysteries be a pantsers? I appreciate the work of Rhys Bowen twice as much because I know she begins each book with only a vague notion of what it will be about. For me, the plotting is the best part, so I don't want to let my subconscious have all the fun. Bring on the white boards and index cards! *Malena Eljumaily*

I'm a full-fledged pantsers. I like to take the journey with my protagonist. If I knew the plot ahead of time, I would be bored and never finish the manuscript! Every time I'm stuck at the end, I vow that I'm going to outline, but 25 novels later I'm still a pantsers! *Camille Minichino*

I'm a plotter. It's reckless not to think your story concept through considering you're trying to corral 80,000, 90,000 words, etc. and hundreds of details . . . *Simon Wood*

I'm a plotter or pantsers or whatever you want to call a mix. I need a general outline—beginning, ending, and maybe a turning point to start. Sort of let the characters take it from there. Occasionally, I'll plot a chapter or scene when I need something specific to happen. *Kate Wyland*

I'm a hybrid. I wrote my first thriller during NaNoWriMo and was in writer's heaven as the characters appeared and took off with the story, but the YEARS of revision were grueling. Now I do a little planning—where the story opens, who dies, where the story ends—then write. For each chapter I make a plot synopsis, so if things start going too far on a tangent, I can review the main plot points and aim for my target. *Ana Manwaring*



## Question of the Quarter, continued

---

As I pounded the keyboard toward the finish line of my latest novel, *The Culinary Art of Murder*, I found the ending I'd hoped for wasn't going to work. I panicked, because I'd written 78,000 words thus far, and there was no "The End" in sight. So I put the manuscript away hoping I'd find a way. I prayed. I wept. I ate chocolate. Lo and behold, several nights later I woke up at 4:00 a.m. realizing the ending I'd envisioned would work if only I changed my approach. Meanwhile, I'd gained three pounds. That's a pantsier for you. *Heather Haven*

Dana is a pantsier; I am a plotter. That said, in our last co-written book, *Time Shards*, she's come to appreciate a good rough outline (though she still hates writing them) and I've gotten better about letting go and not waiting until every plot point is nailed down! *David Fitzgerald & Data Fredsti*

If you have any suggestions for future **Questions of the Quarter**, please send them to [mbunting@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbunting@sbcglobal.net)

---

## New Member of the SinC Norcal Executive Committee!

---

Welcome, Heather Haven, as the newest Member at Large of our Executive Committee!

**HEATHER HAVEN, Member at Large:** I try to be a good human being and a good writer, but not always in that order. I am the author of *The Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries*, *The Persephone Cole Vintage Mysteries*, a standalone noir, *Death of a Clown*, and have been fortunate to have won an award or two along the way. I am most honored to be appointed to the position of Member at Large of the Sisters in Crime Norcal chapter.



## **It's 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 **Heidi Noroozy**, Event Coordinator ([heidinoroozy@gmail.com](mailto:heidinoroozy@gmail.com)), with meeting and venue suggestions and **Margie Bunting**, Newsletter Editor ([mbunting@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbunting@sbcglobal.net)), with newsletter article suggestions and submissions.

### **SinC Norcal Executive Committee**

President: Terry Shames [terryshames@gmail.com](mailto:terryshames@gmail.com)

Vice President: Diana Chambers [diana@dianarchambers.com](mailto:diana@dianarchambers.com)

Membership Chair: Malena Eljumaily [malenamariee@yahoo.com](mailto:malenamariee@yahoo.com)

Secretary: Mariella Krause [krausely@gmail.com](mailto:krausely@gmail.com)

Treasurer: Ana Manwaring [anamanwaring@gmail.com](mailto:anamanwaring@gmail.com)

Event Coordinator: Heidi Noroozy [heidinoroozy@gmail.com](mailto:heidinoroozy@gmail.com)

Past President: Susan Shea [scsauthor@me.com](mailto:scsauthor@me.com)

Newsletter Editor: Margie Bunting [mbunting@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbunting@sbcglobal.net)

Website: Maddy McEwen [mmcewenasker@gmail.com](mailto:mmcewenasker@gmail.com)

Member at Large: Margaret Lucke [getlucke@earthlink.net](mailto:getlucke@earthlink.net)

Member at Large: Mysti Berry [mysti.berry@mac.com](mailto:mysti.berry@mac.com)

Member at Large: Heather Haven [havenmeister1@yahoo.com](mailto:havenmeister1@yahoo.com)

**SISTERS**   
**IN CRIME**

**Northern California Chapter**

---