

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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Greetings, Siblings

Be careful what you wish for.

One of my top priorities when I agreed to become president of SinC NorCal was to introduce virtual, shared events. I had been using video meeting technology for close to twenty years. With a widely dispersed membership, it seemed like a great way to increase participation and our membership.

However, our organization has had a strong tradition of in-person meetings. The intimacy and sense of community we receive from gathering together is one of our strong suits.

As I was mulling how best to introduce technology into our meetings without discouraging attending in person, suddenly it was all taken out of my hands! Now most of us are meeting regularly via technologies such as Zoom, Skype, Facetime . . . We have had several board meetings via Zoom, and even our first full-length SinC NorCal meeting, featuring Robin Stuart.

While this is the way we are going to operate for now, I want to assure everyone that “real” meetings where we gather in person are not going away. At the same time, we are now committed to being able to share our meetings over video and audio, both streaming live and recordings after.



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President's Letter, continued

Happily, I have been quickly reminded that, to quote Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message” (usually quoted as “the medium is the message”). Watching a stage play is not the same as watching a movie. Reading an ebook is not the same as reading a printed book. Each medium brings its own special flavor.

Video meetings are not a simple substitution for meeting in person. In odd ways, I often feel they are more intimate and direct, whether it's seeing people in their “offices” or speaking directly to more attendees. I have met with members who haven't been to a meeting in years and have connected more deeply with regulars as well.

Being able to share recordings brings another dimension to sharing. We're scattered geographically and often have conflicts. Now we can all attend and enjoy in different ways.

My last point is about security. As you may have heard, Zoom—our current preferred platform—has had a number of security issues and has been susceptible to bad behavior from meeting crashers with “Zoombombing.”

Fortunately, we have people such as Robin Stuart to call on to help us navigate these waters. And Zoom has been making some changes to their default settings and other aspects that have improved our confidence in using this solution. Nevertheless, we're keeping a watchful eye on these developments.

Meanwhile, meetings that are “public,” such as our monthly events, will require registration and other types of secure access.

Although I'm not normally a big follower of the British monarchy, I was very struck by the Queen's address. To paraphrase for SinC NorCal:

This episode shall pass. Let's continue to support each other to do things we can be proud of when it does.

We'll meet again

Don't know where, don't know when,

But I know we'll meet again some sunny day.

Ross Parker and Hughie Charles

Sincerely,

Susan Bickford (she, her, hers)

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal

Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, May 2, 12:00 – 1:30 p.m.

Agent Panel: Live from the East Coast (Via Zoom)

We are thrilled to welcome literary agents Anne Hawkins and Paula Munier to share info and advice about their work, pet peeves, and how to query, particularly in light of current disruptive events. During the meeting, you can use the Chat Room to ask questions & offer comments.

Paula is the Senior Literary Agent and Content Strategist at Talcott Notch Literary Services. Her specialties include mystery/thriller, SF/fantasy, romance, YA, memoir, humor, and pop culture. She has served four terms as President of the New England chapter of Mystery Writers of America and is on the MWA board. Paula also served as both co-chair and Agents and Editors chair on the New England Crime Bake committee and is an active member of Sisters in Crime.

Anne is a partner with John Hawkins & Associates, Inc., the oldest literary agency in the country. She has an eclectic list ranging from thrillers to literary fiction to serious non-fiction. She also has particular interests in science, history, public policy, medicine, and women's issues. Current clients include Miranda Beverly-Whittemore, Tasha Alexander, John Gilstrap, Taylor Stevens, and SinC NorCal members Susan Bickford and Ann Parker.

The panel will be moderated by Faye Snowden, Secretary for SinC National and a NorCal member. Faye is the author of three published mysteries with Kensington. Her new book, *A Killing Fire*, was released in August 2019. Faye has published short stories in various literary journals and small presses. Her story, "One Bullet, One Vote," will be featured in the anthology, *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume II*, scheduled for publication on July 4.

Saturday, June 6, 12:00 – 1:30 p.m.

Cara Black (via Zoom)

Bestselling author Cara Black will discuss the challenges and joys she faced working on her first ever historical standalone, *Three Hours in Paris*, after writing 19 series books.

Cara is the author of the Private Investigator Aimée Leduc series, set in Paris. She has received multiple nominations for the Anthony and Macavity Awards, a *Washington Post* World Book of the Year citation, the Médaille de la Ville de Paris, and invitations to be Guest of Honor at conferences such as the Paris Polar Crime Festival and Left Coast Crime. With 400,000 books in print, the series has been translated into German, Norwegian, Japanese, French, Spanish, Italian, and Hebrew.

Please register in advance on the website for both events.

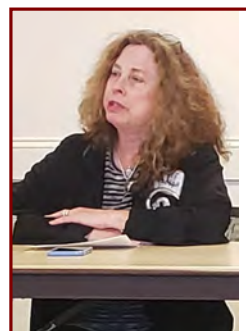
In Case You Missed It . . .

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

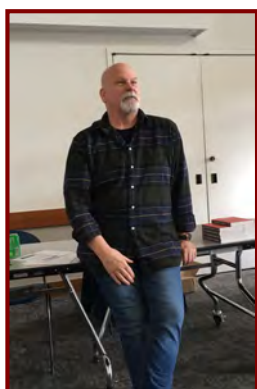


February Meeting - Annual Meet and Greet

Lots of current, new, and prospective members were on hand as we shared what we're doing and what's coming up for each of us. We ended with a panel discussion from Susan Bickford, Janet Rudolph, and Ana Brazil (left to right) about Bouchercon, Left Coast Crime, and the Bay Area Book Festival, respectively, with lots of tips for newbies and a lively Q&A session.



Crime, and the Bay Area Book Festival, respectively, with lots of tips for newbies and a lively Q&A session.

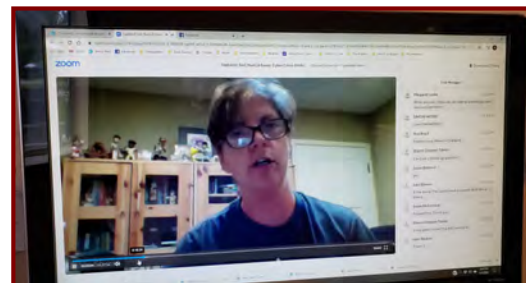


March Meeting - David Corbett

The author of six mystery novels and two books on the craft of writing—*The Art of Character* and *The Compass of Character*—Corbett conducted a wide-ranging discussion on creating believable characters, interspersed with references to well-known fictional characters and pertinent details from his personal life.

April Meeting - Q&A on Cybercrime with Robin Stuart

Since we're all sheltering in place now, we suddenly had to get "creative" with our monthly meetings. Cybercrime expert Robin Stuart kindly stepped in to replace our postponed Author Showcase with the answers to all of our lingering questions after her popular 2019 presentation. It was our first SinC NorCal experience with Zoom, and Susan Bickford and company did a fantastic job getting us connected and informed!





Adventures with Vonnegut and Gorey or Why I Write a Cape Cod Mystery Series by CJ Verburg

Looking to settle on Cape Cod in the late 1980s, I picked the village of Yarmouth Port for two reasons. One was a hilltop house overlooking a farm and a salt marsh. The other was my realtor's assurance that artists lived here. Excellent news! Everyone knew the Cape's arts center was Provincetown—30 more miles and an hour farther from Boston, AKA civilization, than I cared to be.

In my four years as a renter here, only one artist had crossed my path: Kurt Vonnegut. He'd lived in Barnstable Village for decades, directing and occasionally performing at the Barnstable Comedy Club. Even after moving to New York, he was regarded as a local. Someone told me about the parties he'd throw, not mingling with his guests but sitting with a bottle of whiskey, elbows propped on the table, head in his hands, slowly sinking forward as the night, the whiskey, and consciousness faded.

I hadn't met Kurt Vonnegut, but he'd terrified me by telephone. He called after I wrote to ask if he'd like to read the part of Julian Castle in a 25th-anniversary staged reading of his novel *Cat's Cradle* to benefit the Comedy Club. I'd picked that book for my long-overdue return to theater because I loved it, I'd first read it on Cape Cod in my (and its) youth, and it was blatantly unstageable. Moreover, Vonnegut had written the Comedy Club a letter granting them permission to perform any work of his anytime, without fee or notification.

I assumed Vonnegut would be pleased the Club had finally taken up his generous offer. Wrong. He was furious.

What he told me—as fiercely as his lawyer must have reminded him—was that he didn't own the rights to most of his work, including *Cat's Cradle*. "I was bringing up six kids," he snapped. "I sold everything as fast as I finished it."

"But—your letter," I protested. "The Comedy Club blew it up and posted it on the office wall."

