

# NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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FEBRUARY 2021

## Greetings, Siblings

Even for an introvert like me, the pandemic is getting old. Overlooking the basic paranoia and enforced hypochondria, I rather enjoyed having greater flexibility around meetings and gatherings. And not having to drive long distances to meetings was fine by me. My house is on a busy-ish local street with lots of foot traffic. My neighbors regularly plop down in chairs on the front lawn for socially distant talking. I never felt isolated.

But of course, this is an artificial, unsustainable state. Many are suffering terribly due to losing income and/or housing, dealing with juggling school online, profound loneliness, and other hardships.

When I needed emergency back surgery at the end of September, I also discovered just how fragile normal safeguards had become. If my sister had not been able to come to California, I would have been stuck in a rehab facility, followed by risky home health assistance.

My online communities such as SinC NorCal became a lifeline to re-engage. When I found I couldn't write after surgery, I committed to our NaNoWriMo events and finished the first draft of my next novel.

Now, "normal" seems to be just around the corner, but we know that many parts of our lives will be forever changed.



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## President's Letter, continued

For the time being, we are planning on virtual events for 2021, keeping a very cautious eye on the fall. We will be working on a plan to maintain the ability for members to engage via platforms such as Zoom going forward, even as we adjust to meeting in person.

What we hope to do in the interim is to expand our member benefits and how we engage online.

Look for more interaction in our virtual meetings. Zoom's concept of Breakout Rooms is a great example of how to split up meetings into smaller, more intimate groups.

Our drop-in writing sessions, conducted Monday through Friday at 1:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., draw a steady list of appreciative attendees. In this model, we say hi, go on mute, and write until the hour is up.

We would like to offer more of this style of event to our membership but with more variety: prompt-driven writing, flash fiction sessions, sharing work-in-progress . . . We would also like to offer critique groups.

We plan to expand our Speakers Bureau with a longer list of potential speakers and instructors from our membership. In a similar vein, we would like to create a Professional Services list where members can list their skills with editing, ebook formatting, marketing, and other offerings.

The hitch is we will need help to execute and sustain many of these plans. If you would like to help the Executive Committee by taking on one of these activities on a trial basis, please let me or one of our board members know. We will do our best to carve out scope and time commitments that best fit your busy life.

Many thanks to all of you for making 2020 a rich and fulfilling year. Here's to less drama and more fun in twenty twenty-one.

Sincerely,

Susan Bickford (she, her, hers)

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal

# Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

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**Saturday, February 6, 12:00–2:00 p.m.**

***Meet and Greet (via Zoom)***

Feeling a little disconnected from your fellow NorCal siblings? Hear from each and every one of them at our annual Meet and Greet meeting. Please come prepared to share one minute of yourself with us—your publications, your writing, your reading, how you survived 2020, your 2021 goals—any 60-second intro is welcome. As time permits after the intros are over, we might mosey into breakout rooms to get to know each other a little better.

**Saturday, March 13, 12:00–2:00 p.m.**

***Mark Your Calendar!***

We're working on obtaining a great speaker for that date. Watch your email and the NorCal website for updates.

**Saturday, April 3, 12:00–2:00 p.m.**

***Spring Author Showcase (via Zoom)***

It's time again for our lively, twice-yearly Author Showcase, where NorCal members read an excerpt from their recent work. It's a great way to add to your TBR list! If you are interested in participating and have a book or story published since the last showcase in November, please contact Michele Drier (see the last page of this issue for her email address).

**Please register in advance on the website for all events.**

# In Case You Missed It . . .

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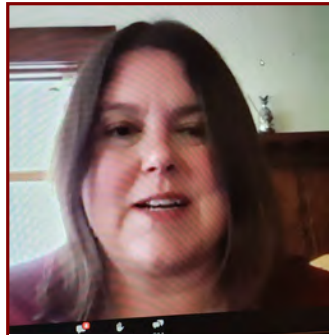
If you weren't able to attend our recent events, here's what you missed.

