

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

VOLUME 21, ISSUE 3

AUGUST 2020

Greetings, Siblings

As if the uncertainty of these times weren't enough, the news that Capitol Crimes President Sonja Hazzard-Webster died very suddenly was a huge wake-up call as well.

Since Capitol Crimes shares many members with both SinC NorCal and the Coastal Cruisers, Mary Feliz and I agreed to step up and help Penny Manson, the new Capitol Crimes president. I barely knew Sonja, but I learned a lot more about her by working on Sonja's memorial with Penny, Mary, and members of the Sacramento chapter. She was truly a compassionate and dedicated individual, bringing a nurturing and creative energy to all who knew her.

Our hearts go out to Sonja's friends and family, and the wonderful members of the Capitol Crimes chapter.

On the happier side, we also realized what a wonderful pool of talented and committed siblings we have in our extended regional area. We vowed to look for synergistic opportunities to combine resources, share experiences, and more.

Some steps are easy. Using technologies such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, Google Meets, Skype, and more, we can extend our reach and include a broader audience.



CONTENTS

Page 1:	President's Letter
Page 3:	Mark Your Calendar
Page 4:	In Case You Missed It
Page 6:	Writing Jewish Noir
Page 8:	From Beads to Books
Page 12:	Write What You Know
Page 14:	A Long & Winding Roller Coaster
Page 17:	Research Tips for Writers
Page 21:	Not Your Usual Edgar Awards
Page 25:	Unlockdown Diary
Page 27:	Profile: Deb McCaskey
Page 33:	Blog Opportunity
Page 34:	Member News
Page 37:	Question of the Quarter

President's Letter, continued

To do that, we need to communicate better so that—for example—we avoid holding events on the same day. Similarly, knowing what events and speakers our regional partners have in mind, we can avoid duplication and offer more variety to our members. We may even combine forces on shared events.

With so many uncertainties ahead, I wanted to take this opportunity to say thank you to our SinC NorCal board. It is a genuine pleasure working with all of you. I know that whatever happens in the future, we'll be in good hands as a chapter and with our regional partners.

We have had many wonderful board members over the years. Some people join to take on a specific task, others to hold office. If you are interested in contributing to our chapter by being a board member, feel free to get in touch and we'll talk. There's always something to do.

Sincerely,

Susan Bickford (she, her, hers)

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, August 1, 12:00-2:00 p.m.

Revolutionizing the Hero's Journey: How to Use Non-Western Folklore to Make Old Tales New (via Zoom)

Our speaker is Vanitha Sankaran, who holds a Ph.D. in biomedical engineering and an MFA in creative writing and is both a researcher and a storyteller at heart. From her childhood days on, she has been lucky to travel the world, gaining diverse perspectives that continue to fuel her imagination. In addition to her 20-year career in medical communications, she has written *Watermark: A Novel of Historical Fiction*, numerous short stories and essays that have appeared online, in print, and on NPR. She is a co-founding member of the literary journal *Flashquake* and has served as Conference Chair for the Historical Novel Society of North America for three terms. She is currently the conference's Program Chair and writes monthly feature articles for *Pacifica Magazine* and *On the Coast Magazine*.

Saturday, September 12, 12:00-2:00 p.m. (Note: 2nd Saturday)

Short Story Panel (via Zoom)

Moderated by Terry Shames, this panel will explore the wild and creative world of crafting, writing, and publishing crime fiction short stories. Our panelists include Vinnie Hansen, Gigi Pandian, Art Taylor, and Nancy Tingley. Look for more information on our website soon. Zoom info will be emailed to you at the end of August.

Saturday, October 3

Save the Date!

Topic and more information to be revealed soon.

Please register in advance on the website for all events.

In Case You Missed It . . .

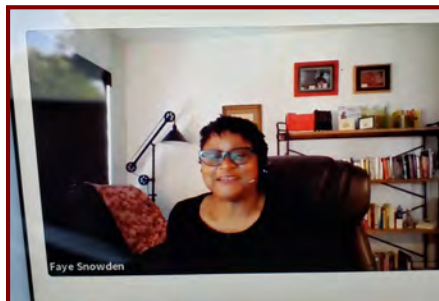
If you weren't able to attend our recent events, here's what you missed.

May Meeting - Agent Panel: Live from the East Coast via Zoom

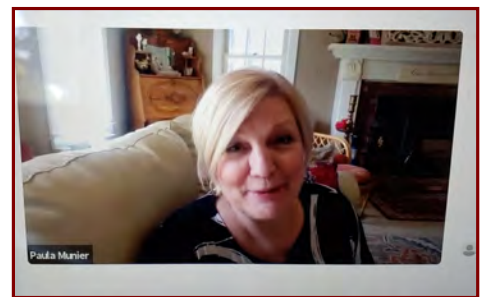
Our own Faye Snowden moderated a lively discussion by seasoned literary agents Anne Hawkins and Paula Munier, where attendees were able to ask whatever questions were on their minds about the crime fiction literary scene and receive valuable insights from the panelists.



Anne Hawkins



Faye Snowden



Paula Munier

June Meeting - Cara Black via Zoom

Author of the long-running, bestselling Aimée Leduc mystery series (and SinC NorCal member) Cara Black regaled us with her experiences writing her first standalone thriller – *Three Hours in Paris*, released in April. In the book, Cara reimagines World War II history as a young, female, American sharpshooter working for British intelligence is assigned to assassinate Adolf Hitler during his true-to-life 3-hour visit to Nazi-occupied Paris in 1940, while dealing with her own personal tragedy.

Cara is currently working on the 20th book in the Aimee Leduc series.



In Case You Missed It, continued

July Meeting – Author Showcase

Our April Author Showcase had to be postponed because of the social distancing guidelines, but in July we were finally privileged to hear our fabulous authors read from their recent work. This is the first time (and probably not the last) we had this popular event online—and the first time we have held an event on Crowdcast—but it garnered an especially large audience and a fun time for all. Kudos to SinC NorCal VP Robin Stuart for deftly coordinating and emceeing the Showcase.



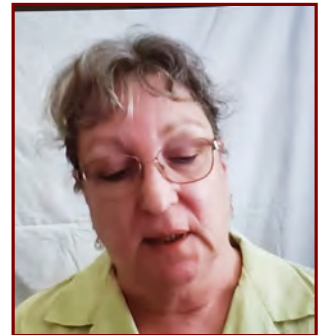
Ann Parker



Cindy Sample



CJ Verburg



Deb McCaskey



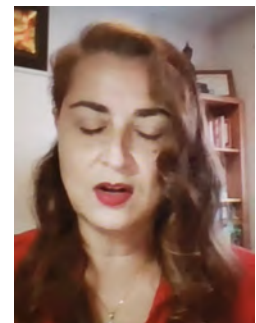
Joseph Schneider



Kelli Stanley



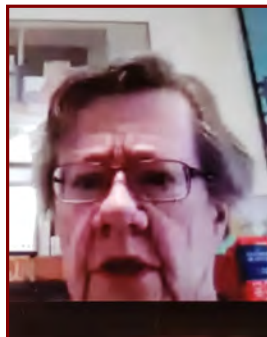
Linda Howe Steiger



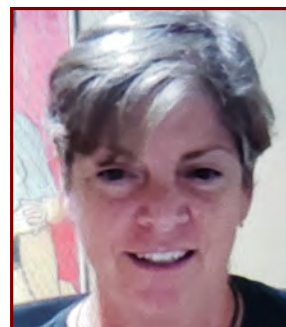
MM Chouinard



Susan Kuchinskas



Priscilla Royal



Robin Stuart

Writing Jewish Noir

by Terry Shames



I'm a novelist. It's deeply ingrained. When I think of a story, it automatically seems to come with a cast of characters and many complications. Short stories are not easy for me to write. I look at authors like Barbara Goffman and Art Taylor and I can't understand how they churn out one gem of a story after another.

I have published short stories, but almost always by request. They usually come to me from some experience, or I dip into a trove of half-written story ideas I've jotted down over the years. Then last summer I got a request to submit a story for *Jewish Noir II*. I laughed to myself and wrote back to the editor, "I don't even know what that is. I'm not Jewish and I don't write noir."

She shot back that she knew I could devise a story for the anthology. How did she know, I wondered? Had she read my other short stories and found them noirish? I didn't ask because I didn't really think I was going to do it. Still, I told her I'd think about it. For the next couple of weeks, the request popped into my head several times a day. My internal response was always: This is ridiculous. It's not going to happen.

And then I started thinking about the stories I'd had published. There were just a few, but they were always a little darker than my books. They also had an element of humor. So maybe I could write a noir story if I added a little twisted humor. And, as the editor reminded me, an ambiguous ending, which often characterizes a noir story.

I understand that short stories generally grow out of a situation rather than a character. But I'm a novelist. I had to start with a character. So I started kicking around ideas for a character and realized right away that I had a natural: My husband's Jewish grandmother had always intrigued me. She was the boss of all she surveyed. She drove my poor mother-in-law nuts. She practically ran the Jewish Home for the Aged in Miami during the time she lived there. She expected everyone to cater to her whims, of which there were many.