"That was a love letter," Vonnegut growled, "and like all love letters, was not meant to be taken seriously." After a tense debate, he agreed to let the show go on. I nearly collapsed from relief. I didn't mind missing my first shot at fame and fortune, but I'd have hated to miss a long-awaited visit with my sister Bonnie.



Adventures with Vonnegut and Gorey, continued

Bonnie had just become head of children's books for a New York publisher. In a pile of old contracts she'd uncovered one with the artist Edward Gorey, now living on Cape Cod. I was thrilled she'd found an expense-account excuse to come see me and *Cat's Cradle*, but I had mixed feelings about her guest. Kurt Vonnegut I'd expected to be sardonic and charming, like his character Julian Castle, and look how that had turned out. Edward Gorey no doubt would fall somewhere between grim and blood-curdling.

I'd never been a Gorey fan. My taste ran to drama, mystery, action, color. Gorey's little black-and-white books were too quietly creepy, his delicately etched interiors too hushed, his characters too enervated, their fates too gruesome.



The tall, thin man my sister brought to the play wasn't like that at all. He wore faded jeans and sneakers, a yellow sweater, and two bronze Coptic crosses hung on black string around his neck. The hair on his head was scant, but as snow-white as his full mustache and beard. Wire-rimmed glasses perched on his aquiline nose; his eyes were radiantly blue. Edward Gorey was as airy and nonchalant as Kurt Vonnegut was brusque and fierce.

After the play we crossed the street to the Barnstable Tavern and talked until the bar closed.

Like me, Edward was fascinated with theater. Soon after moving to the Cape he'd put together an experimental revue, *Lost Shoelaces*, which was performed in Woods Hole. Although I had no idea how, when, or where, I knew he was someone I really wanted to work with.

In Yarmouth Port I discovered that my artist neighbors were Helen Pond and Herbert Senn, whose brilliant set designs I'd admired for years at the Opera Company of Boston, and their friend Edward Gorey. Helen and Herbert had created a theatrical home for themselves by remodeling a church. Edward lived around the corner in a rambling mansion with a Greek Revival façade and a porte-cochère, built one section per century.

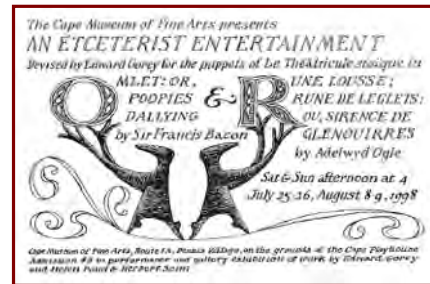
By now my artistic base was Provincetown, where I co-headed the fledgling Playwrights' Workshop and the Provincetown Theatre Company. When I learned the Woods Hole Theater troupe had tapped Edward to do another show, I called him (he was in the phone book) to ask if he'd bring it to Provincetown. He said he'd rather write us a new one.

Useful Urns opened at the Provincetown Inn in July 1990, written, designed, and directed by Edward Gorey and produced and stage-managed by me. It launched a creative collaboration and a close friendship which lasted until his death in April 2000. In that decade we staged more than 15 of his "entertainments" in Provincetown, Woods Hole, and half a dozen other venues – including

Adventures with Vonnegut and Gorey, continued

(once) Los Angeles. He designed the set and poster for my production of *Hamlet*, which inspired his puppet play *Omlet*.

The pinnacle of Edward's writing for the stage was *The White Canoe: an Opera Seria for Hand Puppets*. Sadly, composer Daniel Wolf finished the music the same week that a heart attack finished Edward. Dan sent me the script, which Edward's puppeteers performed and I directed. Our friends Herbert and Helen created the set. Only Edward never got to see his doomed lovers paddle across the Dismal Swamp into theater history.



I could not bear to lose him.

We'd joked the previous summer about using his/our usual lunch spot, Jack's Outback, as the setting for a murder mystery. As months became years, and Edward refused my pleas to come back as a ghost, I picked up the pieces and turned them into *Croaked: an Edgar Rowdey Cape Cod Mystery*. Meanwhile, a committed group of fans and friends turned his home into The Edward Gorey House museum. When they staged a show of his theater art, I created a catalog which morphed into a multimedia memoir, *Edward Gorey Plays Cape Cod*, later expanded to *Edward Gorey On Stage*. *Croaked* inspired a sequel called *Zapped*, then two stories, and now the first of six "Awdrey Gore Legacy" novellas: *Scalped, or The Toastrack Enigma*. Also, at the request of Edward's estate, I'm organizing his drawings and scripts into *Edward Gorey's Art of the Theater*.

April 25, 2020 marked twenty years since I sat beside Edward's hospital bed and read him a farewell speech from his beloved *Tale of Genji*. Now there are Gorey websites, Facebook and Instagram pages, a Tiger Lillies album, even (soon) a film. I'd like to think he'd be tickled to see the number and variety of creative experiments he's still provoking.

Photos © CJ Verburg, original art @ Edward Gorey Charitable Trust, *Cat's Cradle* cover used by permission of Edie Vonnegut. Reproduction strictly forbidden.

Besides her Edgar Rowdey Cape Cod mysteries, San Francisco writer CJ Verburg is the author of two Cory Goodwin mystery novels and several international literature collections. Her story "Birdbrain," published in Sisters in Crime NorCal's 2019 anthology *Fault Lines*, is a finalist for the Derringer Award. She's also an award-winning playwright and theater director. Look for her first "Scandal at the Savoy" story in *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine* #30. <http://cjverburg.net>



Artist Communities: When You Need Time *and* Focus

by Faye Snowden

I've always been fascinated by authors who can write in bits of time. William Carlos Williams, a doctor and poet, wrote on blank prescription pads between appointments. Can you imagine writing "This is Just to Say" between Mrs. Jones' bursitis and Little Tommy's stomach upset? Almost a hundred years later and we're still talking about those damn plums.

Closer to home, I know writers who can develop an outline on a lunch hour or plot a murder scene on a coffee break. During this pandemic, authors are apparently able to finish their novels while the bread bakes.

This is just to say that I'm gobsmacked. I've always needed time, space and focus to produce my best work.

I wrote my first three novels on a carefully planned schedule using a book called *The Weekend Novelist*. After a sixty-hour work week I'd spend Saturday and Sunday locked in my studio from exactly 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. No wavering, no exceptions. I'd emerge in such a fugue that one of my good friends leaned over the dinner table to ask if I was high. No. I'd just been writing. For hours. Non-stop, and still stuck in the fictional small town of Haven, somewhere in Mississippi, or the imaginary Dunhill, California.

Later I learned there was a place for people like me. (No, not that place.) Knowing I was going to night school, had two rambunctious boys, a full-time job in technology with 24/7 on-call, and this compulsion to put words on paper, my professor recommended that I apply to this thing called an Artist Community. She insisted that I go away for a month. Of course, I protested. After all, my kids were little and I still liked them enough to spend time with them. But before I could say a word, she said again, emphatically, "For a *month*."

What is an Artist Community?



Hedgebrook Cottage

Artist Communities have been around for a long time. Also referred to as a colony or a residency, an artist community is a place for writers, composers, visual artists, and other creatives who need time and space to create. Artists who are lucky enough to win a residency are given a room or, in some cases, a separate cottage of their own, communal dinners with other artists in residency, and sometimes a chef to cook their meals.

Artist Communities, continued

Communities are usually funded by philanthropists who appreciate the important function art plays in society. Think of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes' patron, Charlotte Mason, but without the strings attached. Though the community itself may be themed, patrons don't stand over you like Annie Wilkes from *Misery*, demanding that you write what they want to hear. You can write whatever and as much as you want.

Or you can hobnob with the other artists, play Wiffle ball, catch the shuttle to town, or grill the chef about why he doesn't wash the vegetables. (Answer: It only makes them wet. Timeframe: before pandemic.) The goal is to create a safe space for reflection and, as much as possible, to write. All they may ask is that you knock out a few chores, have a reading at the end of your stay, or acknowledge the community if the work is published. As far as time is concerned, residencies can last anywhere between two weeks and several months.

Writers such as James Baldwin and Jane Hamilton have attended communities, but before you think that these colonies only support "literary" endeavors, know that I've had three residencies over the years. Yes, yours truly. A writer of murder mysteries.

How apply to an Artist Community:

Aside from a small application fee, writers usually aren't required to pay for a residency in an artist community. The [Virginia Center for the Creative Arts](#) (VCCA) in Amherst, Virginia that I attended is supported through donations. They may still ask that the writer pay what they can afford, but it's not mandatory. I spent a month at a community in the mountains of Santa Cruz, California. [Djerassi](#) provides a space for writers and other creatives free of charge. I've recently learned that some communities charge artists, but the fee appears to be nominal. Do your homework before applying to communities that require the writer to pay for the residency.