## November Meeting - Fall/Winter Author Showcase

I hope you were able to attend our second author showcase of the year, again on Zoom. As always, our authors did a fantastic job reading from their latest works. Simon Wood was our host.



Cara Black



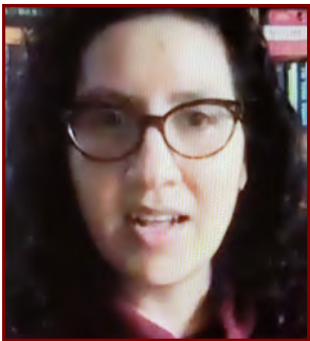
Daisy Bateman



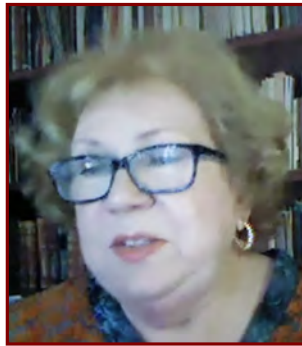
Diana Chambers



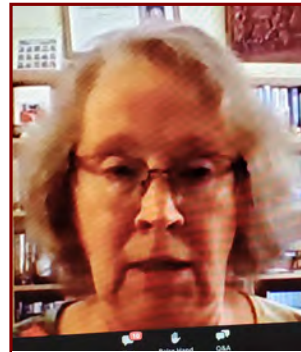
Faye Snowden



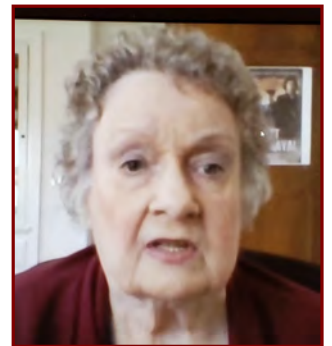
Gigi Pandian



Heather Haven



Janet Dawson



JoAnn Smith Ainsworth

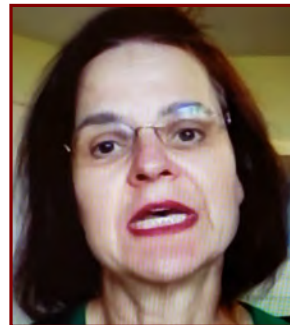


Reece Hirsch

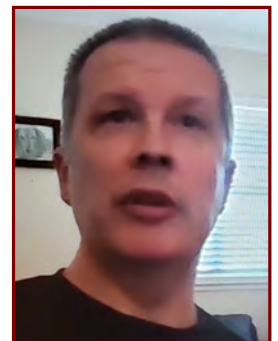
Margare



Susan McCormick



Susan McCormick



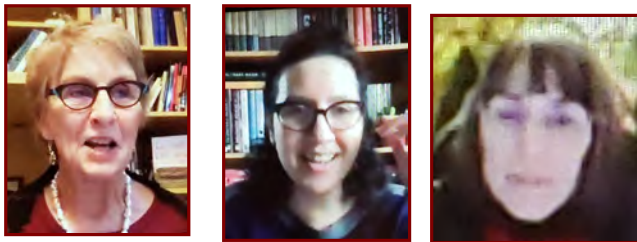
Simon Wood

## In Case You Missed It, continued

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### December Meeting - Holiday Event

Because our annual holiday event was on Zoom this year, we were able to include Sisters in Crime members from NorCal, Coastal Cruisers, and Capitol Crimes chapters, as well as members of Mystery Writers of America NorCal.

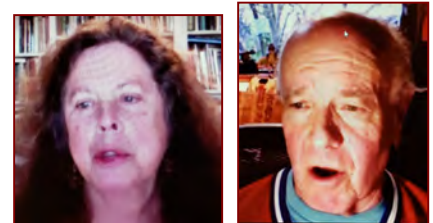


on the page”: (l. to r.) Terry Shames, Gigi Pandian, and Ana Manwaring.

