

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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NOVEMBER 2020

Greetings, Siblings

Time for NaNoWriMo – it's a Bay Area Tradition

Did you know that NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) started in the Bay Area? Founded in 1999 by Chris Baty, there were all of twenty participants from the San Francisco Bay Area that year. The magical 50,000-word count was determined by the shortest novel on Baty's shelf, *Brave New World*.

In 2000, NaNoWriMo had a website and the month was moved from July to November since the nasty weather was more conducive to writing. And thus a wonderful and quirky writing tradition was started.

To find out more about these fun facts, be sure to visit www.wikiwrimo.org/wiki/National_Novel_Writing_Month, www.wiki.wrimo.

Meanwhile, regardless if you have written only a few pages or many novels, November is upon us and we have double the reasons to sign up because Sisters in Crime is a national sponsor of NaNoWriMo this year. There will be additional write-ins, support meetings, and fun events, both at the SinC National level and from SinC NorCal.

Even better, NaNo participants do not have to be Sisters in Crime members to participate. Everyone is invited. Do you



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President's Letter, continued

have friends who say, "You know, I've always wanted to do some writing."? Or, "I have this idea for a novel." This is a great time to invite them to join in and help make that happen.

November continues to be the month when NaNoWriMo stresses writing the 50,000 words for the month. However, you can definitely feel free to craft your own goals and earn your own prizes. For example, NaNo offers prizes for the number of consecutive days writing, no matter how many words. Do not let the idea of 50,000 words or needing to be a novel get in the way of establishing or rebooting a steady writing practice and making strides with your personal goals are.

Getting Started

First go to the NaNoWriMo site, <https://nanowrimo.org/>, and register and/or update your previous registration. Each year is a bit different, so check out your profile, look for buddies, see what the newest tools are, discover the discussion groups.

Next, join SinC50K. This is a group that gets you all our SinC50K communications and invitations: <https://www.sistersincrime.org/event/SinC50K20>

In addition, be sure to sign up for the Sisters in Crime NaNoWriMo Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/sinc50K>, and if you're on Twitter, follow SinC National at <https://twitter.com/SINCnational>.

Stay tuned for announcements from Sisters in Crime National and SinC NorCal.

Meanwhile, let us know if you intend to participate. Log into our sincnorcal2.groups.io site and click on "Databases" on the left side. There you will find our database for NaNo. Please fill in your information and keep in touch.

And even if you prefer to huddle by yourself, have a great writing month in November.

Sincerely,

Susan Bickford (she, her, hers)

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal

Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, November 7, 12:00-2:00 p.m.

Fall/Winter Author Showcase (via Zoom)

Our Fall/Winter Showcase features eleven Sisters in Crime NorCal authors with exciting new work in a range of styles. Join us to hear flash readings from your fellow Siblings. Here's the lineup:

JoAnn Smith Ainsworth
Daisy Bateman
Cara Black
Diana Chambers
Janet Dawson
Heather Haven
Reece Hirsch
Margaret Lucke
Susan McCormick
Gigi Pandian
Faye Snowden

Saturday, December 12 12:00-2:00 p.m

Holiday Event with MWA (via Zoom)

Join your NorCal and Cruiser SinC siblings and MWA NorCal friends at a Holiday Event (via Zoom). Watch for more information, coming soon.



As always, there will be no chapter event in January.

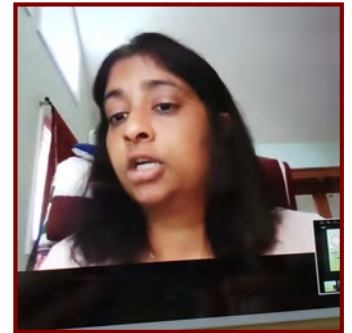
Please register in advance on the website for all events.

In Case You Missed It . . .

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

August Meeting - Revolutionizing the Hero's Journey: How to Use Non-Western Folklore to Make Old Tales New

Researcher, scientist, and storyteller Vanitha Sankaran showed us the similarities and differences in how stories are told in diverse cultures, from West Africa to Korea. She drew parallels from pop culture references such as the movie *Black Panther*, the *Peanuts* comic strip, manga, and even knock-knock jokes. Attendee comments expressed that the presentation was fascinating, informative, and inspirational.

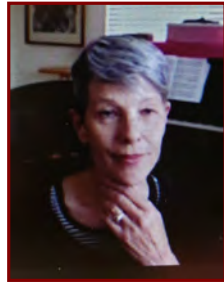


September Meeting - Short Story Panels

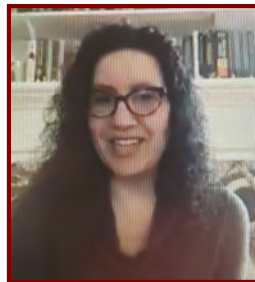
Terry Shames moderated this fascinating panel about everything you wanted to know about writing short stories—for both experienced and aspiring short story writers. Panel members participated in a lively Q&A session.



Terry Shames



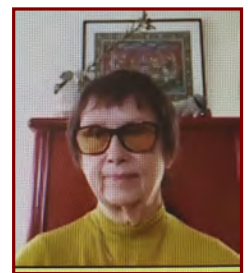
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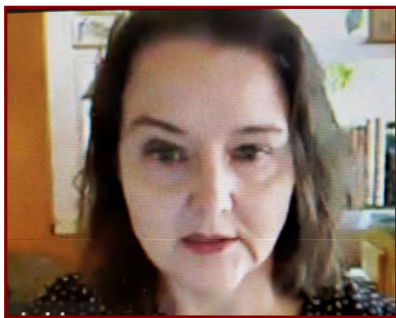
Gigi Pandian



Art Taylor



Nancy Tingley



October Meeting - Author Mailing Lists

Sue Trowbridge led us through an informative, fact-filled presentation about author mailing lists and newsletters—how much the most popular services cost, which features they offer, working with templates and more, with an emphasis on Mailchimp and MailerLite and a helpful handout.