The communities, the established ones such as Djerassi, VCCA, McDowell, Blue Mountain, and Hedgebrook* (a wonderful retreat just for women on Whidbey Island in Washington State), are juried or competitive. You'll need to complete an application, provide writing samples and an essay about your plans for the residency. Some residencies are highly competitive, while others are more open. Being published or well-known may be an advantage for applicants to some communities, or not a factor at all at others.



Artist Communities, continued

How to find an Artist Community

A directory of communities can be found in the book *Artists Communities: A Directory of Residences in the United States That Offer Time and Space for Creativity*. Also, an organization called [Alliance of Artists Communities](#) has a website with a search feature for communities throughout the world.

An artist community can be a great place for writers who need long stretches of time to be creative, or for those who find it difficult to pen the world's greatest novel in the margins of a grocery list.

*Hedgebrook produced a [video](#) describing the intent of an artist community, along with information about their program.

Faye Snowden is the author of several published novels with Kensington, as well as short stories and poems in literary journals. With a master's in English, she's a true literature geek who spends her spare time ruining movies for family and friends by explaining what will happen next, or how the film industry supports dominance society or, as she explains, the "hegemony." Her latest book, *A Killing Fire* (Flame Tree Press), was released last year. Aside from publishing, she has also managed two boys, a husband, five dogs and three writing fellowships over the years. Faye writes from her home in California.





A Flat and Happy Heroine by Laura Jensen Walker

I miss my breasts. Occasionally.

That's the opening line(s) to my debut cozy mystery novel, *Murder Most Sweet, A Bookish Baker Mystery* (August 2020, Crooked Lane Books.) Not your standard cozy beginning.

As a longtime breast cancer survivor—28 years in August, thankfully—I wanted to see someone like me in a mystery novel; a flat-and-happy, strong, independent woman who's grateful to be alive. A woman who jokes about her breastless state and doesn't let it hold her back from anything—including doing what she loves.

I also wanted to show that a man—a good-looking, successful man (who looks a little like Colin Firth) could be attracted to my quirky, strong, and funny breastless character. Breasts don't make a woman. Here's an exchange between my protagonist, Teddie St. John, and visiting English suspense author Tavish Bentley:

"I'm asking you out."

"On a date?"

"I believe that's what they call it."

"Seriously? You remember I don't have breasts, right?"

"Breasts are overrated."

Well I know that, but most men do not.

Diagnosed with breast cancer the day after my first wedding anniversary, this August (the week before my first cozy releases) I will celebrate 29 years together with my husband, Michael. I'm grateful to be married to a man who didn't marry me for my breasts. Michael married me for the important stuff: my record collection, killer scrambled eggs, and my ability to beat him at Silver Screen Trivial Pursuit.

I always begin my books with the main character—character first, followed by the plot, which unfolds organically. (Back in the pre-mystery-day, I wrote seven character-driven fun and frothy chick-lit novels.)

A Flat and Happy Heroine, continued

This seat-of-the-pantser never expected to write mysteries. Although they've always been my favorite genre to read—thank you, Trixie Belden—mysteries are all about plot. Intricate, in-depth plotting and planning. So. Not. Me. I'm not a plotter or a planner. It wasn't until I was whining to a longtime editor friend saying I didn't know what I wanted to write next and she said, "You should write cozy mysteries," that the idea was even planted.

And then it took root.

Less than a month later I sent two cozy ideas along with a few chapters to my agent. He told me to focus on the book with the slightly snarky Episcopal woman priest named Pastor Hope. So, I wrote my first cozy, *Hope, Faith & a Corpse*, which all the publishers promptly (and sometimes not so promptly) rejected. After crying into my cup of tea (PG Tips. Hot.) and shaking off the rejection blues, I decided I wanted to write a book with a character I hadn't seen before in a mystery—a character like me: a breast cancer survivor who chose to go flat.

And thus, *Murder Most Sweet*, which Catriona McPherson calls "fearlessly funny," was born. (Thank you, Catriona!) And thank you, SinC NorCal, for letting me tell you about my breastless baker and writer Teddie St. John from Lake Potawatomi, Wisconsin, who on a walk with her American Eskimo dog, Gracie, finds her missing silk scarf tied tightly around the neck of blonde, boobalicious Kristi, fiancée of touring British author Tavish Bentley.

I'm thrilled and grateful to return to writing after more than a decade away working for the State of California and to start this new mystery writing career. Who'd have thought?



Former journalist Laura Jensen Walker is the award-winning author of 17 books—both fiction and humorous non-fiction. *Murder Most Sweet* (August 11, 2020) is Laura's first mystery. Her second cozy, *Hope, Faith & a Corpse*, releases in January 2021. She is currently at work on *Death for Dessert*, the next novel in her Bookish Baker mystery series. Laura lives in Sacramento, CA and is a member of both Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America. For more, see www.laurajensenwalker.com.



Inciting Incident by Claire Ortalda

Beginnings are hard, as we all know. In a few words, the writer has to establish genre, tone, authorial voice, point of view, setting, protagonist. You're supposed to hook the reader/pose a story question yet give an idea of the character's "ordinary world" and somehow make the latter interesting. (Readers today are sophisticated and impatient and would not sit still for a lengthy description of the River Floss and the mill upon it, as George Eliot did at the beginning of *The Mill on the Floss* . . . before she got to the good stuff.)

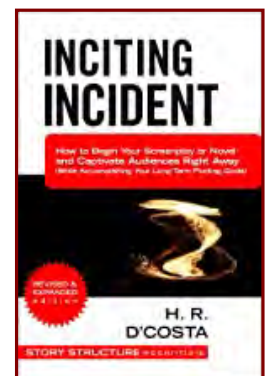
Somewhere in all this Act I material, you're supposed to launch your heroine on the quest/mission/goal that will occupy her for the rest of the novel. But heroines, like many real people, often can't contemplate or don't like leaving their ordinary world, however miserable it may be, so must be shoved, often kicking and screaming, out of it via something called the "inciting incident."

Okay. But what exactly is the inciting incident? And where is it placed? On page 1? End of Act I? Is it the hook, or is the hook on page 1 something different and the inciting incident an end-of-Act I thing that makes the hero "accept the call" (as in the hero's journey) or "accept the assignment" or commit to some path or mission, as in many detective stories and thrillers?

Most definitions of "inciting incident" kind of mush over these questions. Some conflate hook and inciting incident. Others seem to imply it's up to the writer where to put the thing, though, of course, it has to be in Act I somewhere.

Confused, I finally stumbled upon a self-published, Kindle-only book entitled . . . wait for it, *Inciting Incident*. It is by H.R. D'Costa, who doesn't write fiction much herself but can tear apart the inner workings of movies and novels in ways that are quite illuminating.

It was D'Costa who solved the beginning or end of Act I question by positing two inciting incidents: the distal inciting incident and the proximate inciting incident. By this definition, the distal inciting incident, which happens right away, as close to page 1 as possible, is the event that jolts the protagonist out of her ordinary world. It is passive—it happens to her in a way that allows the writer to illuminate the protagonist's ordinary world without boring the reader. For example, Lulu is trudging home from her boring job, as she does every day, when she encounters upon the sidewalk . . . a bundle of thousand-dollar bills, a baby, a treasure map, a dead body . . . whatever. Or encounters



Inciting Incident, continued

someone . . . her long-lost husband, a shivering orphan. “If it didn’t occur,” D’Costa writes, “it would be ‘business as usual’ for your protagonist.” Further, she notes, “it creates a ripple intriguing enough to get audiences to stick around for the proximate inciting incident.” The proximate inciting incident occurs later, close to the first-act break, and is the impetus for the acceptance of the call/assignment/mission which will comprise the rest of the plot of your novel.

After some thought, I could see this dual inciting incident pattern in successful novels I had read. Here’s an example: In Agatha Christie’s *Dumb Witness* (if you ignore the chapters before Poirot is involved and begin with Hastings’ P.O.V.), Hercule Poirot receives a letter from a woman asking for his help and worried about her safety. The missive is vague and annoying, according to Captain Hastings, and Poirot has to agree, but Hastings fails to note something intriguing that Poirot notices right away: the date on the letter is three months ago. This is the distal inciting incident. That date so intrigues Poirot that he gets Hastings to drive him down to the lady’s village that day. They arrive in the village to find that the lady died about two months ago. Well, that’s that, Hastings says, but not so for Poirot. A woman writes to him worried about her safety, the letter is somehow not mailed until recently, and now the woman is dead. This is too intriguing for Poirot and he launches onto his mission: to find out how the lady died and, if it’s murder, to find the murderer. The proximate inciting incident, for a lover of puzzles like Poirot, is when he finds out the woman is dead.