I had a photo of Grandmother in middle age at a chi-chi nightclub, at a table with a foursome. I like the photo so much that I had it framed. It's very much 40s in atmosphere. Furs and white tablecloths and glamor. So who could this woman become in my story? How about an elderly woman living in the Jewish Home for the Aged—a woman who in the past was a glamor girl and who still has a certain something about her.

Writing Jewish Noir, continued

I then expanded her from the “real” grandmother and incorporated a *grande dame* from another part of my life. I had a voice teacher who had been quite the opera diva in the 30s in Germany—just before authorities found out her grandmother was Jewish and she had to flee. She was ninety years old when I took lessons from her. Not only was she sharp up until the day she died at ninety-two, but she had retained her regal air and her firm conviction that she was “somebody.” Everyone who knew her treated her like a rock star. I was intrigued by how flirtatious she was with men of all ages and how they in turn responded by acting like she was a deposed princess.

What better combination of women to be my main character? And then I knew I had to have a man who was not just willing to tease her, but who genuinely liked her. A man with a bit of a past who worked at the Jewish Home for the Aged where my character was living. The first lines of the story, bantering between these two characters, seemed to come naturally.

As for conflict, who hasn’t known someone who could barely wait for an elderly relative to die so they could get their hands on an inheritance? The story came rushing out of all those ingredients. It was great fun to write and made me wonder if I have more short stories hiding in wait.

“Inheritance” will be published in 2021 in *Jewish Noir II*.

Terry Shames writes the popular Samuel Craddock series. The books have been finalists for multiple awards, winning the Macavity Award for Best First Mystery and an RT Reviews Critics Award for Best Contemporary Mystery of 2016. The eighth in the series, *A Risky Undertaking for Loretta Singletary*, was published in April 2019. Terry lives in Berkeley, CA. She is a member of NorCal Sisters in Crime and on the national board of Mystery Writers of America. For more, see www.terryshames.com.

Janice Peacock: From Beads to Books

by Deb McCaskey



Janice Peacock had already made a name for herself in the world of glass bead making—the art and craft of melting glass in a 4,000-degree flame to make beautiful beads, round or in sculptural shapes—when the urge to write a novel struck.

Janice’s glasswork has been exhibited internationally, and some of her pieces are in the permanent collections of The Corning Museum of Glass and the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington. She has begun to create large sculptures using sand-casting techniques, and micro-mosaic jewelry, intricate designs using tiny bits of glass. She also teaches various glass art techniques in classes around the United States.

While working at a glass studio several years ago, Janice noticed that the colorful collection of artists who didn’t always get along reminded her of the characters in the mysteries she loved to read. From that experience, the idea for her first novel, *High Strung*, took shape. *High Strung* introduced glass artist and amateur sleuth Jax O’Connell. Janice has continued the Glass Bead Mystery Series with *A Bead in the Hand*, *Off the Beadin’ Path*, *To Bead or Not to Bead*, and the mini-mystery *Be Still My Beading Heart*.

Intrigued by the intersection of visual art and mystery writing in Janice’s creative life, we caught up with her to find out more:

Q: What is the appeal of making glass beads and other art?

I love glass and always have. As a child, I had a vast collection of glass animals, and as a teenager, I went to the flea markets with my mother to buy Depression Glass. I still have those dishes and continue to love their transparent pastel colors and intricate pressed glass designs.

I’ve also been a maker my entire life, and one of the things I love to make is beaded jewelry. In the 1970s, there was a little bead shop in Laguna Beach, CA, that I would visit as often as possible. My friends and I would load up on beads and make necklaces for hours. So, beads and glass together seemed like an obvious choice for me. It took me a long time to figure out that glass bead making was what I wanted to do. I spent many years trying photography, silk painting, ceramics, and many other mediums before finally getting hooked on glass bead making.

Q: Is glass bead making a difficult art to learn? How long did it take you to acquire the skills and reach the level of mastery you have?

From Beads to Books, continued



Glass bead making is not that difficult to learn, but it does take some time to build up the skills to make what you want. Much like writing in that way, sometimes there is a disconnect between what you want to make and what you're able to create.

I've been making glass beads since 1992 and feel like I can pretty much make whatever I set out to do when working at the torch. The books in the Glass Bead Mystery Series describe how to make glass beads, so I'll skip that discussion with the hope that some of the readers of this article will check out my series. That said, I did find it a challenge to describe something I know so well to readers who had no idea what glass bead making was. If you are more of a visual learner, as I am, you can go to YouTube to see me demonstrate making a glass bead.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc_PkahjQpM&list=PLdZxnQ7474O3R

Q: Even when it's not the setting for a murder mystery, isn't glass bead making dangerous, using those hot torches and being around glass, especially when it can break and form sharp edges?

The oxygen and propane-fueled torch I use is permanently mounted to a flame-resistant work surface, so I am always aware of where the flame is—pointed well away from me! This arrangement means I haven't been burned by the torch, fortunately. Usually, I get a burn by picking up something from the workbench that looks cold but is still at several hundred degrees. Most of the injuries I've gotten were no more severe than what one might get in the kitchen by touching a hot pan. I get the occasional nick or cut, but in general, those injuries are small. I'm always mindful when working with glass because when I haven't been paying attention, that's when I've gotten hurt. For instance, once I absentmindedly ran my hand over my worktable to remove some dirt and ended up with a small disk of glass embedded in my palm that required a trip to the surgeon to remove. The doctor did comment on how beautiful the piece of cobalt blue glass was that he removed from my hand. And that is the truth: Glass is inherently beautiful, especially blue glass.



Mask Beads 1.5" x 3/4" by Janice Peacock



Vessel Beads 2" x 3/4" by Janice Peacock

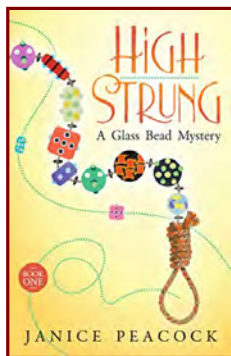
From Beads to Books, continued

Q: What sort of people are drawn to glass bead making? Are glass artists in general as eccentric and unusual as they appear to be in your stories?

I think most creative people are eccentric, and glass artists are no different in that respect. There are many types of people who are interested in glass bead making. Some find the fluidity of molten glass mesmerizing, and some enjoy making jewelry for friends and family. Others enjoy the technical aspects of working with such a challenging medium.

Q: Tell us more about how it first occurred to you that the glass art world would be an excellent background for a murder mystery.

I took a class at the Corning Studio in upstate New York several years ago. Most people will recognize the name Corning—they are the manufacturers of Pyrex glass baking dishes and measuring cups. While working in the studio, I had an epiphany—the perfect way to kill someone! To find out what that is, you'll have to read *Off the Beadin' Path*. And while I didn't have plans to murder anyone in particular, I decided that I wanted to write a murder mystery. I'd always been a fan of cozy mysteries, so I knew that I needed to write a cozy, which is perfect for a craft-oriented plot. The cozy mystery genre is full of crafty topics. I was glad to discover that there were no glass bead making mysteries, though there are a couple of glass-oriented series.



Q: Is your sleuth Jax typical of the kind of person who gets into glass bead making?

I think Jax is fairly typical. However, one difference is that most artists who make beads do it as a hobby rather than a full-time job. In *High Strung*, Jax leaves her career, moves from Miami to Seattle, and becomes a full-time glass bead maker. It's often difficult for creative people to make a living, but Jax jumps into making beads with help from her best friend, glass bead aficionado Tessa Ricci. While Jax has had some success as an artist, there have been some bumps in the road, especially when she has to use her creative mind to find a murderer.

Q: When did you know you would write more than one mystery featuring Jax and her friends?

The first book I wrote was *A Bead in the Hand*, which turned out to be the second book in the series. I intended to write it during National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo.) On October first, I started writing. After ten days, I checked into the NaNoWriMo website to discover—to my horror—that NaNoWriMo was November, not October. Since I was already on a roll, I finished out my 50,000 words in October and then started again on November first to write another book, which became *High Strung*.

From Beads to Books, continued

Q: Does your writing process resemble your glass-art process at all? Do you do similar amounts of planning for both?

Making glass beads and writing books are quite different. It can take me anywhere from ten minutes to an hour to make a glass bead. It is a one-shot deal; there is no putting down an in-progress bead and working on it again later. I must complete it before I stop. Of course, writing works much differently. It requires many months of work, reviews, edits, and revisions that prolong the writing process.

One similarity between glass bead making and writing is that glass bead making is mostly a solo endeavor. While working in my glass studio, I am alone with an audiobook playing nearly all the time. While working in my office on a book, it's largely the same as the studio, minus the audiobook. It's a quiet time while I string words, not beads, together.

Q: Would any of your glass artist friends or acquaintances recognize themselves in your stories?