How Much Crime is Enough Crime?

by Susan C. Shea

How much crime do you need in order for your story to be a crime novel? And when do you need to present the crime? Some novels are awash in death, grisly scenes, fear and horror. Many hit you with it on page one or even in a prologue. At the other end of the spectrum, do you really need a murder, or is some other kind of crime enough?

This year, I've read novels that range from noir to thriller to domestic suspense and police procedurals, but most of them have in common gruesome deaths, lovingly described down to the last blood spatter or dripping entrails. Cut throats, faces shot off, gut stabbings, fingers whacked off, evidence of torture including sexual violence, bodies thrown off high bridges. The list goes on, writers being such imaginative souls.

I admit to being a bit squeamish, but is it just me? These books come with cover texts that let you know the writers are (all? how can that be?) *New York Times* bestselling authors, and rave back cover blurbs, so I know this level of violent, fictional death delights a lot of readers. (As an aside, anyone who reads Marilyn Stasio's biweekly Crime column in the *New York Times Book Review* section knows she relishes novels in which people's faces are chewed off by large animals, and people die very badly, the gorier the better. The time she reviewed my gentler novel, she gave it what passes in her perspective as a positive review of a cozy, writing that it was a "pleasant getaway from hard core killers." In the same column she reviewed a Jo Nesbo novel in which the killer—I kid you not—rips out the throats of his victims "with lethal dentures made of metal spikes and drinks their blood."

Near the other end of the spectrum are the tidy, off-the-page murders that take place in libraries, cookie shops, and apple farms. Comparatively bloodless, they seem to be committed by people with far less lust than the blood-drinkers and eyeball-gougers, and far fewer deep, psychological disorders.

In addition to the amount of violence in the novels, there's also the *timing*. Police procedurals by their very nature start with the discovery of a body, or something like a hit and run "accident" or a house fire that the cops quickly figure out is actually attempted murder. But almost all the contemporary books I've read in the past ten years start with the murder or the finding of the body, somewhere in chapter one. A few show the reader the murder taking place in a prologue, but set the discovery at a later time, a week, a year, even a decade or two later. But we get the murder scene right up front, just so we know evil is with us.

How Much Crime is Enough Crime? continued

There are a few books in which the murder—if there even is one—happens 80 or 100 pages into the book. We have a feeling something bad’s going to happen, and that the reasons for it are important to understand, but no corpse. P.D. James has a clever way of hooking the reader in the very first sentence without offering up a dead body, by the way, and does it in at least two of her immensely popular crime novels. She opens with something like “Three weeks before her death, so-and-so went to her office...” But a lot of plots without early killings are criticized as “slow” by Amazon and Goodreads amateur reviewers. Agents and editors probably fret that they’ll be hard to sell.

Early on, before my first crime fiction manuscript was complete, the advice I got was you need a body on or close to page one. That pushed my preferred version of storytelling into something that felt for a while kind of artificial. But in the final revision of what became my first book, the body plummeted out of the window during the first scene. It took me quite a long time to structure it so that it felt believable to me, but I think it worked.

In addition to the amount and timing of crimes, there is the question of the number of victims. Many of the books on the market now feature horrific serial killers and the dread the FBI agents or police or non-professionals experience as bodies pile up faster than they can identify or catch the suspect. Even if they’re not serial killers, villains tend to leave a trail of deaths behind them, sometimes the people they kill to keep them from telling the police about their original act of violence. In the Dani O’Rourke Mysteries, I opted for an inciting murder that inevitably led someone to kill again, caught in the web they had spun. It made sense to me for those rather ordinary people driven by panic and mental instability. But in my French village mysteries, a single murder was plenty for one small town to absorb.

Why so much graphic violence? Why so many dead people strewn across the landscape of a single book? Has crime writing changed to mirror the amount and kinds of true crime we’re exposed to in newspapers and news reporting today? In the 21st century, have we become accustomed to constant loss of life, so much so that writing fiction that will appeal to readers requires us to up the ante?

The earliest crime fiction novels didn’t have multiple or particularly bloody murders. *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, published in the mid-nineteenth century, was effective without them. A real 19th century serial killer, “Jack the Ripper,” was plenty ghoulish and inspired lots of crime novels, although I’m not sure how many were written in the first years after he terrorized London. Agatha Christie penned some mysteries that might sound modern (a number of people stabbing the same victim, a number of victims dying one after the other on an island) but were not too realistically described. There was a rather polite distance observed in the telling.

How Much Crime is Enough Crime? continued

But times change, and I'm not either a literary researcher or an expert on mental health. I don't pretend to have an answer. I do know that I'm beginning to steer away from the nastiest sounding examples this year, even from crime fiction itself. There's enough dystopian reality these days. As a crime writer, I'm trying to figure out if I really need a murder in the book I'm working on now. As a reader, I may backpedal all the way to Jane Austen at this rate for some fresher air and small mysteries about a handsome, brooding stranger who shows up at the local ball.