Dick Francis uses dual inciting incidents like this to excellent effect. In *Hot Money*, for instance, the protagonist’s stepmother is murdered (off screen), followed by a plea from the protagonist’s father for help. What? He and his father have been estranged (ordinary world) ever since the father married the stepmother. This is the distal inciting incident. We are intrigued by the stepmother’s murder and our hero is jolted out of his everyday world by his father’s unlikely plea. Hero cautiously agrees to meet his father at a horse sale, during which Francis manages to stuff a lot of backstory including the fact that an attempt had been made on the father’s life as well as the stepmother’s. Hero and Dad walk out of the horse sale and a car almost kills Dad, but hero heroically saves him (proximate inciting incident). Whoa! Dad’s fears are real. Hero-son accepts the assignment to play bodyguard to his ridiculously wealthy father and therein lies the tale (rest of book) of all the schemers after Dad’s bucks and the hero’s quest for the murdering party.

In *Reflex*, also by Dick Francis, the book begins with our jockey-hero on the ground after a fall during a steeplechase (ordinary world). As he is lying there groaning, he is glad that a malicious racetrack photographer, George Millace, has recently died and therefore is not present to record the jockey’s ignominy, as the shutterbug so loved to do. This combination of “ordinary world” but dramatic fall and mention of the photographer serve as the distal inciting incident because soon our hero is drawn into George’s life. First the innocent widow is burglarized, then beaten up, then the house is fire-bombed. At this last, the proximate inciting incident, out of pity for the family and conviction that the attackers were trying to either locate something of George’s photography in the

Inciting Incident, continued

house or destroy it, our jockey-hero, who is also an amateur photographer, accepts the assignment to find out what George was hiding that someone wants to stay hidden.

In Francis' *Bolt*, a jockey upset about possibly losing his fiancée rides the Princess's horse (ordinary world) too hard. Then the Princess fails to show up for the jockey's next race on one of her horses. Her failure to show up is the distal inciting incident, followed, in this case, fairly quickly by a sort of intermediary inciting incident: the jockey goes looking for her and finds her, upset, in the company of a strange, threatening man. The Princess asks the jockey to accompany her home and there reveals that the man was threatening her husband's business and honor (proximate inciting incident). She asks the jockey for help and he accepts the assignment for her sake, and because she is his fiancée's aunt. The rest of the novel is comprised of our hero's efforts to defeat the threatening man's evil plans. (Yeah, he wins the girl in the process!)

For me, D'Costa's two-step inciting incident solves the confusion created by competing definitions of the term. By starting with something that happens (distal inciting incident) to a passive protagonist yet is so personal that it jolts the protagonist out of his ordinary world, the writer creates interest (a hook, a story question, an intriguing situation). By concluding the first act with another occurrence (proximate inciting incident) that's causally linked to the distal inciting incident but that has an even stronger jolt, the author can launch the protagonist on his mission or assignment, the trials and tribulations and trajectory of which will comprise the rest of the novel.

Claire Ortalda wrote stories as a child, later became a journalist, then wrote ad copy and promotional materials in Silicon Valley. She received her MA and MFA at San Francisco State in Creative Writing: Novel and wrote literary fiction and poetry for a while, with some publication success and a few awards. Along the way, she became aware that her reading material of choice was mysteries, so she joined Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America. Claire is currently marketing a full-length traditional mystery and working on another mystery novel with a sci-fi bent. "Oglethorpe's Camera" was published in the Anne Perry-edited MWA anthology, *Odd Partners*, in 2019. Her humorous mystery story, "The Recipe Box," will be published in the July/August issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*.



Member Profile: Ana Brazil

Fourteenth in a series to introduce our members to each other

Many of you know sibling Ana Brazil as our very busy Events Coordinator. She's also the award-winning author of historical crime fiction celebrating bodacious American heroines.

Stiletta: First of all, how do you forestall people from pronouncing your surname like the country? Tell me more about the name's origin.

Ana Brazil: Brazil is my husband's family name (it's Irish) and honestly, it took me a while to learn how to pronounce it. It's hard to forestall people from pronouncing our name like the country, but if I can, I explain that our Brazil rhymes with "razzle" or "dazzle." Fortunately, most people smile when I say, "You know, Razzle Dazzle Brazil." The family mythology is that Portuguese sailors shipwrecked during the Spanish Armada of 1588 swam the Atlantic Ocean to a new life in Ireland. Ancestry.com claims that Brazils have been in Ireland a lot longer than 1588, but that's our fun family mythology and we're sticking to it.

Stiletta: How/why did you decide to set your historical mysteries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

AB: The women of this era have always intrigued me. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many American women (primarily native-born white women) were turning away from marriage, attending college, reading extensively, forming supportive friendships, and making big decisions about how to live their best lives. When I studied Women's History at Florida State, I was immediately drawn to bold, audacious women like Hull House Settlement founder Jane Addams, pioneering muckraker Ida Tarbell, and suffragist Alice Paul. I was also drawn to urban America—because that's where real social progress seemed to take place—and I eventually wrote my Master's thesis on "Social Welfare in Gilded Age New Orleans."

I had always loved reading historical mysteries and realized that the real-life heroines I admired so much would certainly have the right stuff to solve any mystery thrown their way.

Stiletta: You received your master's degree in American history from Florida State and have worked as an architectural historian. "Kate Chopin Tussles with a Novel Ending," which appeared in our NorCal *Fault Lines* anthology, features details of Chopin's home. Did you visit and/or study her house?

Member Profile: Ana Brazil, continued

AB: Nope! I set “Kate Chopin Tussles” on the Louisiana Gulf Coast in 1899, but Kate was actually living in St. Louis, MO at that time. I “visited” the house I created in the story by reading Kate’s

1899 novel *The Awakening*, in which the Creole families spend the summers in large boarding houses on the coast. As an architectural historian, I’ve inspected, photographed, and described so many different types of buildings that—as an author—I can recreate almost any type of American historical building in my stories.

Stiletta: Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* is integral to this story. Did you read the novel and then decide to write the story, or how did the novel and story intersect for you?

AB: I read *The Awakening* in college (didn’t we all?) and knew that the Gilded Age locales described—New Orleans and the Gulf Coast—would be perfect for my second Fanny Newcomb historical mystery (which isn’t finished). To be honest, I cherry-picked through a digital copy of *The Awakening* for usable ideas. (FUN FACT: Women used umbrellas on the beach, but parasols in the city.) Since the action of the story is that Kate “tussles with a novel ending,” I reread the ending of *The Awakening* many, many times for inspiration.

As far as the writing goes, my first decision was that I wanted to join the fun and participate in the NorCal SinC anthology *Fault Lines*. But I had a really hard time finding an intersection between fault lines/earthquakes and the historical crime fiction that I write. Fortunately, I starting thinking about faults, blame, and guilt instead of actual earthquakes. I was dipping into *The Awakening* at the time, which I knew, when it was published, was often vilified. And so I wondered: What kind of faults, blame, and guilt would be exposed, what would happen, if Kate were confronted by one of her very passionate readers?

Stiletta: “Miss Evelyn Nesbit Presents” in the *Me Too Short Stories* anthology includes fascinating factual information about the showgirl Evelyn Nesbit. For example, her millionaire husband murdered the famous architect who raped her when she was fourteen. But most of the story seems fictional. Do you worry that your readers will not properly sort the historical from the fictional?

AB: No, I don’t worry about that.

When I write a short story that includes a real person, my main concern is to be fair to that person. I’ve done my research to understand their personal miseries and pleasures, responsibilities and rewards. I want to tell something truthful that people may not know about that person and then let the character loose in a tense situation. Since I write historical crime fiction, that usually means that the character is looking for justice.

What I really hope my readers do—after reading one of my short stories—is find out more about the character’s real life.

Member Profile: Ana Brazil, continued

Stiletta: Your novel, *Fanny Newcomb and the Irish Channel Ripper*, is set in New Orleans in the 1880s, the Victorian Age. Fanny is certainly an “audacious woman,” as her investigation into a student’s death leads her into the unseemly worlds of prostitution and pornography. In this setting, what were the advantages and disadvantages of having a female protagonist?

AB: As an amateur female detective in Gilded Age New Orleans, Fanny definitely has the element of surprise. No one expects her—a mid-twenties, middle class spinster—to forge through saloons, cemeteries, slums, and houses of prostitution in search of a murderer. But she does, and men and women (many shocked to their proper southern core) stand back and let her through.