I don't think so. Most of the characters in my books are pastiches of creative people I've met over the years. Some of my glass artist friends have approached me to tell me that they are certain they know who I was writing about in a book. It's interesting to hear what people think of a particular character and their similarity to a real-life person. Those people are, without fail, incorrect, since I pull my ideas for characters from many contexts other than the glass world.

Q: Is there anything else you would like readers or fellow authors to know about your work?

If readers or other authors would like to see more examples of my work in glass, there are lots of pictures of my glass beads on my website, www.janicepeacock.com. A picture's worth a thousand words, right? You can follow me on social media @JanPeac and sign up for my newsletter at www.janicepeacock.com/newsletter.

Deb McCaskey, who is profiled in this issue on page 27, discovered glass bead making through her interest in designing jewelry with beads. Writing has taken up more of her time lately, but her husband, Ralph, is the more active glass artist and teaches bead making; they have a small business, Nightside Studios, where you can see his work: <https://www.etsy.com/shop/nightsidestudios>.



Write What You Know

by Dana Fredsti

I've always envied people who had a clear-cut idea of what they wanted to do with their lives from an early age. A vet, doctor, accountant, whatever. They had it all figured out by the time they went to college (some earlier than that, which always provoked irritation no doubt fueled by envy), signed up for the appropriate classes, graduated, and strode down the road of their chosen careers.

Me? Well, I did go to college but dropped out after less than a semester to join a rock band, the first of several. And while I always wanted to write and eventually focused on that goal, I wandered down many rabbit holes along the way. To name a few, I:

- Studied theatrical combat and a variety of martial arts.
- Was a part of several sword fighting acts, performing at Renaissance Faires and at conventions, including Comic-Con back when it was still a smallish convention and cosplay was just called wearing costumes (and somewhere there's a photo of me with Mark Hamill—one that he solicited).



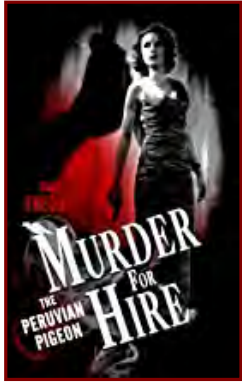
- Acted in a few bad movies.
- Worked behind the scenes on some other bad movies.
- Was a stunt specialty player (sword fighting) in a few films of varying quality.
- With my best friend Maureen, started our own mystery-themed theatrical troupe.
- With the same friend, co-wrote and managed to film a good ten hours of footage for a silly romantic comedy, convincing friends, family, and some of our actors to participate.
- Volunteered at an exotic feline breeding facility.
- Worked a mind-numbing amount of admin jobs.
- Drank a lot of wine.
- Wrote and co-wrote a half dozen screenplays, several of which were optioned.
- Wrote around 13 books, a half dozen or so short stories, and no poetry. Can't write poetry.



Write What You Know, continued

In short, I've lived an eclectic life.

Maybe if I'd focused sooner on writing novels, I'd be further along in my career as an author. On the other hand, the experiences I've had over the years have greatly enriched my writing, and there is some truth to the whole "write what you know" adage. Although I've never been bitten by or killed a zombie and yet somehow managed to churn out a trilogy about a zombocalypse. Still, it helps to have experience!



The theatrical troupe provided the backdrop for my first novel, *Murder for Hire: The Peruvian Pigeon*. If my friend and I hadn't wanted to kill one of the women we were unfortunate enough to work with, that book might not have ever been written. And if the book hadn't been written, I might be serving time instead of taking out my frustrations with good old-fashioned literary vengeance.

Volunteering at EFBC/FCC (the exotic feline breeding facility) gave me the inspiration for *Fixation*, a spicy romantic urban fantasy about feline shifters that I wrote for Ravenous Romance. Another of my Ravenous Romance novels, *Ripping the Bodice*, was an adaptation of the romantic comedy script Maureen and I wrote.

The film and stage work—including the acting roles/sword-fighting/crew positions—provided enough grounding in the world of Hollywood to write my *Spawn of Lilith* series, which features stuntwoman Lee Striga, who's also the descendent of Lilith, Mother of Demons. True, my experiences were 15 plus years in the past, but luckily, I still have friends in the Industry who are willing to answer questions and update me on how things have changed since I lived in Los Angeles. Gotta say, I don't miss it at all. I'd rather write about it.



The admin jobs, you ask? They helped me make rent and bills while I struggled to make it in one of the more interesting career choices. They also paid for the wine at the end of the day that made working those jobs more bearable. And while I haven't utilized the rock bands or Renaissance Faires in my writing yet, like all the rest of those rabbit holes, the experiences are there to be drawn on if and when I need them!

Dana Fredsti is an ex-B-movie actress with a background in theatrical combat (a skill she used in *Army of Darkness* as a sword-fighting Deadite and fight captain). Through 7+ years of volunteering at EFBC/FCC, Dana's been kissed by tigers and had her thumb sucked by an ocelot with nursing issues. She's addicted to bad movies and any book or film, good or bad, that includes zombies. She's the author of the cozy noir mystery *Murder for Hire: The Peruvian Pigeon*, the Ashley Parker series, the dark fantasy series *Spawn of Lilith*, and the science fiction series *Time Shards*, cowritten by her husband and fellow author David Fitzgerald. They live in Eureka, California with a horde of felines and their dog Pogeon.

A Long and Winding Roller Coaster

by Daisy Bateman



I thought I had experienced everything publishing could throw at me. Then 2020 showed up and said, "Hold my beer."

My first book is being published this year. Not the first book I wrote, which was begun longhand in a loose-leaf binder, sitting on the lawn outside my college dorm. Not even the first book by me my agent sold to a publisher, almost two years ago. And definitely not the book about the giant underground squid. (We aren't going to get into that here.)

There is no way to tell this story without dating myself, so I might as well admit that when I started seeking publication, there was not the wealth of information on the internet as there is now. (There was barely an internet, and what there was, was mostly devoted to Beanie Baby rumors.) So I bought a copy of the *Writer's Digest* guide and a stack of envelopes, wrote a terrible query letter, liberated some binder clips from my employer, and proceeded to pile up the rejection letters. (Later on, Camille Minichino would loan me her copy of the Jeff Herman guide, which I think I forgot to return. Sorry, Camille. Do you want me to have a look around and see if I've got it here somewhere?)

That first book was not very good, a quality recognized pretty much unanimously by the publishing industry. The second was better, but still well off the mark, and the third had the aforementioned squid problem. But by the fourth book I was finally getting somewhere, enough for an agent to take it on, and help me to beat it into shape with some serious editing. Then she started sending it out to editors, who said a lot of nice things, but not "I'll buy it." It was frustrating, having swum for so long in the sea of rejection, to finally make it onto the beach and find that it was full of rejections too.

Eventually, all of the editors had come back with "no's" of varying niceness (with the exception of one whose non-reply seemed like it was probably an answer of its own), and it was time to start thinking about the next steps. At this point, I did what I had done every time a book I had written ran out of options: I started writing another one.

Cut to a couple months down the line. I'm at work, in the lab (my day job is in biotech research), when a call comes in from my agent. My phone is back on my desk, so I answer it on my watch, leaning up against the window because that's the only place I can get any reception. So there I am, looking like a defunded Dick Tracy, finding out that that last editor not only loves the book, but wants to buy it.

A Long and Winding Roller Coaster, continued

Needless to say, I was over the moon. And not just our moon. Like, one of Jupiter's. Friends and family were told, toasts were drunk, plans were made. The only thing I didn't do was post on social media, because I was saving that for when I had my *Publishers Weekly* announcement, so I could do that thing where you post the screenshot with an overly casual comment like, "Hey guys, got some personal news." The contract came and I read it carefully, asked my questions, signed and sent it back. All that was left was for the publisher to countersign, and the announcements could be made. I could wait for that, couldn't I?

So I waited. And waited. A month went by, and then another. I heard from the editor, and the cover designer. I heard that publishing was slow, and weird, and I believed it. But I was still getting worried.

I found out that the imprint was closing from another author's Facebook post. I called my agent for confirmation, because you can't believe everything you read on the internet, but there was no mistake. They would still publish the book, but no more after it, and soon they were going to start laying off the staff. I wanted to have my book published. But I also wanted to have a career as a writer, and this wasn't the way to start it. So we asked for the rights to be reverted, and got them, and I went on a road trip that ended up being wine tasting in Anderson Valley, where my husband drove and I got absolutely blotto on pinot noir. And that was the end of that leg of my publishing journey.



Except that it wasn't. Have you ever told a lot of people that you are going to be a published author, and then a few months later told them that you're actually not? I don't recommend it. Altogether, it was a rough autumn, and I'll admit, I wallowed for a while. But I at least I had the new book to work on.

That book was done in the spring of 2019, and ready to go out for its brief visits with editors. And then one morning, while I was still in bed (time differences) my agent called and said we had an offer! This time I kept the news to myself, having already snatched defeat from the jaws of victory once, but eventually (because publishing IS slow) we had the contract, and the *PW* announcement, and plenty of rejoicing with just a touch of déjà vu.