Susan C Shea is a past president of the Sisters in Crime NorCal chapter, past Secretary of national Sisters in Crime, and the author of two series: three Dani O'Rourke Mysteries and a pair of French village mysteries.



Zooming with Zoom

by Heather Haven



If anyone had said to me six months ago a large part of being an author in today's world would be virtual, I would have laughed in his or her face. So much for reading the future. Before the pandemic, I did my share of in-the-flesh panel discussions, book signings, writers' meetings, board meetings, i.e., the basic tools of the trade. They were enough of a trial. Back in the day, the Bay Area traffic was so bad it would take hours to travel anywhere that wasn't your local filling station. But here I am, forced into the unlikely reality of Zoom.

First off, I had no idea how to Zoom. What do you mean, I need a camera? And a mic? But soon I realized it was time to come kicking and screaming into 2020. This old poodle needed to learn a few new tricks. Bow-wow.

So I took a free Zoom online class offered to those like me to learn the rudiments. For the next forty minutes, we rushed through everything that makes Zoom a gift to the virtual world. I watched the clicking of the teacher's mouse going from here to there and back again while trying to remember what went where. After my class, I asked my heart sister to let me practice on her with a Zoom meeting. She was the ideal person because whatever I did or didn't do, she would be all-forgiving. I managed to set up the Zoom meeting and it went great. Was this one-on-one Zoom stuff really this easy to do?

Not quite.

To attain a more professional look, I needed an interesting backdrop behind me instead of the basket of laundry sitting on the dining room table waiting to be folded. Or hubby walking by in nothing but his boxers, grateful as I was for him at least wearing those. Then I remembered my class. The look of a *real* background could be solved by using a *virtual* one. Virtuality saves the day?

Not quite.

Unfortunately, one has to have a fairly new computer to support this enhancement. I don't. But wait! I could buy a green screen plus its stand to place behind me. Then a multitude of backgrounds could be superimposed on the green screen. Once I got that, they said, I could virtually be wherever I wanted to be: the Roman Coliseum, Waikiki beach, or even outer space (which seemed pretty good at the time). Problem solved?

Not quite.

The lighting has to be just so, they warned, or you will look like Bela Lugosi. Or in my case, his mom. And the virtual background on its little green backdrop won't work so well, either. It

Zooming with Zoom, continued

shouldn't have too much or too little light, but something just right. Goldilocks aside, now I'm a lighting director?

Not on your tintype.

This all seemed a little too sophisticated for me, so I axed the virtual background thing. But after a bit more research, I did buy a ring light on a mini-tripod that sits behind the laptop. I have to admit, the lighting does smooth out some of the wrinkles in my face...ah...dress.

I'm still looking for that perfect writerly background. I've been prowling around the house, laptop and ring light in tow. The only acceptable background I've found so far is the bookcase in the bedroom directly across from the bed. So I set the laptop and ring light on a box on top of the bed because I've learned the camera needs to be elevated. This is so my double chins don't show as much. One hopes. Then I brought in a chair and sat down between the bed and the bookcase, trying to look writerly. Not so comfortable and the cat was totally confused. Just who did I think I was, dumping all this junk on *her* bed and interrupting her mid-afternoon nap?

Okay, so I'm still trying to work out the bugs of this new media stuff. I am beginning to appreciate the idea of the green screen. But I am *really* beginning to appreciate the idea of radio.

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



Got Gimmicks?

by Camille Minichino



I'm at the end of my rope.

I mean that literally. I want to hang a character but I think I've used up all my rope in other stories.

I know that 29 novels and a dozen or so short stories is down in the noise of so many of my well-published colleagues in Sisters in Crime, but it's a lot for me and I'm running out of gimmicks.

How many different weapons are there? I ran through quite a few in the periodic table series, turning some elements into weapons. Still, I had to resort to hit & run, garroting, and suffocation.

How many ways are there of threatening a victim or a sleuth? A note under her windshield wiper? Slashed tires? A vandalized apartment? A dead animal on her doorstep? A heavy-breathing phone call? A tailgating SUV on a winding mountain road? Brake lines cut?

Done and done.

How many dangerous situations can I think up that aren't over the top in terms of the TSTL syndrome? An underground parking garage? (No, no, don't go there alone at night!) In her own home? (No, no, don't switch on the lights and stand in front of the uncovered window!) In a deserted office building after hours? (No, no, don't refuse the security guard's offer of an escort!) On a jogging trail in the park? (No, no—see all of the above.) Motive is another big element. There are only 7 deadly sins. What can I use that I or a dozen other traditional mystery writers haven't already worked to death, so to speak?

There's also that final confrontation scene between the protagonist and the killer. SHE is not going to die; we know that. Not in this subgenre. But that doesn't relieve me of the obligation to make the scene suspenseful.

If the writing is good enough, can we get away with a do-over of *Murder on the Orient Express*? An episode of "Murder She Wrote"?

I think my personal best for a confrontation scene was in a hazardous waste pit, which fit the story well. That's the ideal, to have the last scene the likely outcome of the story.

Got Gimmicks? continued

Maybe this is a good Question of a future Quarter: what was your most original weapon? Confrontation scene? No spoilers, but maybe we can trade.

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 published three books in the Postmistress Mysteries. Her fifth and newest series, written as Elizabeth Logan, is the Alaska Diner Mysteries. The first, *Mousse and Murder*, was released in May 2020. The second, *Fishing for Trouble*, will be released November 24, 2020. Camille is a Past President of SinC NorCal. <http://www.minichino.com/>



Genre-Bending Transformation: Your Story Into a Play

Part 1 of 2: The Four Major Ingredients of a Good Play by Pat Morin



Have you ever considered transforming your short story or novel into a play?