I see Fanny as “Miss Steel Magnolia, circa 1889,” and rarely see her gender as a disadvantage. Whether she has to fuss, flatter, or manipulate, she’s going to get the information she needs.

Stiletta: *Fanny Newcomb and the Irish Channel Ripper* is about to receive a new cover. What prompted this decision?

AB: Last June I was at the Historical Novel Society Conference and saw my book on sale next to all of the other “Gilded Age” novels. My existing cover—which featured turn-of-the-century pornography which ties into my story—really stood out, and not in a good way. Suddenly, my cover was not at all attractive to me, which meant that it probably wasn’t attractive to other readers either. And if it’s not attractive, it’s not going to sell. I want Fanny to find a home with many readers, and I’m hoping that a new cover will open her to a new market.

Stiletta: You and four historical novel cohorts have banded together to form Paper Lantern Writers. Please tell us about your group.

AB: Mystery writers have been banding together to promote themselves for years (Jungle Red Writers and Ladies of Mystery come to mind), but traditionally, historical novelists go it alone. Last summer five historical novelists (two published, three pre-published) decided to pool our promotional efforts as a group. We’ve created a website where we blog twice a week and we show up on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter almost daily. Although we started with promotion in mind, we’ve quickly come to value each other’s writing strengths and friendship. In the writing and publishing biz, you’ve got to have friends!

Stiletta: What is your next project?

AB: I’m finishing up the first book of a trilogy set in post-World War I America. Book One is set in San Francisco and stars Viola Vermillion, a brash, self-confident vocalist who has a single-minded ambition: to play the Palace Theatre in New York City. But when her piano player/lover is

Member Profile: Ana Brazil, continued

murdered in the loge of the theater...her ambitions take a turn. The trilogy was inspired by the scrapbooks, photographs, and records that I inherited from vaudeville chanteuse and Okeh Records artist Elise Clark. I've always appreciated historical fiction that tells both an intimate story (in our genre, a murder) and a broader story that ties into what's really happening in the world. This is my WIP goal and so far, it looks like I'm going to pull it off!

Stiletta: Is there a last thing you'd like your NorCal siblings to know about you?

AB: Yep, I'm very, very grateful to be able to write full time. My mind has been chock-full of historical and criminal ideas for decades, and I'm finally able to settle down and work out these ideas. When I'm not writing, I'm very happy reading, playing bluegrass mandolin (my husband plays banjo), and loving on my twelve-year+ Belgian Sheepdog.

Ana Brazil was interviewed by Vinnie Hansen, another NorCal sibling. A two-time Claymore Award finalist, Vinnie is the author of the Carol Sabala Mystery series, the novel *Lostart Street*, and many short stories, including "The Last Word" in the *Fault Lines* anthology.

Free Online Summer Workshop

Mystery in the Midlands, a mid-summer conference sponsored by the Palmetto Chapter of Sisters in Crime and the Southeastern Region of Mystery Writers of America, was scheduled to be held in "famously hot" Columbia, South Carolina on July 25, featuring guest of honor Charlaine Harris and an array of fabulous authors. Then the pandemic hit! What to do?

Their guests were too wonderful to cancel, so it was decided to go virtual via Crowdcast with a half-day workshop. Now, any member of SinC or MWA can participate for free.

What better way can you imagine beating the heat of July than spending time in your air-conditioned home or sunbathing outdoors listening, for free, to: John Floyd, Tara Laskowski, and Art Taylor (short stories), Alexia Gordon, Toni L.P. Kelner, and Gigi Pandian (paranormals), and Dana Cameron, Jeffrey Deaver, and Charlaine Harris (novels to screenplays).

This year you don't need to come to Columbia. Watch the registration link at the SinC Palmetto website: <https://palmettochaptersin.wixsite.com/palmetto>.



Why Pacific Heights is Perfect for a Cozy by Susan McCormick

I set my new cozy mystery series, *The Fog Ladies*, in an elegant apartment building in San Francisco where old ladies start to die, with a group of spunky older women and one overworked, overtired, overstressed medical intern. The Pacific Heights building is similar to the one I lived in years ago, minus the old ladies dying. The neighborhood is as much a character in the story as the Fog Ladies themselves, with its beautiful 1920s and 30s apartment buildings, Union Street, hills, pruned trees in winter, and views.

In my apartment building, which was on Broadway, tenants of all ages lived together--single people, young families with babies, middle-aged couples and older women. Being the cozy mystery lover that I was, I realized my apartment building would make a perfect cozy-type enclosed setting for a series of murders, with a killer afoot and nowhere to hide.

In the book, Mrs. Bridge falls off a stool cleaning bugs out of her kitchen light. Mrs. Talwin slips on bubbles in the bath and drowns. The Pacific Heights building is turning over tenants faster than the fog rolls in on a cool San Francisco evening. The medical intern, Sarah James, has no time for sleuthing. Her elderly neighbors, the Fog Ladies, have nothing but time. Sarah assumes the deaths are the natural consequence of growing old. The Fog Ladies assume murder.

Years ago, my elderly next-door neighbor fell and broke her hip. She fell against the door and blocked it, and her son was forced to climb out my window, six floors up, and across the fire escape to her window to reach her. She went to the hospital and healed, but she did not return to her apartment. There was nothing nefarious about her unfortunate accident, though the Fog Ladies might have seen it differently.

The name of the group of ladies, the Fog Ladies, popped into my head as I thought about my old lady characters and their special bond of friendship. When I lived in San Francisco, I heard the same words on the radio each day: Early morning fog burning off by midday. So young Sarah in the book says you can count on the ladies just like you can count on the early morning fog.

Apartment life lends itself to over-involvement in others' lives. One of my characters, Enid Carmichael, has very good hearing and a perch above the front door. She hears mutterings, sees stealthy visitors. She also discovers Starbucks lattes at the ripe old age of eighty. She loves the bitterness, the froth. Then she craves more, but her fixed income does not allow for Starbucks. She



Perfect for a Cozy, continued

steals Starbucks coupons from her neighbors' newspapers to feed her addiction. If not for her apartment life, those newspapers would not be sitting on the lobby table for the taking.

For my mystery *The Fog Ladies*, Pacific Heights' fine old apartment buildings provide the ideal setting for a cozy. Apartment living, where everyone might know everything about everyone else and where tenants may have known each other and each other's secrets for years, is rife for a whodunit. Add fog and foghorns, earthquakes and aftershocks, Bay views and rooftop decks with tenuous railings, and you have the perfect neighborhood for a mystery.

Susan McCormick is an author and doctor in Seattle. She is an active member of the Puget Sound Chapter of Sisters in Crime and recently joined SinC NorCal as well. The first in her new series, *The Fog Ladies*, is set in San Francisco. She also wrote *Granny Can't Remember Me*, a children's picture book about Alzheimer's disease and dementia. She graduated from Smith College and George Washington University School of Medicine, with additional medical training in Washington, DC and San Francisco, where she lived in an elegant apartment building much like the one in the book. She is married and has two boys, plus a giant Newfoundland dog, Albert. Visit her at <https://susanmccormickbooks.com>.



Podcasting for Authors

by Marcia Rosen



Let's face it. It ain't easy writing a book.

First, you write the book with, hopefully, a plausible idea.

Then, there are the rewrites, edits, more rewrites, more edits and, much of the time, some level of concern about deadlines, publishers, distribution to bookstores, and--fingers crossed--sales.

Then what?

Wait? I don't think so. Not the best idea. Having owned a marketing/public relations firm for many years, I know that good marketing campaigns work.

As an author I agree that, oftentimes, writing the book is the easiest part; it's what comes next that involves anticipation, hope, and serious effort to get the word out about our words.

There is a truth to our ambition: most authors have a story to tell, created from life experiences or imagination. Our love of words and how they're put together allows us to create the magic of a book. Our own book.

So, how do you reach your potential audience? There are many good ways, some not so good, and some that are just scams. Beware the scams! Ask seasoned writers what they recommend and what to stay away from. You'll save time and money.

I have found that book signing events, some online promotions, publishing articles, blogging and guest spots on blogs are good options. All of these give you visibility and establish your potential reader's awareness of you and your books. As an agency founder myself, I know authors need a strong voice promoting their work, for both visibility and relevance.

One fairly new and valuable book marketing approach: **podcasts**.

Millions of people are listening to podcasts. Online surveys have revealed over 70 million Americans listen to podcasts each month on tablets, smartphones, home computers and other listening devices. Online statistics assert that "beyond any doubt, podcasts are a potential goldmine for promoting your book(s)."

Here are some outstanding podcasts for book authors:

- [8 Great Podcasts for Writers and Book Authors](#)

Podcasting for Authors, continued

- [The Ultimate List of Podcasts for Authors](#)
- [New York Magazine articles about podcasts](#) Great resource about numerous podcasts, from mystery to comedy, from culture to politics and much more.