It was over a year from the announcement to the release date, with edits, cover designs, and those long periods of silence publishing is known for. But around the beginning of this year, things started to pick up, and they picked up in a big way. I had blurbs! Preorders! A *Kirkus* review that didn't compare my book unfavorably to a bag of flaming dog poop! (I understand that from them, this counts as a rave.) And best of all, my local indie bookstore agreed to host the launch party, a dream of mine for years. Finally, it was actually happening.

A Long and Winding Roller Coaster, continued

Heh.

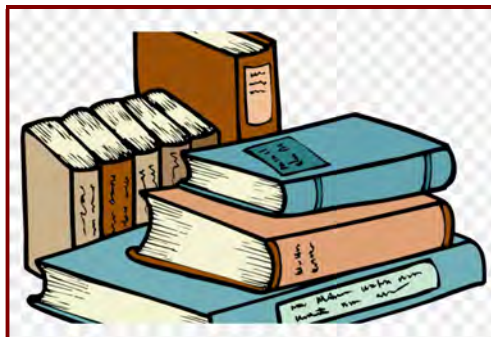
Well, something happened, all right. For those of you reading this in the distant future, please look up “spring 2020” on your bionic search implants (or, depending on how things turn out, in the cave paintings that describe life in the Before Times). Contemporary readers will already know. Conferences were cancelled, bookstores closed their doors. It hasn’t been a good time for a lot of people and businesses, and small presses are on that list. The ebook came out in June as scheduled, but the print launch was pushed to September, and the publicist was furloughed. There would be no launch party.

Am I aware that there a lot of people who have it much worse than me? Of course I am. Did I spend some time feeling sorry for myself anyway? Of course I did. But I am now a published author with a book out in the world that people are reading, and that is something that no stupid virus can take away from me. And the September release of the paperback is coming, and who knows what the fall will bring? My optimism remains extremely cautious, but I’m not giving it up just yet.

As for future projects, what am I doing now? Well, I’m writing another book.

But this time it’s the second in a series.

Daisy Bateman is a mystery lover, cheese enthusiast, and world-renowned expert in *Why You Should Buy That*. In what passes for normal life, she works in biotech. She lives in Alameda County, California with her husband and a cat, only one of whom wears a tuxedo on a regular basis, and a puppy on a mission to chew the whole world into tiny pieces. Her first book, *Murder Goes to Market*, was released as an ebook in June 2020 and is coming in paperback in September from Seventh Street books.



Research Tips for Writers

by Michal Strutin



No matter what time period we are writing about, no matter which country, city, or line of work related to crime, if we don't have first-hand knowledge, we must do research. Good research gives our work authority, juicy details, and veritas. Although it's sometimes fun to go down the rabbit hole and wander around, if you need to know the progression of insect species cleaning a corpse or background on neocolonialism and the CIA *right now*, there are fast and efficient ways to get there . . . usually. That's what this article will focus on: research tips.

I'm nearing completion of draft #1 of my historical mystery trilogy. I need to know about Venetian Renaissance doors: how did they open and close? how did they lock? There's lots of shipping news throughout: where did sailors sleep? what did they eat? and what's the deal with shipworms? Most of my writing has focused on natural history and the environment, so I'm outlining a climate-change dystopian novel. I need to know the latest on the wolf-coyote intersection and what sea-level rise will do to the West Coast in, say, 25 years.

Likely you, too, have specific questions about whatever mystery, crime fiction, or thriller you're writing.

I'm also a research librarian, with a science/environment specialty. But research is research. Before we head into some best practices, here is the link to a research guide with a PowerPoint presentation (upper left) that history librarian Helene Lafrance and I presented at the 2019 Historical Novel Society conference: <https://libguides.scu.edu/HNS2019>. Although it's weighted toward historical fiction, many of the tips and skills are applicable to any research. It will remain on this site for a year, then – or before – I'll transfer it to my website: <https://michalstrutin.com/>

Everyone's Go-to Online Site

When I taught university freshmen how to do research, I'd start by asking where they went first. "Be honest," I said, then grinned. Sheepishly, they all admitted they started with Google. "Where next?" I asked. You know the answer. About 85% said, "Wikipedia."

Wikipedia is great for specific, well-known info, such as the date of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre or the specs for particular pieces of modern weaponry. But nuance or deep information can be questionable. At that point, it's helpful to check the references at the bottom of a Wikipedia entry. Do they have the weight of authority? Serve as points for deeper digging?

Research Tips for Writers, continued

Google - Advanced Search

Google Advanced Search is a great choice for fast, efficient searching. Most Google results are clogged with commercial sites: .com and .net. Sometimes these are what you need. Sometimes they are just piles of junk blocking your way to good results. Advanced Search allows you to shape your search: by site type, date, language, etc.

How to: 1. Type Google Advanced Search in the Google search box. Click the resulting Advanced Search link, or, 2. Type in a few critical keywords in the Google search box. After you get the results, look at the tabs above, and, over to the right, you'll see "Settings." Click this, then click "Advanced Search" in the dropdown menu. Now you have real control.

The most useful of the choices is "Narrow your search by site or domain." The dropdown menu offers .org (organization), .gov (government), .edu (educational institutions). The clutter of commercial .coms and .nets—gone! You can also limit by date, language, country, and more.

If you need academic-type research, try Google Scholar. Type "Google Scholar" into the search box.

Images

When you need to see the Scottish moors or a fedora from the 1920s, here are some of the best image search sites: Google Images, Wikimedia Commons, Pinterest, Flickr, Getty.

YouTube is a great venue to see how things work. I learned how to build a bow for a scene in my book *Judging Noa: a Fight for Women's Rights in the Turmoil of the Exodus*.

Digital Libraries

Increasingly, public libraries are developing digital collections that reflect their local culture and history. One of the best and broadest digital collections reflects the nation: Library of Congress Digital Collections include Local History and Folklife, Science and Technology, and 60+ other subjects.

Public Libraries

Don't forget your public library. You'll have to check their services and hours, if any, during Covid time. Information possibilities, depending on library funding:

Online catalog: use Keywords or Subject in the search box to find books and ebooks.

Online reference books, such as Gale Virtual Reference Library

Online databases with authoritative information and powerful, granular search engines

Online local and national newspapers.

Research Tips for Writers, continued

WorldCat

If you can't find what you're looking for at your local library, try WorldCat, "the world's largest network of library content and services."

If a search yields a book or other media that sounds useful, click on the link and you'll see what libraries have it, in order of distance from you. For example, I used keywords "insect forensics." Among the results was: *A Fly for the Prosecution: How Insect Evidence Helps Solve Crimes*, by M. Lee Goff. If your local library supports Interlibrary Loan, it's easy to get.

Mystery Specific

Writers Digest's Howdunit series includes approximately 20 books, with titles such as *Howdunit Forensics* and *Police Procedure & Investigation: a Guide for Writers*.

To find Howdunit books in WorldCat, search: se:"Howdunit series"

To find the series in Amazon: click Howdunit into the Amazon search box.

CDC's Toxic Substances Portal: Type "CDC Toxic Substances Portal" into the Google search box and you will find an A-Z list of toxic substances from arsenic to zinc, with background and a ToxGuide for each.

Writing World.com has a whole site with links to help mystery writers:
<https://www.writing-world.com/menu/mystery.shtml>

The Mystery Writer's Guide to Research

Somebody Call a Cop! Writing About Law Enforcement.

Conducting Forensic Research: A Tutorial For Mystery Writers

... and many more

The Internet Writing Journal Research Resources for Mystery and Crime Writers

Free Online Mystery Writers Workshops

Jane Cleland, award-winning author of nonfiction books on writing mysteries and her Josie Prescott Mysteries, is offering free monthly workshops on aspects of mystery writing. I've attended two, so far. Worthwhile! These one-hour events are detailed at <https://janecland.com/events/>

Rabbit Hole

One of my favorite sites is Foodtimeline.org. Curated by professionals, this timeline starts in

Research Tips for Writers, continued

prehistoric times and goes all the way into this century, detailing the history of specific foods and trends. For example: marshmallows, consumed as healthful plants, date back to 2,000BC. How did they become the white, sugary things in s'mores? Do you need to know the "Popular U.S. Food & Trends" in the 1970s, 80s, 90s, 2000s? Foodtimeline.org has it.

Judging Noa: a Fight for Women's Rights in the Turmoil of the Exodus is Michal Strutin's debut novel. She is working on a Late Renaissance mystery trilogy. Her award-winning nonfiction books focus on natural and cultural history and travel. Her articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Tablet*, *Outside*, and others.





Not Your Usual Edgar Awards

Many literary events have gone virtual in the shelter-in-place days of 2020, and some seemed almost to disappear.

The prestigious Edgar Awards, named after Edgar Allan Poe, are presented to authors of distinguished works of crime fiction in various categories. In the past, the Edgars have been celebrated by events in New York City, culminating in the black-tie awards banquet. And three SinC NorCal members nominated for Edgar Awards this year were looking forward to it:

Gigi Pandian, whose novel *The Alchemist's Illusion* was nominated for the G.P. Putnam's Sons Sue Grafton Memorial Award

Susan Bickford, whose novel *Dread of Winter* was nominated for Best Paperback Original

Catriona McPherson, whose novel *Strangers at the Gate* was nominated for the Simon & Schuster Mary Higgins Clark Award

But alas, this was not a normal year. And each of the three authors has something to say about that.