Even if you have no desire to become an active playwright, now is a good time to expand your creative boundaries and acquire another valuable skill.

Where do you start? Well, you already have. You have a genre, plot, characters, setting, and time period. You know the beginning, middle, and end, and can identify your target audience. Your readers trust you will deliver an entertaining story, as your audience trusts you will deliver an entertaining play.

How long is your play? Generally, plays take a minute-per-page to read.

It can be a flash short play, up to five minutes; a short story, 10-15 minutes; a one-act up to 50 minutes; or a full-length piece of 90-120 minutes. The theatre will have clear guidelines to help you decide the best format, and there are many play festivals that feature/include eight 10-minute plays.

I started my career writing short fiction and then envisioned how my short stories would look on a stage, being interpreted by a director and actors. My first play, *The Gatekeeper*, about the cemetery of buried emotions, won every category in the Fringe of Marin in 2012. The excitement of seeing what I visualized on stage, as well as others applauding my work, enticed me to write my next play, and then the next.

I want to share some of the important rules I learned before having my plays chosen from different theatres for productions.

Okay, you have a tightly knitted story ready and are now ready to apply these four major winning components of a good play: style, theme, characters, and dialogue.

Style sets the whole mood and spirit of the play. You, as the playwright and author of fiction, create the direction of the piece by manipulating its details: movement of the actors, gestures, tone of speech, pace. You prepare the general expectation and demeanor of the audience for either comedy or drama, or both. Through style, the pattern of the play will travel a set path and resonate through the audience; they cannot fully participate if the paths keep changing.

Four Major Ingredients of a Good Play, continued

Theme: What is this story *really* about? How is it relevant to today?

We might ask these two questions before picking up a mystery novel or short story. As mystery writers, we sew up a short story or novel neatly, leaving no anxiety swirling around the heart and mind of the reader. In plays, for the most part, even when the story ends, the theme lives on through discussion. Environmental, social, political, and historical issues are the most popular universal themes. Plays often unite themes.

An example of theme is my short story, “The Downeaster,” turned into a play. The story surrounds a woman on a train who is heading north to meet her brother and sister for a holiday shopping day together. Her new boyfriend, calling several times a day, is disappointed she did not invite him to meet her family. As she complains to her sister by phone about him not giving her space, he shows up at one of the train’s stops and sits next to her. He has no intention of leaving. In the meantime, a killer, a stalker, is on the loose. She murders nurses, and, of course, she is a nurse. The mystery focuses on three personalities until it is solved.

So, what is the theme? What is the relevance to today?

How eerie, threatening, and creepy are stalkers? They are for sure, but no. The invasion of privacy/space takes many forms: personal relationships, stolen identity from a credit card theft, stolen property, internet information used against a character—all creepy and all invasive. It could grow into a theme of revenge—a very popular one—or morality, if the play were to expand into a full-length piece.

Successful plays that have explored universal themes, such as Arthur Miller’s “The Crucible” and Tennessee Williams’ “A Streetcar Named Desire,” can be produced over and over again, and resonate with new generations,

Characters: This is where the novel and play begin to take different paths. In a short story or novel, the author can have as many characters as desired. Plays are different: the theatre and/or festival will determine the number of characters and length of a play they will produce. (Check the guidelines before submitting!) Small stages usually mean a small number of actors, hence often a small number of characters—although one actor can fill more than one role.

The animate character, the actor on stage breathing life into your play, will communicate thoughts and feelings to the audience that inspired you to write the script. It is the actor’s duty to interpret the meaning of the author’s words so that the play relates to the human experience in some way and engages the audience. Abstract concepts, such as the character Death, can be very powerful. Death often imitates human behavior. The closer the experience to our own, the greater the effect on the audience.

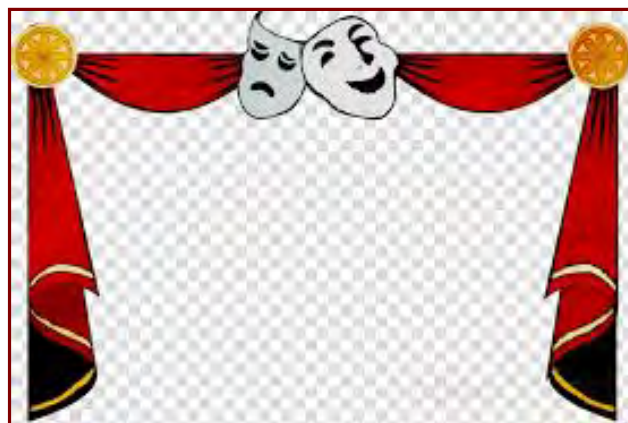
Four Major Ingredients of a Good Play, continued

The character, through the actor, achieves effect through *dialogue*. You are writing for an audience and, unlike the reader, your audience is interwoven into the play as a vicarious observer. You cannot put down the play and finish it later. You are pulled into the play through the setting (discussed further in Part Two), the style, the storyline, the theme, the conflict of the characters, and the dialogue. The audience is a participant to every moment and reacts, often as one, to your words.

There is no greater thrill for a playwright than to see their work brought to life on stage. To know that everyone in the theatre views the same set design, built from your vision, is nothing short of wondrous. Unlike reading a book, where perception often dictates what the mind sees, the play unfolds in exactly the same way to each individual. It can be very exciting.