Following are my tips on booking an appearance as a podcast guest and on being a successful podcast guest.

Booking an appearance as a podcast guest:

- Be prepared.
- Know what podcast is best for you.
- Connect with podcast hosts.
- Pitch the host or booker. Tell why you believe their audience will find your books, and you as a guest, entertaining.
- Ask the host what is expected of guests.

Being a successful podcast guest:

- Be prepared.
- Provide host with information about you and your book prior to the podcast. (You want the host to create audience interest when introducing you.)
- Be able to discuss why you wrote the book, along with:
 - What motivated, inspired and interested you in the story or subject.
 - What type of research you did.
 - Your writing process.
 - Your top three favorite authors, and why.
- Sound enthusiastic and excited about being on the podcast.
- Never say anything negative about other authors or publishers.
- Tell listeners where they can purchase your book.
- Thank the host. Be gracious.

And finally, yes, I'm starting *MysteryLoversPodcast.com* – look for it in fall 2020.

Marcia Rosen, (aka M. Glenda Rosen) frequently speaks about writing mysteries and growing up as “the gangster’s daughter.” She is author of The Senior Sleuths mysteries and her publisher, Level Best Books, will re-releasing the Dying to Be Beautiful Mystery Series beginning in 2020. She is also the author of *The Woman’s Business Therapist* and the award-winning *My Memoir Workbook*. Founder of a successful marketing/public relations agency, she is a member of Sisters in Crime (NorCal and Albuquerque), Southwest Writers, Central Coast Writers and Public Safety Writers Association.

In Real Life: When Cops Do the Killing

by Ellen Kirschman



These are hard times to be a cop. There are days it seems like everyone hates the police because the actions of a few have tainted the entire profession.

Policing is one of the most stressful and complex occupations in the world.

What other job requires you to be combat ready at the same time you are called upon to be a counselor, a priest, a lawyer, and a social worker? What other profession authorizes you to use deadly force and then mandates that you attempt to save the person you just tried to kill?

On average, over the span of a career, an urban police officer will see about 25 recently dead bodies, 14 decaying corpses, and 10 sexually assaulted children. They will know two colleagues who are badly injured, intentionally or accidentally. They will be shot at once and injured several times.

I hate reading novels or watching TV shows where a cop kills someone and is undamaged, morally and psychologically. This is far from the truth and trivializes what real officers go through. In my experience, after a brief moment of relief about staying alive, the aftereffects of a shooting can be dire.

I am a police and public safety psychologist. I write the Dr. Dot Meyerhoff mysteries to explore these complexities. If you write novels with police shootings, here are a few things I'd like you to know. It is my hope that this brief exploration of a very deep subject will inspire you to write real-life, multi-dimensional police characters.

- There are literally millions of interactions between cops and civilians that go smoothly every day, but don't make headlines.
- Most cops gain compliance without physical tactics.
- Most officers will never shoot their guns in the line of duty except on the firing range.

Not all shootings are alike: What happens following a shooting depends on how the shooting went down, who was shot, and the officer's experience before, during and after. Here are a few scenarios I know firsthand.

Friendly fire: This happens when one LEO (law enforcement officer) accidentally and unintentionally kills another. This can happen during a large-scale multi-agency event with lots of

When Cops Do The Killing, continued

crossfire. Or when an unknown undercover cop appears on scene and is mistaken for a bad guy. Or when an officer accidentally discharges a weapon. Or thinks the weapon is unloaded when it isn't.

Victim's status: Was the victim unarmed? Was the victim's weapon unloaded? Was it a cell phone? A replica? Was the victim a bystander? A child? A combat vet? Mentally ill? A family friend, a neighbor, or a relative?

Was this **suicide by cop**? In which case, there will be two victims: the dead guy and the officer who, despite all efforts to avoid a shooting, is forced to use his or her weapon.

The aftermath:

Most officers will experience physical, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms, e.g., perceptual distortions, degradation of memory, difficulty sleeping, irritability, preoccupation with the event, etc. These are involuntary reactions, activated by the human response to threats against survival and generated by a storm of stress hormones and neurochemicals.

Approximately 10-15% will go on to develop PTSI (post-traumatic stress injury).

Many officers will oscillate wildly between remorse for actions not taken and guilt for acts committed. Adaptive denial breaks down as the officer realizes, often for the first time, that there really are people who will kill a cop and times a cop has no choice but to kill.

Recovery is influenced when an LEO was blindsided by the event, feels helpless, thinks he or she is going to die (even if untrue), has a pile of stress (work related and personal), is vilified in the media, had eye contact with the victim, is called a hero (the label of hero is a lot harder to wear than it is to earn), has poor coping skills (substance abuse, isolation, rugged individualism), is betrayed by his or her department, by the community, or by friend or family.

I invite you to my website (see my bio below) or my blog on *Psychology Today*. I'm happy to answer your questions.

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* 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.



MFA Part 2

by Camille Minichino

There's something wrong with Margie Bunting's bookkeeping. Her records say that the article I wrote as I embarked on an MFA in Creative Writing appeared in May of 2019. But I know for sure it was no more than a month ago. Maybe two?

Or – could it be that I'm *that slow* in pursuing this degree, only halfway through after a year?

I might have to accept that I am that slow.

I'll skip over the year in between and jump to my 6th class, this month: "Gothic Literature," the genre that gave us Poe, Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, and Stephen King, among others.

The novel featured in the first week could only be read slowly (excuses, excuses), thanks to sentences like this:

To this application, however, Olivia replied, that, though she had long been no stranger to their mutual affection, or to the several circumstances which had both proved its durability, and tried their fortitude, she never could consent that her daughter should become a member of any family, whose principal was either insensible of her value, or unwilling to acknowledge it; and that in this instance it would be necessary to Vivaldi's success not only that he, but that his father should be a suitor; on which condition only, she allowed him to hope for her acquiescence.

From *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe (1764 - 1823)



How many times did you have to read the sentence to realize it's a Romeo-and-Juliet kind of story, only darker, eventually including diabolism, eerie sounds, and nameless terrors?

Radcliffe is one of the authors thought by many to have spearheaded the "genre," a term not widely used before that time. The novels of Radcliffe and others, such as Horace Walpole, who gave it its name, and Matthew Lewis were often rejected as trashy, a threat to virtue, piety, and domestic order. (Uh-oh, did I just lapse into convoluted Goth?)

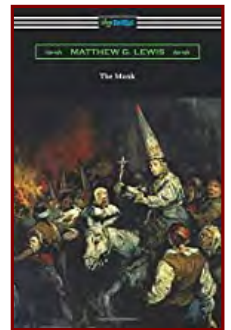
On the way to my homework, an extreme analysis of the origins of Goth, as we literati call it (chin in air), I picked up a few treats to toss around the next time we have a physical Meet and Greet. The selections in italics are from *The Italian*.

MFA Part 2, continued

- I loved seeing words used as different parts of speech from what we're used to: . . . *a gentle slope that margined the water.*
- And what about a word with a different meaning: *From this moment I make you independent and promise . . . to give you a thousand sequins.* In the past I've had a sequin or two on a jacket. But these thousand sequins are Venetian gold coins.
- One of my favorites: *Young man! You are an enthusiast, and I pardon you.* The explanatory note: Enthusiasm was a dismissive 18th century term for the belief in private revelation or personal communion with the divine.

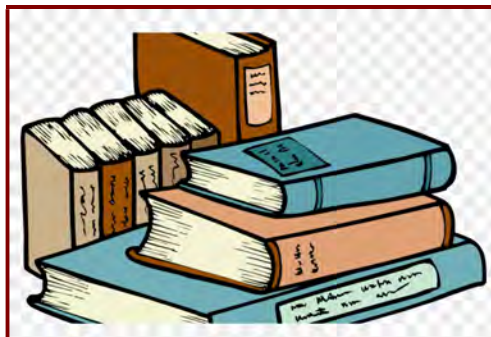
The next book, for the second week, is Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, described as a more sensational type of Gothic romance, exploiting horror and violence, including Lucifer, witchcraft, and ghosts, and making it a bestseller before Lewis was twenty years old.

I can hardly wait.



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. Her fifth series, the Alaska Diner Mysteries by Elizabeth Logan, will debut in May 2020.

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



This Murder was a “Beach”

by Ana Manwaring



Hours before my flight, I wavered with my decision to attend this year’s LCC. Although I’d registered a year earlier, I hadn’t anticipated a highly contagious virus infecting the world. Should I get on that plane? But Jane Stillwater, the moderator of my panel and not one to let a little pandemic put her off, had asked if anyone had connections to migrant centers in Tijuana – for me, an irresistible *sirena* song, the lure of adventure in Mexico .