Gigi Pandian

I've never been nominated for an award given out at the Edgars before, so it was such an honor to have *The Alchemist's Illusion* nominated for the G.P. Putnam's Sons Sue Grafton Memorial Award.

It was disappointing that I didn't get to attend the Edgars as a nominee (I have a pair of killer heels I was looking forward to wearing), but one silver lining was that my fellow nominees and I were on a group email thread leading up to the winner being announced, in which we were rooting for a 6-way tie.

That experience reminded me what a great community this is.

Susan Bickford

Writing is such a solitary experience. Even with writing groups, chapter meetings, conferences, and reader talks, authors are still the ones that are accountable for the work. Often, I find that by the time I finish a book or a story, I can't tell if it's any good or not.



Not Your Usual Edgar Awards, continued

That was certainly the case for *Dread of Winter*, my second novel, released (at last) at the end of October 2019. I wrote it once and hated it. So, I rewrote it and my editor rejected it. I wrote it a third time and then attended to the issues raised by The Editorial Letter. Right before my final due date, I put in more changes I thought might be good. Done!

A few months later (early 2019), I was instructed to go get blurbs. In all honesty, I was embarrassed. I really did not think the book was any good.

However, I did get some really wonderful blurbs. By the time the book launched I was feeling much better.

Fast forward to January 2020. After months of waiting, my publisher advised me that they would not give me a new contract for subsequent books. Talk about bad news.

The reason they gave was the books had not sold well enough. Although they didn't mention the quality of the writing, I still took it hard.

And then, one week later, MWA came to the rescue. *Dread of Winter* was nominated for an Edgar (Best Paperback Original). There's nothing like a prize to perk up a writer.

I was off to the races. I grew up in New York State and lived for many years in NYC, so I was really looking forward to the trip. Yes, I had to lose fifty pounds in four months, find a little black dress, acquire appropriate shoes, and compose my wonderful acceptance speech. I was looking forward to hanging out with my fellow nominees and all the other writers. My agent even paid for my banquet ticket.

We all know what came next. By March, the event was canceled.

Happily, MWA still pulled out the stops. Every author was featured in blogs and encouraged to provide a short reading to put on Twitter.

At some point we were asked to provide our acceptance speech. Personally, I was planning to compose mine on the way to the dais, so this was challenging. Even more daunting was providing a one-minute video of our acceptance speech. I tried very hard to shed a few tears, but that's not the way it came out.

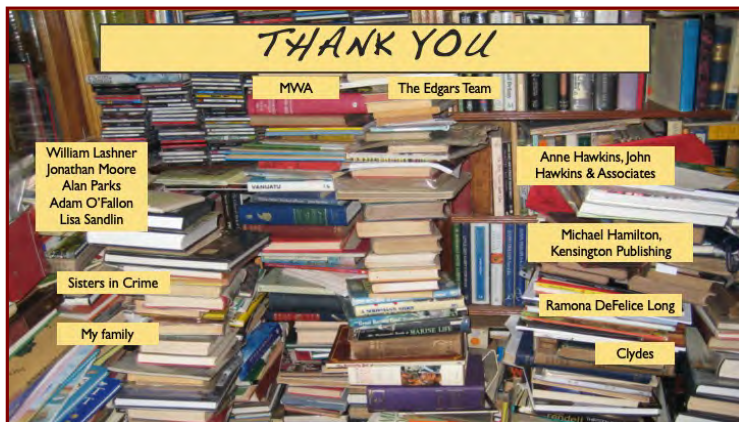
Although I did not win, I had no complaints when announcement day arrived on April 30. All my fellow nominees wrote terrific books. MWA had done a fantastic job under incredibly terrible circumstances. They absolutely made my whole experience of writing this book worthwhile.

Now I just need to do it again!

Not Your Usual Edgar Awards, continued

Since I didn't have a chance to deliver my acceptance speech, here it is, along with the background I concocted for my online version.

Thank you to everyone who helped me with this book and to MWA.



First, I'd like to thank MWA and Edgars for this honor. You have done a wonderful job under very difficult circumstances.

For me, writing is like driving alone in a heavy snowstorm at night on a dark country road. The plow hasn't been by for hours, but there you are. No going back. Only the reflective markers stuck in the snow at regular intervals on each side of the road keep you from running into a ditch. Mile after mile.

I'd like to thank my reflective markers.

Querying is all about rejection and ditches. The first time I spoke to my agent, Anne Hawkins, she said, "You are a very good writer. I really want to represent you." That day was the happiest day of my writing life. Thank you, Anne, for guiding me on this journey.

Landing with my editor, Michaela Hamilton, at Kensington, was right up there too. Michaela has been the perfect balance of tough love. Always upbeat and supportive but very firm about what needed work. This book is a testament to our relationship. Thank you, Michaela. You told me I could not write a second book that was not at least as good as the first one, and you made sure I didn't.

Then there is Ramona DeFelice Long, who guided me onto the road to success. I didn't even know how badly written the first draft of my first book was. I took every online course Ramona offered. I apply her lessons every day of my writing life and I know I'm not alone in that. Thank you, Ramona.

Finally, I'd like to thank Sisters in Crime and the Guppies chapter in particular. I wouldn't be here today without you.

Not Your Usual Edgar Awards, continued

Catriona McPherson



There wasn't much that was good about *not* going to New York, *not* seeing my beloved agent (coming from London to meet me halfway), *not* hugging a hundred friends and watching a handful of them have a great night winning an Edgar, *not* getting the train down to Malice in the morning . . .

However, finding out you didn't win for the fourth time, while sitting up in bed in your nightie with a cup of coffee and a Twitter feed? Rather than all gussied up and a long way from home? Sorry, no. That sucked too. Because I couldn't join Hank, Tara, and Emma to celebrate with Carol about her deserved win for *The Night Visitors*.

On the other hand, the online-instead-of-actual Edgars doesn't constitute my biggest ever Edgar disappointment. That honor goes to the time I went downstairs to the station concourse to get a wedge of Junior's cheesecake to stash in my room for private commiseration/celebration eating after the awards were over. I've seldom stopped dead in my tracks, but I did it that day when I saw that the Junior's franchise was gone and I was facing a cheesecake-free night. In my memory, one little Junior's napkin blew disconsolately around in the dust under the empty counter. But then I imagine things for a living. There was probably a Hawaiian barbecue doing a brisk trade.



Unlockdown Diary

by Diana Chambers
(originally for *Hindustan Times*)



After a 30-year gestation, my novel, *The Star of India*, was published by Penguin Random House India in late April of this year of the plague. Even as the virus rampaged brutally through China and then Italy, I was finishing copy edits, reviewing cover design and marketing plans. But by mid-March, I feared the book might not see the light of day. Like most of us, in every corner of the world, I faced crushed dreams, heartbreak. There would be no pub date, no anything.

We were under Lockdown.

Yet the Penguin team persevered. In the end, the novel was a digital release with a print edition to arrive when life turned safer.

Would it turn safer? Would the virus keep us on tenterhooks forever? We were all so anxious, and no one could peek beyond today. All we knew was: we must #stayhome.

Fortunately, we had our digital lives. I had professional obligations: pre-publication events and interviews. More time was occupied by my role as Provision Officer for my family. I searched diligently online for flour and toilet paper. I began to hoard rice and beans, nuts and dates. The shortages made me anxious, too.

In the last days of April, my anxiety grew ahead of *The Star of India* launch. Light-headed, I awoke at 5:00 a.m. California time to join in at 6:00 p.m. IST. The Facebook interview was conducted by Stutee Ghosh, so lively and easy to chat with that I need not have worried. Yet oh, I longed to have a print book in my sweaty palms.

Did I imagine that clutching my newborn novel would give me a sense of reality amidst all the unreality? A sense of control? Was that why I chose the writer's life—my power to maneuver my characters through time and space? Of course, I knew better, but Covid underlined the point: we have no control. Worse: we cannot hug.

As to all that time I had to read? I could barely focus.

Then I received word that my former yoga studio was offering Zoom classes—every day. After moving to another town, I hadn't really connected with a new studio. Never mind, I was too immersed in my latest novel. And then, there was a shoulder injury, and I became president of Sisters in Crime of Northern California. In any case, over the next few years my decades-long yoga

Unlockdown Diary, continued

practice fell away. I missed it terribly. I sat too long at the computer, and my body didn't feel like my own any longer. I injured myself further. But, I'd told myself, I was dedicated to my work.

Now, hungrily, I grasped the opportunity to return virtually to Enso Half Moon Bay, an airy, artist-owned space nestled against the Pacific Ocean. Although I couldn't hear the surf through my computer monitor, I could see the wood fire and the familiar surroundings. I was coming home to yoga. I was stretching again. Breathing. Meditating. I had a schedule, something to get up for, at nine every morning. Throughout these perilous three months, I haven't missed a day. Yoga has gotten me through Lockdown.