In Part Two, I will take you through writing a short play from your short story--the format, the dos and don'ts, different types of plays, and where you can submit your play after you fall in love with it. 😊

Besides writing short stories, novels, and plays, Pat Morin has Master's degrees in both counseling psychology and clinical social work. She has had numerous plays produced, nationally and internationally. She has written four crime and mystery short story collections: *Mystery Montage*, *Crime Montage*, *Confetti*, and *Deadly Illusions*. She is working on the fifth: *The Fear of Number Thirteen and Other Psychological Short Stories*. "Homeless" was a Derringer and Anthony Award finalist, while "Pa and the Pigeon Man" was nominated for a Pushcart. Pat is also a theatre reviewer for Theatrius.com and a member of the San Francisco Bay Area Critics Circle, as well as the Dramatists Guild. You can visit Pat at www.patriciamorin.com.



Boris Karloff, the 60s, and the First Truly Modern Thriller

by Joseph Schneider



“Mr. Boogey Man,” “King of Blood” they used to call me. Marx Brothers make you laugh, Garbo makes you weep, Orlock makes you scream. – Boris Karloff as Byron Orlock, Targets

Crime as a genre carries an intrinsic power because crime is about human extremes, and it’s at our extremes where we reveal the most about ourselves. I think it’s for this reason that the greatest films – by a wide majority – have a crime at their center.

I’m hoping this article can be the first of a series in which we explore overlooked and undervalued gems of crime cinema. Along those lines, I won’t be spending a whole lot of time on the titans of the form (e.g., *Goodfellas*, *The French Connection*), since those aren’t in any danger of falling below the radar; they’re established classics and get plenty of well-deserved love. This is for those movies that, for whatever reason, haven’t been granted the status and viewership they deserve. And no film fits that description better than *Targets*.



The year is 1967. A 28-year-old Peter Bogdanovich has just been offered his directorial debut by producer Roger Corman. Naturally, he accepts, but there are a few caveats. First, he must somehow incorporate footage of the Corman-helmed gothic thriller, *The Terror*. Second, he has to stay under \$130,000, and third, regardless of the story, it must include a part for Boris Karloff, who owed Corman’s production company two days of work.

On its own, *The Terror* doesn’t make much of an impression. It’s a plodding, incoherent period piece about a lost French officer (Jack Nicholson, in his first starring role) who takes refuge in the castle of the mysterious Baron von Leppe (Karloff). It was one of my least favorite horror films growing up, and I only watched it when my VHS copy of *The Fearless Vampire Killers* threatened to snap from overuse. Apparently Bogdanovich didn’t think much of it either, and imagined Karloff turning to Corman after a screening and remarking, “That was the worst film I’ve ever seen.”

So was born the character of Byron Orlock – an octogenarian monster-movie icon whose star has nearly winked out. Relegated to low budget B-pictures, Orlock is convinced the world has left

The First Truly Modern Thriller, continued

him behind, that his particular brand of Victorian horror is far too subtle and tame for a decade marked by assassinations, war, and random bursts of public violence.



Targets opens almost exactly as Bogdanovich had envisioned. The lackluster conclusion of *The Terror*—our film within the film—unspools in a darkened screening room. As the credits roll, lights come up to reveal Byron Orlock ruminating as production execs kibbitz about their next project. Orlock casually remarks he’s through making movies. Stunned silence from the execs, then entreaties, and finally some browbeating. The studio head hollers, “If it weren’t for me, the only place you’d be playing is in the wax museum!”

Gripping his cane, Orlock hobbles out of the screening room and onto Sunset Blvd, trailed by his personal assistant Jenny (Nancy Hsueh), along with Sammy (Bogdanovich himself), the beleaguered young screenwriter who’s just lost his leading man.

Sammy tries to persuade Orlock to stay on for the next picture. “Sammy, look around you,” Orlock sighs. “The world belongs to the young. Make way for them. Let them have it.”

No hyperbole—what follows is one of the gutsiest and most jarring shots in cinema history. Suddenly we’re seeing Orlock through a gun sight, the crosshairs centering on his skull. Close-up on the profile of a young man peering down the scope. Close-up on his finger hugging the trigger—tighter and tighter—until there’s the dry snap of a hammer falling on an empty chamber.

This is Bobby Thompson (Tim O’Kelly), and he’s in a gun shop across the street from the production office, buying a sleek new rifle. Bobby is a cheerful, well-mannered young man, and possessed of the flaxen-haired, golly-gee good looks of a beach-party beefcake.



He walks his purchase out to his Mustang and pops the trunk, revealing an arsenal of weapons laid out like surgical tools. He tucks the rifle amid the other guns, shuts the trunk, and hits the road. He’s tuned to KHJ, and it’s *The Real Don Steel* hammering away with a rapid-fire promo as Bobby roars down the 405. He seems to pay special attention to some oil tanks squatting alongside the freeway, then exits in Reseda and parks in front of tidy, tree-shaded bungalow.

The First Truly Modern Thriller, continued

He slips inside, quietly making his way from room to room. We hear voices in the background—other people in the house unaware of the new arrival. Bobby enters the den and notices some photographs. We see them from his POV, and they're of him—the first taken during his deployment to Vietnam, the second on his honeymoon. This is Bobby's house, but he lurks in its corners like an interloper.

His father arrives home and Bobby emerges, making his presence known with an ebullient, "Hello, sir!" The family sits down to dinner—Bobby, his parents, and his wife. After saying grace, they dig in, Bobby giddily recounting the story of how he saw Byron Orlock earlier that day. Everything is suddenly normal.