The day before LCC opened, Jane and I rode the Trolley until we encountered the ubiquitous scent of tortillas and chilies roasting on the comal. ¡Bienvenidos a México! We hired a taxi to drive us around to migrant centers and learned the plight of hundreds of emigres fleeing the violence of organized crime, drug cartels and gangs in Central America and Mexico. We visited two centers: an impoverished “hole in the wall” in a shabby district and the other run by nuns in a tidy middle class *barrio*, housing women and children. The vibe of both centers was of hopeful optimism. We drank margaritas at Playas de Tijuana, where the border wall stretches into the Pacific.

The conference opened with Author Speed Dating and readers mobbed the hallway in front of Rio Vista A-B. With 19 rounds of 10 readers and 2 authors, the noise in the room shook my bones; I lost my voice, shouting. My partner, Lauri Broadbent, and I introduced each other, support to get us started. By table five we were pros, cracking jokes, altering our pitches to suit the group in front of us, and generally relaxing into an exciting and wonderfully enjoyable opportunity to meet readers and come away with some new friends.

After the “grab and go” lunch, I pushed through the crowds scurrying to get to panels and attended “Writing Our Hometown” that included Corey Lynn Fayman, Ken Kuhlken and Carl Vonderau, whom I did not know, but later chatted with at registration during our volunteer shift. I love how connections are made at LCC, and working the registration table is the best way to meet people. Later, I wandered the bookstore, bought a copy of *Crossing Borders* edited by Lisa Brackmann and Toastmaster Matt Coyle. I chatted about poetry with Cory in the hallway outside the hospitality room, visited the book exchange table (to see if people were picking up my books— yes!) and stopped by the Bouchercon table to catch up with Cap Crimes sisters Michelle Drier and Dänna Wilburg, who gifted me their new books.

Now, keep in mind, many people did not attend due to coronavirus and the panels were made up of last-minute additions. I attended “Tales from the Road,” a hilarious revealing of the panelists’ coping methods, fears, and plain silly stories. Laurie R. King is a linen closet tidier; William Kent Kreuger is afraid of the dark. We all know how funny Catriona McPherson is and she didn’t disappoint with her opinions on tidy cars, and Lee Goldberg had the room roaring with

This Murder was a “Beach,” continued

family tales. Humor hit the spot because by mid-afternoon, everyone knew we were going to be closed down.

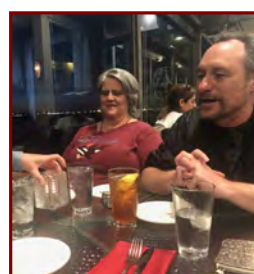
The house was not quite packed for the interview with Matt Coyle who, as usual, entertained the audience with interesting information and humor, but a pall had settled—anticipation of the chopping block. Matt talked about how, even with eight successful books, he’s not able to support himself as a writer. Sad.

And then Lucinda and Stan gave us the bad news. LCC 2020, Murder’s a Beach was over.

Well, not entirely over, we had to eat all those delicious hors d’oeuvres catering had made for our reception and paw through all the unclaimed registration bags for books we wanted to take home. Meanwhile, MWA president Laurie R. King handed out coupons to members for a free drink at the bar and, as on the eve of a war, everyone flocked to the bar for a final Happy Hour before the ^#! hit the fan—lines to use the computers, hours to wait to speak to an airlines representative, emotional conference goers. I experienced a moment of grief when I passed a misty-eyed Lucinda Surber as she and the promoters negotiated terms with the hotel. My heart went out to them; the committee had put so much time and effort into making San Diego LCC one of the best.

In the morning the hotel lobby resembled a ghost town. My waitress gifted me my pot of coffee, I grabbed my bulging tote of books and Lyfted to the airport—already planning for Albuquerque in 2021.

Apologies to Ana for leaving her out of the 2020 Executive Committee Member bios in the February issue. Ana coaches and edits through JAM Manuscript Consulting and teaches creative writing at Napa Valley College. She is a former lifestyle columnist, and her book reviews can be found at www.anamanwaring.com. She has published *Set Up and The Hydra Effect*, books 1 and 2 of the *JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures*, and plans to finish book 3 this year. Her poetry chapbook, *Nature Girl*, was published in late 2019. As NorCal Treasurer, she plans to complete the conversion of our books from a manual spreadsheet to a full digital accounting system to better account for the needs of our chapter.





Bouchercon 2020 Update by Patricia E. Canterbury

My original article for this issue of *The Stiletta* was from my perspective as Disability Coordinator for Bouchercon 2020 in Sacramento, as well as a report on its current status. The team has been planning the event for five years. As we all know now, however, Bouchercon been cancelled. Here's co-chair Michele Drier's announcement.

Dear Bouchercon 2020 Community:

In the 50 years since the first Bouchercon, our community of mystery fans and authors have gathered together annually for several days to celebrate all that we love. We've faced many changes and challenges, but never have we faced something like the global coronavirus pandemic, which is causing widespread disruption to every aspect of our lives.

We're terribly sad to tell you this, but out of an abundance of caution and concern for the health and safety of our community, we are cancelling Bouchercon 2020. We have no way of knowing what the balance of this year holds for groups of people gathering, nor can we tell what the state of travel will be.

While we are cancelling the actual Bouchercon convention, we are working to develop a different format for some of the Bouchercon signal events and activities such as the Anthony Awards, the short story anthology and the general membership meeting. Nominations will continue to be open until June 5 for the Anthony Awards.

As we work to develop other ways to present a traditional Bouchercon experience, we'll keep in touch with you.

For those of you who had registered or provided sponsorships, we will be issuing full refunds.

And for those with hotel reservations, we will be working with the hotels to cancel all reservations, although they, too are closed now.

Although the members of the Local Organizing Committee who have worked on this for the last five years are saddened, we know this is the right step to take to keep all safe. And we know that there will be future Bouchercons where we can gather again to celebrate the world of mystery.

Patricia E. (Pat) Canterbury is a native Sacramentan, political scientist, art collector, avid reader, and philanthropist who has written seven published novels—one children's chapter book, four pre-teen mysteries, and two adult mysteries. Pat has traveled to all 50 states and over 54 countries. More information can be found on her website, www.patmyst.com. She lives in Sacramento with her husband, elderly cat, and a yard full of wild birds, raccoons, and golden butterflies.

Member News



New Releases

The Lost Gargoyle of Paris by Gigi Pandian, an Accidental Alchemist novella, March 31

Dark Tomorrow by Reece Hirsch, book #2 in his series featuring FBI Special Agent Lisa Tanchik, who investigates cybercrime, May 12 by Thomas & Mercer

Faye Snowden, Ann Parker, Camille Minichino, and Madeleine McEwen all contributed stories to the new anthology, *Low Down Dirty Vote: Volume II*, edited by Mysti Berry, to be released July 4. The theme is “every stolen vote is a crime,” and all sales earnings will be contributed to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s program to defend voting rights.

Public (Virtual) Appearances

On Saturday, July 18 from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m., Terry Shames will give an online presentation to the Capitol Crimes (Sacramento) chapter of Sisters in Crime on the topic of “Inspiration for Character and Plot Ideas.” Details TBA.

On Tuesday, May 19 at 6:00 p.m. (online), Cara Black and Jacqueline Winspear will discuss their books and help celebrate the fact that their host, City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, is able to keep its doors open, thanks to a huge crowd funding. Check with www.carablack.com for more details when they become available.

Awards and Recognition

Gigi Pandian’s *The Alchemist’s Illusion* is a finalist for the G.P. Putnam Sons Sue Grafton Memorial Award, to be given out at the Edgar Awards on April 30, which will now be presented online.

JoAnn Smith Ainsworth reports she is walking on air as *Expect Trouble* hit the Amazon Top 100 list in Psychic Mysteries in April.

Simon Wood won Haw Creek Horror’s real life ghost story contest with his story, “My Other Sister.” You can read it here: <https://www.hawcreekhorr.com/stories/reader-mail-my-other-sister>

Miscellaneous

JoAnn Smith Ainsworth debuted the book trailer, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qUtBsOgSfY>, for her latest release, *Expect Betrayal*, Book 3 of an award-winning series wherein the U.S. government recruits psychics to hunt down Nazi spies during WWII.

Question of the Quarter



In what environment are you most comfortable writing? (Think home/elsewhere, noise/music, clothing, food/drink, pets, etc.)