Do I still have anxiety? Yes. Do I still long for a good hug, even a handshake? Yes. Do I fear the risk of air travel? Yes. Do I still long to travel—to France, for a new novel? To India, as ever and always? YES.

One thing I know: I can't let my yoga practice go again. I love my work but will never allow it to stand between me and what is even more essential. The asanas are important, but so is simply following one's breath.

Equally so is staying connected to others. During these months of intense isolation, I've been communicating regularly with India, by email and chat, voice and video calls. In one, with a Mumbai director, we agreed on the pandemic's unifying effect; we have been oddly brought together, everyone sharing this horrific yet unique moment. A contradictory sentiment was voiced by my film/TV agent, also in Mumbai, that we have never been so separated—immigration shut down, borders closed off.

Both thoughts are true. We are all experiencing a fraught, fear-filled moment and, still, no one knows what will come tomorrow. As we begin to step out of our homes, we must be more mindful than ever. At the same time, climate change has taken a back seat to health concerns, yet this remains our one and only world. Perhaps this shared experience will remind us that we are all in it together.

We can only hope. As to that longed-for print edition, my publisher has just informed me that I may be holding a copy of my novel in my hands before fall. Somehow life goes on.

Diana Chambers was born with a book in one hand and a passport in the other. After earning an art history degree, she was soon wandering the cobblestones of Paris and bazaars of India. Eventually her road led to Hollywood, where she met actress Nancy Valentine, the subject of *The Star of India*. Thirty years later, in April 2020, the Year of the Plague, this end-of-the-Raj novel was published by Penguin Random House India. Diana is also the author of two spy thrillers: *Stinger*, set in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and *The Company She Keeps*, set in Paris and Tehran. She lives in a small Sonoma County town with her family. For more: www.dianachambers.com. Instagram: @dianarcl Twitter: @DianaRChambers

Member Profile: Deb McCaskey

Fifteenth in a series to introduce our members to each other



One of our newer SinC NorCal members, Deb McCaskey was thrilled to release her first mystery, *Stardusted*, in November 2019.

Stiletta: Deb, I heard that you are a rare 3rd generation Northern California resident but that you are fascinated by Southern California. Where have you lived, and why the SoCal obsession?

Deb McCaskey: Yes, I never thought much of it until I was an adult, but I guess it is rare to be a native Californian, since almost everybody here comes from somewhere else. I have several friends whose families go back to the Gold Rush or to California Indians or Spanish explorers, though, so by comparison I don't feel like three generations is that much. My great-grandparents came from the Azores like so many other Portuguese-Americans and settled in Contra Costa County, where my great-grandfather was born in 1896. (My father did come here from another state, Oklahoma, and most of those ancestors were in America before the Revolution—but he was definitely a newcomer to California!)

I was born in Berkeley and have lived most of my life in Contra Costa County, and in fact now live only about a quarter-mile from the house I grew up in—which was very handy for checking in on my mom as she grew older.

I guess my fondness for Southern California dates back to childhood visits to see a group of cousins I found very glamorous. My mother's youngest sister had five children, some older than me and some younger. One is a musician who was part of LA's folk-rock scene in the '60s, another was an LA County lifeguard, and another is a lifelong surfer starting in the '60s when that scene was really getting going. They're all down to earth, lively and witty, and back when TV and movie people mostly had to live in that area, they were always running into famous faces and have a bunch of funny stories about these encounters. It's probably still happening. Anyway, whenever I go to Southern California now, it's still with that feeling of infinite possibility, that anything could happen, and the excitement of being on vacation that I had when I was a kid. But I always like returning home, too.

Stiletta: Please tell us about your career in journalism, why you chose it, and what types of jobs you held.

DM: I was in the newspaper business for 28 years as an editor and reporter for a suburban chain of papers in the San Francisco East Bay. I covered schools and small towns for a while—nothing that momentous—and later spent most of my time in the features department. The job I had the longest was food editor for 11 years. I also reviewed restaurants as one of three on the staff (we all had other

Member Profile: Deb McCaskey, continued

jobs on the paper, too), which was lots of fun. I was one of those people who went into the field because it was the only way to make a living as a writer that I knew of at the time. But overall, I would describe my career in journalism as, um, undistinguished.

Stiletta: As a newspaper features editor, you interviewed a number of celebrities. Tell us about some of your favorite interviews.

DM: Well, it's been a long time ago now, and a lot of the folks I interviewed were better known then. But I guess the biggest celebrity and the one who made me the most nervous was Julia Child. She was also one of the nicest. I remember asking her if after all this time she still liked to cook and she chortled, as though no one had asked her this before, "Yes, it's my hobby!" I thought that was so sweet. I also got to interview various other well-known foodies including Alice Waters, Ruth Reichl, Thomas Keller, and Martin Yan. Chefs and cookbook authors are always fun to meet because they're passionate about what they're doing, and very opinionated!

As a features writer, one of the most enjoyable interviews I ever had was a 45-minute phone chat with the wonderful George Takei, Mr. Sulu on *Star Trek*. What a voice he has. I'm glad to see he's still speaking out these days. We mostly talked about what he was going to be doing next, which was hosting a *Star Trek* series marathon on a local TV station.

Two authors were also memorable: Dick Francis—of course, being a horse nut, I loved interviewing an author who had been a steeplechase jockey—and Diana Gabaldon, back when the idea of her "big, weird" *Outlander* books making it to the screen seemed unlikely, because this was in the days before long-running TV serializations of books were a thing. I wouldn't say she directly gave me advice, but when she described how she writes—writing scenes as they occur to her and then figuring out later how they fit together, like patchwork—it was really inspiring to me. Weird as it seems, it hadn't occurred to me to write fiction that way, but that's exactly how I do it now. It feels like the most natural way to get the story down.

Stiletta: Your Amazon bio says you are “intrigued by the way different people handle fame, success, failure, and life in general.” Can you give us some examples?

DM: All my life I've been drawn to behind-the-scenes tales of the stage, movies and TV, and have read a lot of bios and memoirs. You often start with someone who comes from disadvantage but who is talented and driven to excel, which is admirable. And if they're lucky, they become successful, sometimes achieving unimaginable material wealth. But the downside is the also unimaginable pressure and scrutiny—something which they're often completely unprepared to handle. And since the business is so volatile, even the very successful know that it can all be taken away from them in a heartbeat. How they navigate their lives, whether they figure out an exit plan, whether they develop the perspective and strength to be good people, or whether they succumb to

Member Profile: Deb McCaskey, continued

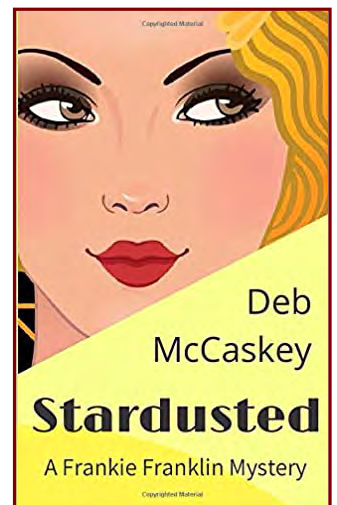
egotism and addiction—those to me are just fascinating stories. In some ways their life stories are like any of ours, except with gaudier highs and lows, and more excessive excess. It's fascinating—and sad—to me that so many young people today just want to be famous, famous for being famous. It's such a stunted life goal. I like the advice singer-songwriter Mark Knopfler offers about this: "Get good at something." He also said it's great to be successful, not so great to be famous. (And of course, he's gotten his wish because now, though he has a devoted fan base, there's at least one generation that doesn't remember Dire Straits!)

Stiletta: Your first novel, *Stardusted*, features “America’s Kid Sister,” the irrepressible 1930s actress Frankie Franklin (née Hickenlooper), her friends and family and, of course, a mystery. What made you decide to set the book in the Golden Age of Hollywood? And why a mystery?

DM: This is all Janice Peacock's fault. We met because I'm a glass beadmaker like her—well, not like her because she's crazy accomplished and successful at it while I sort of noodle around—and she writes the Glass Bead Mystery Series. She was going to do NaNoWriMo a few years ago and when I said I always wanted to try that, she grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, metaphorically speaking, and dragged me into it. I had zero in the way of ideas or characters in mind at the time. But it seemed like a mystery would give me a ready-made structure, and because I've always loved tales of Hollywood's Golden Age—during the time of Astaire and Rogers, Katharine Hepburn, Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, the Marx Brothers, all of those greats—I thought, well, why not set it there? And then I thought it would be fun to have the amateur sleuth be one of those glamorous blonde starlets that most people would underestimate, but who's smart and goodhearted, and pretty soon Frankie showed up and said, "Hey, I heard you needed a heroine?"

Stiletta: The cover of *Stardusted* is irresistible. Did you design it?