It's now clear Bobby has two distinct sides. One is the dreamer, knocking around in an increasingly seductive world of fantasy. The other is a marvelous talent at mimicry, the doting son and devoted husband who can pass among us undetected. Bobby is a uniquely modern monster—a sleeper agent of chaos and death lying dormant until some terrible, hidden switch is flipped on. (The character is in fact modeled almost beat-for-beat on Charles Whitman, the twenty-five-year-old former marine who, only a year before *Targets* began production, climbed the tower at UT Austin with a carbine rifle.) Part of him seems to sense his own unraveling, evidenced in a scene where he tries seeking help from his wife. "I don't know what's happening to me," he tells her. "I get funny ideas."

The story alternates between our unlikely leads—the disillusioned elder statesman of Hollywood horror and the tightly coiled, deadly enigma. Orlock's motives are always clear—even the characters he's famous for playing, however monstrous, operate according to the relatable human passions associated with vengeance, greed, and lust. Bobby's psyche is on the other hand impenetrable, a product of forces unseen and unknown. The contrast between these two characters is emphasized by the director's deliberate use of color. Orlock's scenes are shot in warm fall tones—oranges, yellows, browns—while Bobby's are tinted icy shades of blue and gray.

Early one morning, Bobby murders his wife and mother. The scene is shocking in its matter-of-fact presentation, free of the least cinematic filigree or directorial commentary. He then drives the short distance to the oil tanks he'd noted earlier. He picks the one with the best view of the 405, eats a picnic lunch, then begins killing motorists. Again, the sequence is hyper-real, shot in a verité style shatteringly bold for its time. Bogdanovich achieves this effect in part through an aural technique rather than a visual one. There's no score anywhere in the film, no musical editorializing to soften the violence.

How the seemingly disparate stories of Orlock and Bobby converge is something I'll leave you to discover, but collide they do, and in one of the most surprising and exciting climaxes of the

The First Truly Modern Thriller, continued

genre. Ironically, however, the film was perhaps *too* effective—enough at least that it became a casualty of its own subject matter. The sixties had already seen Medgar Evers, JFK, and Malcolm X fall to assassins' bullets. The killing wasn't done, however, and 1968 brought fresh horrors. Martin Luther King, Jr. was gunned down in April, then RFK in June. *Targets*, slated for an August release, was probably the last thing anyone wanted to see. You didn't need to go to the movies—there were plenty of real-life Bobby Thompsons to show us just how much misery could be spread by a single man with a gun. *Targets* came and went, slipping into obscurity even as Bogdanovich's career took off.

As mentioned earlier, Karloff owed two days of work to Corman's production company, but he gave three more—without pay—to complete the project. It was one of his last movies, and he died only a few months after it came out.

Targets isn't on Blu-ray, but you can find it streaming on Amazon. The DVD is out of print and expensive, but also features a wonderful director's commentary that many may find worth the extra money. Hopefully, one day Criterion will take up the cause and give the film the release it deserves.

There's nothing quite like a well-crafted crime story, nothing else that in ninety minutes can strike all those notes—suspense, shock, humor, tragedy, terror—and strike them so truly. If you value that experience as much as I do, then you may soon count *Targets* among your favorites.

Joseph Schneider is the author of the LAPD Tully Jarsdel Mysteries, including *One Day You'll Burn* and the upcoming *What Waits for You*. He is a member of MWA and both the NorCal and LA chapters of SinC.
www.jschneiderbooks.com





Member Profile: Rita Lakin

Sixteenth in a series to introduce our members to each other

Newer members of SinC NorCal may not be aware that our fellow Sibling Rita Lakin was a pioneer for women in the TV industry, with a 25-year career as a script writer, producer, creator, and showrunner. Her credits include *The Mod Squad*, *Peyton Place*, *Dr. Kildare*, *The Rookies*, and *Flamingo Road*, not to mention eight Movies of the Week and two miniseries. After retiring from TV, she reinvented herself as a mystery writer with a series of nine novels. You can learn more about Rita in her 2015

memoir, *The Only Woman in the Room*, or watch “An Evening with Rita Lakin”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_ab1TZ9Cv4

Stiletta: You were a widow and the mother of three children when you got a secretarial job at Universal Studios in the 1960s—without typing or shorthand skills. How did you parlay that job into selling scripts?

Rita Lakin: I started reading scripts at the studio and decided I needed to earn more money, so I bought a book on scriptwriting (the only one on the market, now hundreds) and taught myself how to write them by carefully watching and studying the successful ones. I was very lucky; my bosses helped me get an agent when I was ready.

Stiletta: Of all the TV shows on which you worked, what do you count as your biggest accomplishment?

RL: Working on *Peyton Place* with a group of writers (first time I met other women writers and became aware there were very few of us). Also a very helpful producer and the staff helped me learn more.

Stiletta: Tell us about a particularly memorable person from your TV days.

RL: I met the very successful writer-producer Steven Bochco. Although I never worked with him, he encouraged me every time we met. He was the male pioneer.

Stiletta: Your son Howard also worked in television. Did the two of you ever work together on a show?

RL: He worked for me often when I was a producer. He was a very fine writer.

Member Profile: Rita Lakin, continued

Stiletta: What led you to write your excellent memoir about your TV career, *The Only Woman in the Room*? Was it an easy process for you?

RL: I went to many conventions where many writers came and pitched their books. I had told of so many real adventures that the writers and book buyers gave me the idea to write my memoir. It was great fun writing it.