I'm lucky—I have a home office. Oddly enough, though, I do a significant amount of work on first drafts writing longhand in a notebook while riding on BART on my way to or from my day job. Something about the distractions of the noise and the people helps me get out of my own way and just write without agonizing over every single word. That's what revisions are for. 😊 ***Robin Stuart***

Am I ever comfortable writing? Comfortable conjures for me kicking back in an easy chair with a book, rain or shine, and a glass of wine. When I'm writing, no matter where I am, I'm generally hunched over my computer (always meaning to sit up straight but ending up anything but). I can write anywhere—home, cafe, airplane, hotel room. I read about one writer who writes in bed until afternoon. I'd love to try that sometime, but I tend to bounce out of bed and get busy. Somehow going back to bed to write never appeals. ***Terry Shames***

I am fortunate to have a home office with a standing desk. I close my door and close out the world. When I open my door, I talk to my husband, who does his best not to notice I'm physically in the room but mentally still at my desk. ***Ellen Kirschman***

I'm most comfortable writing at my desk in my home office. That said, distractions there are huge. I've found out that getting out of the house can increase my productivity, especially during those don't-feel-like-writing times. I wrote a fair amount of *Chimera Catalyst* at a neighborhood bar that had a fireplace, lounge chairs, and a playlist with rousing songs. ***Susan Kuchinskas***

I write two books a year so I need my office, surrounded by my reference books, total quiet to get through my 1500 words a day. ***Rhys Bowen***

In my comfy study, in my empty house, up a dirt road, miles from anyone. My everyday life is more like a writing retreat than any writing retreat. ***Catriona McPherson***

I work in the kitchen because it has a view of the patio, plants, and birds. Not a good diet aid, however! I have to have silence so I can hear that strange little voice in my head dictating. Even the cats have stopped talking to me when I am "earning cat food money" . . . ***Priscilla Royal***

If I know where I'm going with a scene that day and I get in the zone, I can write anywhere there's power for the laptop: airport, airplane, at the dining room table, at my desk . . . If things aren't going so great, and I need more support to get going, it's best to have no one at all in the house, usually no music, either. Wearing sweats, having a glass of water nearby, and hoping the dog won't keep asking to get in and out. All that helps. ***Deborah McCaskey***

Question of the Quarter, continued

I can write anywhere. At the moment, I am finishing up my latest novel on a cruise. But most of the time, I'm at home, where I have a small office off the kitchen. If I need privacy, I pull the drapes between my office (which is a former breakfast nook) and the kitchen, in case someone other than me is in there rattling them pots and pans. But overall, I like being surrounded by familiarity, cat, husband, and great smells of a meal cooking. But I have been known to burn something from time to time if I get caught up in writing a chase scene! *Heather Haven*

I commute on the ferry from Alameda to South San Francisco, and while I wouldn't say it's where I'm the most comfortable, it's definitely where most of my writing gets done! There isn't much cell signal out in the middle of the bay, which is good for limiting distractions, but I always seem to have a burst of ideas right as we're pulling into the dock. *Daisy Bateman*

I write in the early morning hours, creeping downstairs while my family sleeps. My giant, slobbery, silent Newfoundland dog, Albert, pads behind me and settles near the desk, my constant writing companion. *Susan McCormick*

First drafts don't matter. I can write anywhere and with anything going on. Revisions and heavy edits: home office or favorite living room chair and portable desk. *Susan Bickford*

Most comfy writing is at home, upstairs where it's warmer, at my farm table with MSNBC on silent with captions (just in case). I write with a cup of coffee (which often gets cold) in sweatpants and a cotton shirt, sweatshirt, fleece slippers and my Havanese buddy Buster under the table. *Robin Somers*

My daily routine is to wake early in the morning, do three-quarters of an hour of physical exercises and another half hour of meditation and breathing exercises. I write for 3-4 hours on my laptop in my p.j.s, then rest a bit before showering and going downstairs for lunch. In the afternoon, I check my email, return phone calls, and handle household and marketing needs. The only time my routine slips is the weeks before and after a book release. Then everything flip-flops. Marketing and taking care of business take priority. I squeeze writing in when I have the energy. *JoAnn Smith Ainsworth*

Armed with hot chai and dark chocolate in front of the desktop computer when my husband is out of the house. *Vinnie Hansen*

I've got two favorite places to write. My "professional office" contains a huge monitor, ergonomic chair, and my beloved roller-ball mouse. This is the best set-up when I'm working on a novel, since I'll cut and paste between chapters or open up research documents. But I also like to write in bed with my laptop. This is a great place to get up-and-close while writing short stories. I can sketch out ideas/scenes/chapters longhand anywhere, but I like to write at home. *Ana Brazil*

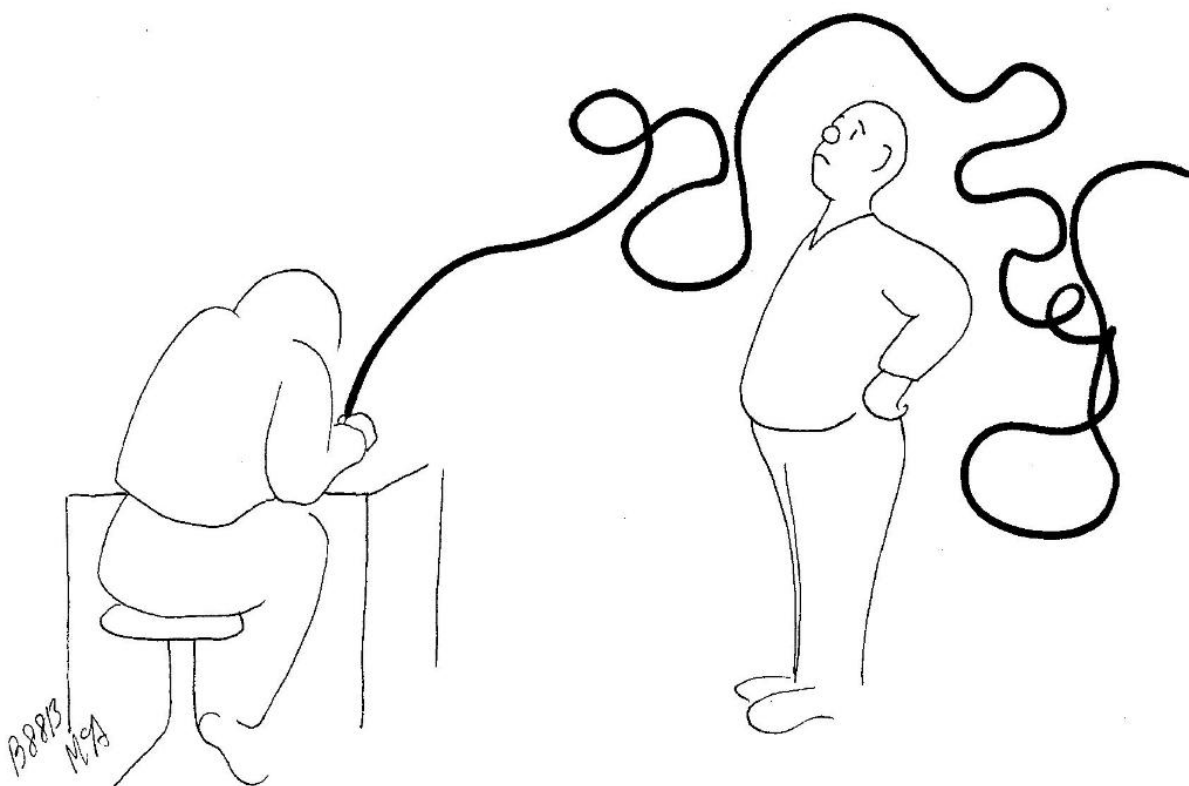
Question of the Quarter, continued

I write in many different locations, but primarily in my home office (surrounded by my reference books and routinely pestered by my cat, the Diva Miss Mia). The more involved I get in my writing, the messier the desktop. If my desktop is clean, there's not much going on! But no matter where I am—office, public library, local coffee shop, hotel room, etc.—I must have two things to kickstart the motor: 1. Coffee. 2. Music (headphones optional). *Ann Parker*

I get my best writing done at cafes, so this spring has been an adjustment! While writing from home, I fix myself a cup of black coffee, use a program that turns the internet off for designated periods of time (saving me from myself), and turn on rain sounds as background noise. *Gigi Pandian*

If you have any suggestions for future **Questions of the Quarter**, please send them to mbunting@sbcglobal.net

From Maddy McEwen . . .



Your tangled narrative arc is giving me whiplash.

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 **Ana Brazil**, Events ([anabrazil \(at\) sbcglobal.net](mailto:anabrazil@sbcglobal.net)), with meeting and venue suggestions and **Margie Bunting**, Newsletter ([mbunting \(at\) sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbunting@sbcglobal.net)), with newsletter article suggestions and submissions.

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