DM: Thank you so much! I did design it. I had considered using some of the nice ready-made covers that are out there, but none seemed quite right for my story. I've always loved drawing, photography and playing with images, and one of my post-newspaper jobs involved doing a bit of graphic design, which I found I really enjoyed. So I got onto Canva and started playing around. The cover is a very small part of a stock image; I just loved her expression, because it seemed to capture Frankie's spirit. The rest was figuring out the best colors, shapes and the typefaces.



Member Profile: Deb McCaskey, continued

Stiletta: I loved *Stardusted* and hope it is the first in a series. How about it?

DM: Thank you! And, definitely! We're in quarantine like everyone else right now, so it's been a weird time. You would think that that, plus being retired, would give me plenty of time to write. But there's also a lot of stress and psychological distraction around these days. We have an old house and a big yard, so there are lots of chores that are perfect for the procrastinating writer. I have been working away on the second Frankie book, though, and the characters have been entertaining me, so I hope readers will also like it. It's going a bit slowly, but that's one good thing about self-publishing—you set your own deadlines. Eventually I hope there will be three or four in the series, at least. We'll see!

Stiletta: You also like to write about horses. Were you a horse lover from an early age, as many young girls are?

DM: Oh gosh, yes. I was lucky that my dad liked them, too—he'd done some cowboying in Oklahoma before World War II—and bought a horse when I was about six. I had my own horse later, and so did my two best friends. We didn't have the money to show horses, and ours were not any fancy purebreds, but we had fun riding them all over the place. For years the only books I would read by choice were about horses, or dogs. I read all of Walter Farley's Black Stallion books, all of Marguerite Henry's starting with *Misty of Chincoteague*, and everything by an author I think few folks remember now, Patsy Gray, who wrote wonderfully about girls and their horses. I only found out much later she hadn't lived that far away from me. As a kid I drew horses more than wrote about them and had favorite artists. I loved the illustrations by C.W. Anderson, Paul Brown, Wesley Dennis, and Sam Savitt.

Stiletta: Please feel free to plug your website. What will we find there?

DM: Why, thanks, I will! It's debmccaskey.com and you can download a PDF of the first chapter of *Stardusted* there. There's also news about where you can buy the book—eventually, books. The home page functions as a blog with sporadic posts whenever I feel like I have something to say, which might include interesting things I've run across in doing research, observations on the writing life—which so often is staring-out-the-window life—and, because I'm a foodie, the occasional recipe. Katharine Hepburn's brownie recipe is on there now, the version I've been making for years, ever since it was printed in a women's magazine my mom had.

Stiletta: What advice would you give to fellow authors trying to publish their first novel?

DM: I'm so new to this myself, all I can offer at the moment is stuff I've noticed as a newbie. I decided to go with self-publishing because at my age I didn't feel like I wanted to spend three or

Member Profile: Deb McCaskey, continued

four years trying to persuade an agent to take me on and get traditionally published, and I'm lucky because I don't need to depend on writing to make a living. My daughter is a musician, and I like the model so many musicians are following these days, recording their own stuff and selling it themselves. You have so much more control of your intellectual property that way, and you can do what pleases you.

That said, I do have some thoughts from years of writing for publication in newspapers, just about being as careful a writer as you can be. Write and rewrite and rewrite some more until you're convinced it's as good as it can be. And have others read it, getting a professional editor if you can. I have several friends who are readers and editors already and edit my stuff, and I'm pretty good at self-editing. I think the hardest help to find is someone who can think about the characters and their motivations, the logic of the story, the pacing, that sort of thing, and make useful suggestions. I have a couple of friends who are good at that, another who's an ace copy editor and has an eagle eye for period slang, and another who's a good copy editor, catches continuity problems, and is also an avid mystery reader and knows what I'm trying for and if I've hit the mark or not.

Stiletta: What authors have inspired you to become an author yourself?

DM: I don't personally know many traditionally published authors, but there are those whose work delights me and inspires me because it makes me think, "Hey, I want to give readers that kind of a good time, too!" Of course, the ones I mentioned earlier were inspirations and as a teenager I wrote horse stories that were pretty bad—I just didn't know how to do it. Now I love Will Thomas's Cyrus Barker books and adore Robert Crais's Elvis Cole novels. Like other series do, they create heroes who have characters around them who sort of constitute a family, and even in novels with fairly graphic violence like theirs can be, you get that sense of safety and security when they're in their family settings, which I like. And Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, of course, the master, who created Sherlock Holmes, John Watson and their landlady, Mrs. Hudson—a name my husband and I swiped for our rescue dog.

Stiletta: How has membership in Sisters in Crime benefited you?

DM: I mentioned Janice before, and she connected me with Sisters in Crime, whose members are endlessly inspiring. I haven't been a member for that long, just a few months, but they are all so passionate about what they're doing, and so supportive, and write in so many different styles, it gives one confidence. I haven't met that many of the members yet, but I already feel like it's a great community. I went to Left Coast Crime in San Diego this year based on the presentation at one of the meetings, and had a great time for the one day it ran before COVID-19 put an end to it. I'm glad I got in that one day, though. I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

Member Profile: Deb McCaskey, continued

Stiletta: What else would you like your Siblings to know about you?

DM: I guess that I'm here to learn from them, and that I love to talk about the craft of writing and researching, especially for historical novels, which I mine are, being set in the 1930s. I guess that's it: It's not so much what I'd like them to know about me, as it is that I'm interested in what makes them write and how they live their writing lives.

Deb McCaskey was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



Blog Opportunity from Thonie Hevron

Do you have a book coming out soon? Are you looking for a free promo opportunity?

I'm currently signing up authors for guest posts on my weekly blog. I host writers of mysteries in three categories: **Mystery Readers Only** (promoting your work to readers); **Writer's Notes** (sharing your thoughts on the writing craft and process for other authors); and **Street Stories** (how to make cop characters relatable and maybe inspire a story or two).

Please let me know which category you wish to write for, but I reserve the right to determine which posts fit where.

I'll try to schedule posts with consideration for your launch/release date, but spots go fast so don't wait too long. I post on Friday mornings and will send you a link to promote on your social media. Please be willing to share your post and ready to respond to comments, as I have a lively audience.

The format is simple:

Mystery Readers Only: ~500 words aimed at the mystery reader – wordcount applies to post only.

Writer's Notes: ~500 words aimed at the mystery writer – wordcount applies to post only.

A novel synopsis is helpful but your author bio, head shot, cover shot and buy link are vital. Please submit no less than five days before your post date.

Email me at badge65@gmail.com and we'll work out the best date.

Member News



New Releases

Riviera Gold by Laurie R. King, a Mary and Sherlock Holmes novel, June 9 from Bantam books

Casting Call for a Corpse by Heather Haven, book #7 of the Alvarez Family Mysteries, August 1

The Mona Lisa Sisters: A Historical Literary Fiction Novel, George Cramer's debut novel, August 14 from Russian Hill Press

The Last Mrs. Summers (a spoof on Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca*) by Rhys Bowen, book #14 in the Royal Spyness mystery series, August 4 from Berkley. No tour this year, just some virtual signings.

Scot on the Rocks by Catriona McPherson, book #3 in the Last Ditch Mystery series, August 3 in e-format (hard cover to follow) by Severn House Publishers

House of Desire by Margaret Lucke, book #2 in the Claire Scanlan Haunted House series, June 9 from Oakledge Press

Beet Fields, Robin Somers' debut mystery, book #1 in the Olive Post mystery series (with a gorgeous cover by Robin's sister Marti Somers), mid-August

The Star of India by Diana Chambers, late April in e-format by Penguin Random House India, print edition around mid-August

Gigi Pandian's middle grade locked-room mystery short story, "The Haunted Typewriter," appears in *Super Puzzletastic Mysteries: Short Stories for Young Sleuths by Mystery Writers of America*, edited by Chris Grabenstein, published June 23 by Harper Collins.

Eileen Rendahl's short story, "Puzzling It Out," appears in *Super Puzzletastic Mysteries*, an anthology of middle grade mysteries, published June 23, and another short story, "A Spoonful of Poison," was accepted for the Bouchercon anthology.

Ellen Kirschman's story, "Welcome to the Sisterhood," is in *Shattering Glass*, the first anthology published by Nasty Women Press and edited by Kelli Stanley. All profits go to Planned Parenthood.

Faye Snowden's story, "One Bullet, One Vote," is in the anthology *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 2*. All proceeds will go to the Southern Poverty Law Center to help in their ongoing efforts to fight voter suppression.

Deborah McCaskey is happy to announce that the audiobook version of *Stardusted* is now available on Amazon. Her narrator-producer, Mary Castillo—an author herself—was terrific to work with, and Deb is really pleased with her first foray into this format.

Member News, continued

Leslie Karst is happy to announce that the audiobook for the first book in her Lefty-nominated Sally Solari culinary series, *Dying for a Taste*, has just been released.

Public (Virtual Appearances)

Diana Chambers was the guest speaker (via Zoom) on *The Universe Writes*, a Jaipur (India) literary event on June 30.

Awards and Recognition

Gigi Pandian's *The Alchemist's Illusion* is nominated for an Anthony Award for Best Paperback Original.