Stiletta: Is there anything you weren't able to include in your memoir that you can tell us now?

RL: Lots, but I still won't reveal them.

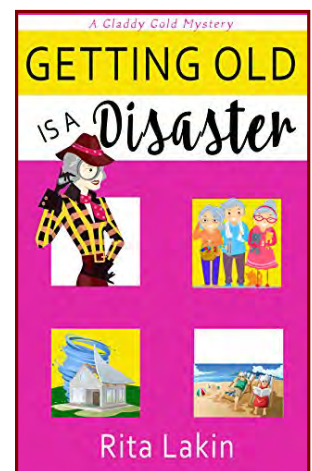
Stiletta: What made you decide to start writing mystery novels?

RL: I had a whole career of working in TV, so that when I moved up north near San Francisco, I decided I wanted to write novels. I thought carefully and decided I could be good at mysteries using my family as characters.

Stiletta: Tell us about your protagonist, Gladdy Gold. Was there a real-life inspiration for the character? And is there a tenth Gladdy Gold novel in our future?

RL: Yes, she was based lovingly on my mother. The tenth book is out now and the end of my series.

Stiletta: You have won many accolades for your work in TV, including an Edgar award for co-writing an episode of *The Mod Squad* in 1970 and a Lefty award for the fifth Gladdy Gold novel, *Getting Old is a Disaster*, in 2009. What award meant the most to you?



RL: *The Mod Squad* episode was a unique plot idea and the first “political” story I wrote because I thought it was important. I am proud of the good response to it. I also really like a number of TV movies I wrote on vital themes, such as transgender issues, some of which came first and are still very important.

Stiletta: How does it make you feel to have been instrumental in breaking down walls for women in the TV industry? What current female writers or showrunners do you admire?

RL: I wish I had done more. I admire the woman who conceived “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.” So original in the dialogue and production especially.

Member Profile: Rita Lakin, continued

Stiletta: Looking back, at age 90, is there anything in your TV and novel writing career—or your life—that you wish you had done (or maybe not done)? And do you have any advice for your fellow published or aspiring authors?

RL: Be strong, believe in yourself, and be aggressive if necessary. I was too innocent, too careful. I was taken advantage of, and didn't fight back.

Rita Lakin was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



Live Online Author Events Opportunity from Rachele Baker

For those of you who don't yet know me, my name is Rachele Baker. I am a veterinarian and author in Davis, California. I am an active member of Sisters in Crime (NorCal chapter and Guppies) and Mystery Writers of America (NorCal chapter). Over the years, I have owned and managed two businesses in California: a motel in Tahoe City for over seven years and a veterinary hospital in Yorba Linda for four years.

I have spent a number of years promoting both my own and other authors' books in a variety of venues including an authors' joint promotion group that I founded on Facebook, in very successful BookFunnel promotions, on social media, on my website, and elsewhere.

In response to authors' need to promote their books with virtual events due to the pandemic, I recently launched a new online business called **Authors Live! Online** <https://authorsliveonline.com/about>

Authors Live! Online helps authors connect with their readers and promote their books via live online events held on Zoom such as Virtual Book Launch parties and Reader Appreciation events. Learn more about our services for authors at <https://authorsliveonline.com/for-authors> Online events have the advantage of being able to reach large numbers of readers anywhere in the country. Events are approximately 50 minutes long and are scheduled on the hour from 9:00 a.m. Pacific Time to 4:00 p.m. Pacific Time Monday through Friday.

I am also working on putting together some fun free events (held on Authors Live! Online on Zoom and livestreamed to Facebook Live), including a regularly scheduled event where authors read their mystery short stories out loud called **The Mystery Hour on Authors Live! Online** and a regularly scheduled event called **Debut Authors Spotlight on Authors Live! Online**, during which I will interview debut authors as well as allow the audience to ask them questions to give debut authors and their books some free exposure.

If you are interested in scheduling a virtual book party, in participating in **The Mystery Hour**, in participating in the **Debut Authors Spotlight**, or if you have questions about any of these events, please contact me using the contact form on my website: <https://www.rachelebaker.com/>



Member News



New and Upcoming Releases

The Fog Ladies: Family Matters by Susan McCormick, book #2 in the San Francisco Cozy Murder Mystery series, October 7 from The Wild Rose Press, Inc.

Fishing for Trouble by Camille Minichino writing as Elizabeth Logan, book #2 in the Alaska Diner Mystery series, November 24 from Berkley

Death Above the Line by Janet Dawson, book #4 in the California Zephyr series, September 20 by Perseverance Press.

Forensic Murder by Alec Peche, book #11 in the Jill Quint, MD Forensic Pathologist series, November 2

The Turning Tide by Catriona McPherson, book #14 in the Dandy Gilver series, November 10 from Mobius

Felony Murder Rule by Thonie Hevron, book #4 in the *Nick and Meredith Mystery* series, October/November from small press Aakenbaaken & Kent

Women of a Certain Rage by Eileen Rendahl, book #1 in the Empty Nest series, November

Gigi Pandian signed a two-book deal, at auction, with St. Martin's Minotaur. *The Vanishing Act of Tempest Raj*, a locked-room mystery and first in a new Secret Staircase Construction series, tells the story of a woman who returns to her childhood home to help her family's business but instead wonders if the Raj family curse has followed her home.