The Capitol Crimes chapter of Sisters in Crime gave Pat Canterbury an award for her continuing support to the chapter and its members—established and emerging authors as well as readers—since inception.

Congratulations to our members who won awards in the Public Safety Writers Association Writing Competition. Thonie Hevron won first place in the Fiction Book, Unpublished category for *Felony Murder Rule*, Ellen Kirschman won second place for *Answers to His Prayers*, and George Cramer won fourth place for *A Tale of Robbers and Cops*. Vinnie Hansen won both second and third place in the Short Story, Published category for "The Last Word" and "Room and Board." Ellen Kirschman won Honorable Mention in the Short Story, Unpublished category for "Don't I Know You." George Cramer won both first and third place in the Flash Fiction, Unpublished category for "Joe" and "Welcome Home" A great showing for our chapter!

Training Delivered

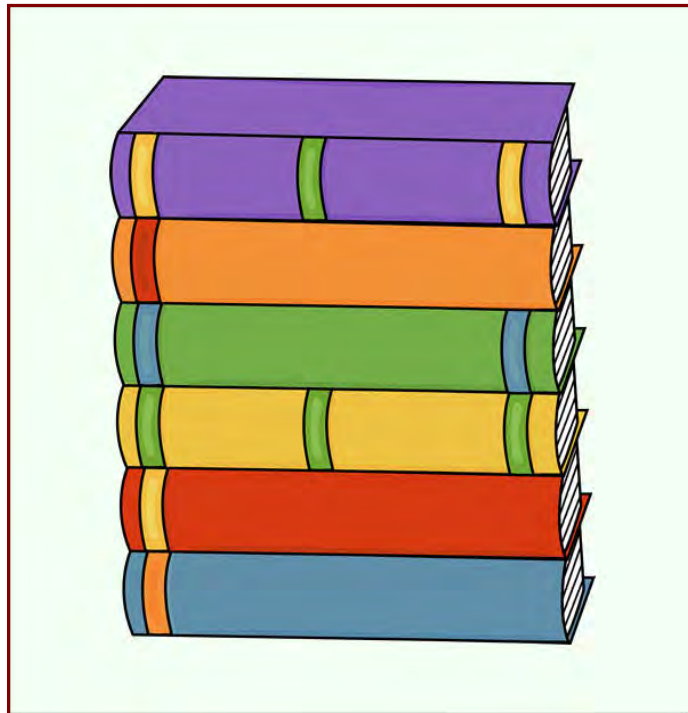
Margaret Lucke will be teaching a new course called "Writing Genre Fiction" for UC Berkeley Extension, exploring the craft behind mysteries and thrillers, of course, along with science fiction, fantasy, romance, horror, and more. Like all of the Extension's classes for the fall session, it is being offered online for 10 Wednesday evenings starting October 7. <https://tinyurl.com/writing-genre-fiction>

Member News, continued

Miscellaneous

Susan McCormick is part of a podcast series, *The Cozy Mystery Quartet*, on YouTube, with short episodes discussing the elements of a cozy: The Sleuth, The Setting, Crime and Suspects, Humor, Sleuth Supporters, etc.

Margaret Lucke's short story "Two Hundred Miles," which was included in our chapter's anthology, *Fault Lines*, has been produced as a podcast by *Mysteryrat's Maze*, a project of the online magazine *Kings River Life*, which also publishes short mystery fiction. The reader, Teya Juarez, did a wonderful job of narrating the story and capturing the protagonist's voice. <https://mysteryratsmaze.podbean.com/e/two-hundred-miles-by-margaret-lucke/>



Question of the Quarter



How many drafts do you usually do when writing a novel or story?

There's no such thing as a final draft. There's just a point where you've run out of ways to criticize . . . until the day of publication, then you have ideas for all sorts of revisions. ***Simon Wood***

In one word, countless. ***Robin Somers***

My first draft is an extended outline, but I will count it. So about five before it is out the door and off to the reviewing wolves. ***Priscilla Royal***

I'm just finishing up #9 in the Samuel Craddock series and can tell you it took five and two halves drafts. The two halves are because the first half gets more attention than the second half. As I revise, I keep having to adjust and readjust the first half to refine the setup for what actually happens in the second half. With the C19 shutdown and consequent distractions, the first draft this time was very odd. When I read over it to begin revisions, I could tell exactly where I was when the s**t hit the fan. Everything after that was very odd. Happily, at some point I was able to concentrate—at least I think so. ***Terry Shames***

This is a tricky question, because my answer is simultaneously “a ton” and “two.” I spend a *long* time plotting, developing characters, and jotting down research notes in paper notebooks before I turn to the computer, and then when I move to the computer (often during NaNoWriMo) I write a full draft quickly. After setting that aside for distance, then I'll write the *good* draft. Subsequent revisions don't really feel like new drafts, it's usually tweaking different parts of the book, with an occasional overhaul when necessary. ***Gigi Pandian***

One! I edit as I go along. I never leave questions unanswered. I follow the rules of a scene, with each one a pattern of dialogue, action, character motivation, and description, and don't move on until I think those pages are ready. I have critique partners and take their advice, chapter by chapter. When I write The End, it's over except for giving to beta readers. I address their concerns and submit. ***Camille Minichino***

My work is usually one, long, constantly changing draft. As I move along, I change the date in the title so I will know the latest draft I'm dealing with. Or with which I'm dealing, to be grammatically correct. With my latest book, there are about two more drafts before it's released. It's left the content editor and is with the line editor now. There will be changes to that draft. Then it goes to the beta readers. I consider that the final draft before debut. However, I will come back to it from time to time in the future and possibly update, change, and modify, especially if—after all that—a reader catches something. Which they always do. Because you are never done. ***Heather Haven***

Question of the Quarter, continued

The number of drafts varies with everything I write. There's often a point where I just can't read or rewrite the dang thing one more time. About that time, I realize I am plotting ways to kill my agent and my editor. *Ellen Kirschman*

As a former newspaper reporter, I was used to banging out a story, making edits as I or my editor required, and letting it go – all in one day if it was a spot news story. So writing a novel feels like a luxury. I've completed one so far, *Stardusted*, and am working on the second book in the series. And I've come to the conclusion that I can't even count the drafts, either on the first book or on the one I'm working on now! I start off with scenes that appear in various places in the story, as they come to me, and start stitching them together, at some point making an outline. Some scenes, such as the opening scene in *Stardusted*, have gone through seven or eight edits at least, and others are almost in their original form. In some ways I guess once I've gotten to the end of all that, that's officially the first draft. Then there's another looking for plot holes, anachronisms (my setting is the 1930s), characters whose name or age or eye color suddenly changes, stuff like that. And then there's the picky copy-editing draft. Then it goes to editors and readers. So . . . three-ish? *Deborah McCaskey*

At least three drafts, one to get my ideas down, the second to firm them up, and a final to polish it off. I also agree with Simon Wood that there's no such thing as a final draft because I'm constantly making changes. Sometimes I make a change, then change it back again. *Marilyn Dykstra*

My WIP file is currently labeled TheGuncopy9. I'd previously thought that was the last draft. Alas, no. *Vinnie Hansen*

Whenever I near the end of a story or novel and try to unclench my grip on it, I remind myself: "A work is never finished, only abandoned." I don't do numbered drafts but edit constantly while I'm writing and could go on forever if not for deadlines. *C.J. Verburg*

As a journalist, I'm used to writing clean first drafts. For my first two novels, *Chimera Catalyst* and *Singularity Syndrome*, I had a fairly good handle on the plot and structure. I did one full draft, editing as I went, and then a couple of passes based on comments from beta readers, but not really a full new draft. Then, another pass to handle my editor's comments. For my WIP, a domestic suspense novel, I do *not* have a good handle on the plot. I try to remind myself it's OK to have a sh*tty first draft, and I'm writing scenes out of order. I think I'm looking at three drafts for this one before it's submittable. *Susan Kuchinskas*

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

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.

SinC NorCal Executive Committee

President: Susan Bickford – [susan \(dot \)bickford \(at\) gmail.com](mailto:susan (dot)bickford (at) gmail.com)

Vice President: Robin Stuart – [rcstuart \(at\) gmail.com](mailto:rcstuart (at) gmail.com)

Secretary: Claire Ortalda – [clairemystery \(at\) sonic.net](mailto:clairemystery (at) sonic.net)

Treasurer: Ana Manwaring – [anamanwaring \(at\) gmail.com](mailto:anamanwaring (at) gmail.com)

Membership: Malena Eljumaily – [malena \(at\) omnicode.com](mailto:malena (at) omnicode.com)

Events: Ana Brazil – [anabrazil \(at\) sbcglobal.net](mailto:anabrazil (at) sbcglobal.net)

Speakers Bureau: Susan Kuchinskias – [susan \(at\) kuchinskias.com](mailto:susan (at) kuchinskias.com)

Newsletter: Margie Bunting – [mbunting \(at\) sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbunting (at) sbcglobal.net)

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