Janet Dawson has also completed a book called *The Sacrificial Daughter*, which is the start of a new series. She hopes to publish it in 2021 under the imprint she shares with fellow author D.Z. Church. Together they are Bodie Blue Books. She has been formatting the book and is awaiting a cover design.

Elegy to Murder by Priscilla Royal, book #16 in the Medieval Mystery series, was released in e-reader only from Amazon in September, with the paperback scheduled for release in October for wider distribution.

Member News, continued

Pat Morin's short story "Little Red, Riding Hood," is part of the Hawaii anthology, *Kissing Frogs and Other Quirky Fairy Tales*, due out in early December. Her play, *Silence Interrupted*, will be Zoomed by the Fringe of Marin in late November.

Cara Black's short story "Special Treatment" was in *The Nicotine Chronicles*, edited by Lee Child, that came out in early October.

JoAnn Smith Ainsworth is releasing an audiobook of *Expect Deception*, book #2 of the Operation Delphi paranormal suspense series.

Public (Virtual Appearances)

Susan McCormick will be interviewed on Dialogue Between the Lines talk radio on November 10 at 10:00 a.m. PST about her Fog Ladies cozy mystery series and the new book, *Fog Ladies: Family Matters*.

Awards and Recognition

Gigi Pandian won the Anthony Award for Best Paperback Original for *The Alchemist's Illusion* at this year's Bouchercon.

Ann Parker's *Mortal Music* won the Second Place/Silver EVVY Award in the Mystery/Crime/Detective Fiction category from the Colorado Independent Publishers Association.

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>

Miscellaneous

Heather Haven reports that The Alvarez Family Murder Mystery Series is under option to Muse Entertainment for a made-for-television series. She asks us to cross our fingers, as this is the second time Muse has come back to her.

Mysti Berry's charity-anthology publishing company, Berry Content Corp., is now an approved publisher with the MWA.

Question of the Quarter



How has sheltering in place affected your writing? Have you been more or less creative? Have you been tempted to including sheltering in place in your book or story?

I've been just as creative, if not more so. I am keeping a COVID-19 journal, which I plan to use to create a publishable work. ***Marilyn Dykstra***

Sheltering in place coincided with a transition to independent publishing so that has taken up more time than writing. Creativity was pretty much applied more to things like finding toilet paper or coping with grocery deliveries than writing in the beginning! Once this current book gets input, I am eager to start the next. I don't want to deal with sheltering in place in a book because I need distance to understand all the effects. Not there yet! ***Priscilla Royal***

I had a deadline, so whether I felt creative or not, I had to dig in and write. I really, *really* missed doing my usual "boots on the ground" research: going to the libraries (not all materials are available digitally) and wandering around San Francisco. I particularly wished I could have done in-person visits to some of the areas I was writing about, including Alcatraz Island and the old U.S. Mint. Oh well! There is a wonderful wealth of information online, thank goodness. It isn't the same, but under the circumstances, I "made do." Since this latest book in my series, which takes place in 1882 San Francisco, has a "haunted house" feel here and there with some squeezey claustrophobic scenes, I was able to channel some of the atmosphere and anxieties of shelter in place into my writing. Aside, I will say that worries about family and the "state of the world" weighed heavily on me during this time. ***Ann Parker***

Sheltering in place has been a challenge to my writing because normally I'm a café writer. I've never been good at writing at home. However, a recent purchase has given me an added creative boost. To celebrate my recent book deal, I bought myself a fun writing-related toy: a typewriter-inspired keyboard. In addition to looking and feeling like a typewriter, the keys sound exactly like a typewriter. Now, when I sit down at my typewriter keyboard with background "café sounds" playing on my phone, I'm set to get writing. ***Gigi Pandian***

Sheltering in place plus the global climate-change fires, BLM movement, and the frontal assault on our democracy have affected my writing. Big questions nag me. Are you doing something worthwhile? Should you be using this energy directly to combat our world's problems instead of sitting at your computer? If you sit at your computer to write, should you be using your words to fight? To resist? How are you contributing? ***Vinnie Hansen***

As a self-confessed sufferer of Attention Surfeit Disorder, I find that the pandemic has severely limited my usual distractions. Being forced to stay in one place for 98% of the time has landed me in

Question of the Quarter, continued

front of my computer. Bereft of my usual assortment of friends and activities, I have created an entirely new world to play in. I'm 40K-plus words into a standalone that seems to be writing itself. The book is set in 2017. I did give some thought to setting it in present time but decided that sheltering in place would limit my characters' ability to move around and deprive me of much needed distraction. *Ellen Kirschman*

I think the first month of Covid had me losing writing momentum. In mid-March, it was like watching an extremely slow-moving car crash. By mid-April, Sisters in Crime NorCal rescued my writing with their 1:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., and 10:00 p.m. write-ins. In fact, I've been so productive thanks to the write-ins that I'll be releasing my second book since the Covid SIP. My latest release is set basically now, but there is no Covid in my storyline. I've had fans write that my mystery story got them through a painful recovery from something, so I leave the pandemic out of my stories. Anyone interested in joining the write-ins should contact Susan Bickford to be added to the invite list. *Alec Peché*

Because of SIP, I'm out of excuses not to be at my desk 5-6 hours a day. So here I am, getting through the WIP, in a steady way that wouldn't have been possible before. *G.M. Malliet*

The facts of lockdown crept into my latest short story – but it helped the mystery! My WIP is set in the 1930s, so maybe by the time it's done, we won't be in lockdown anymore. *Mysti Berry*

Thanks to Camille Minichino for suggesting these questions. 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.

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