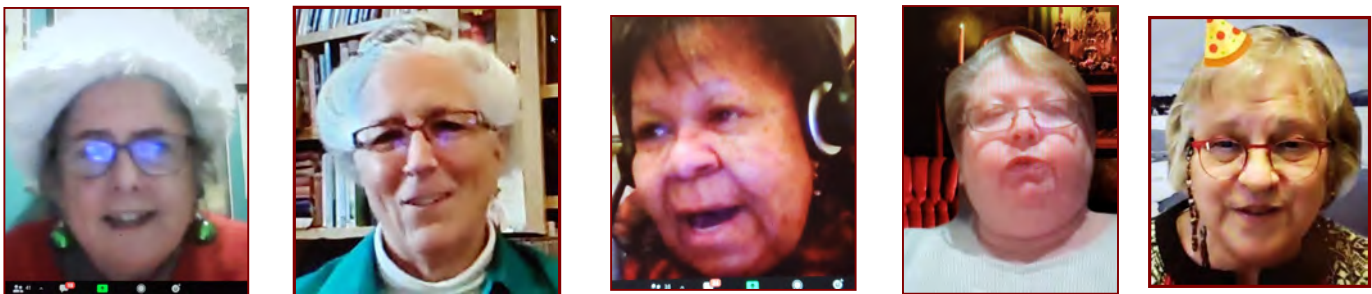
In addition to brief presentations from the leaders of all of those organizations, we had three opportunities to join smaller breakout groups that enabled us to join conversations about individual topics (cocktail names, anyone?). And presentations from three authors who told us “how to get words



As if that weren’t enough, Janet Rudolph and Frank Price talked about everyone’s favorite subject—chocolate (and some crimes associated with it)—and conducted an informative and delicious tasting session. And Laurie Sheehan (left) demonstrated how to make the Cocktail of the Day, the Black Raven, as well as a non-alcoholic drink, the Red Herring (because not all mystery protagonists drink alcohol).



Wishing us holiday happiness were (l. to r.) Claire Johnson, incoming MWA NorCal president; Laurie R. King, past president, MWA NorCal; Penny Manson, president, SinC Capitol Crimes; Sharon Cathcart, president, SinC Coastal Cruisers; and Susan Bickford, president, SinC NorCal.



# Introducing Our 2021 Executive Committee Members

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**SUSAN ALICE BICKFORD, President:** I was born in Boston and grew up in Central New York, the setting for many of my stories. Eventually I migrated to Silicon Valley to work in high tech in a variety of engineering and managerial roles. I write thrillers and suspense stories that are deeply embedded in the rural areas of New York State and New England, featuring resourceful female protagonists. My short stories have appeared in the anthologies *Fish Out of Water* and *Fishy Business*, and in the latest Guppy anthology, *The One That Got Away*. My debut novel, *A Short Time to Die*, was published in 2017 and was nominated for the 2018 Left Coast Crime Best Debut Novel. My second novel, *Dread of Winter*, released in October 2019, was a 2020 Edgar Award nominee. My biggest learning in 2020 was that technologies like Zoom are not a one-for-one replacement for meeting in person. Rather they bring their own characteristics, many of which were very positive. Being forced to use Zoom, Crowdcast, Skype and others, we discovered that many members who hadn't attended meetings for years began to attend again, and we even grew membership. Even several diehard technophobes climbed on board and learned how to run virtual meetings. The challenge going forward will be how to integrate the two models in a way that is compelling and brings value to our membership.

**MICHELE DRIER, Vice President:** I was born in Santa Cruz and am a fifth generation Californian. During my career in journalism—as a reporter and editor at daily newspapers, including the *San Jose Mercury News*—I won awards for producing investigative series. I'm the past president of Capitol Crimes, the Sacramento chapter of SinC and Guppies, the online chapter of SinC, and co-chaired Bouchercon 2020, the world's oldest and largest convention for mystery writers and fans. I have written a standalone, *Ashes of Memories*, and several series: three books in the Amy Hobbes Newspaper Mysteries; ten books in a paranormal romance series, SNAP: The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles, which was named best paranormal vampire series of 2014 by PRG; and two books in the Stained Glass Mysteries. Last year I learned that, though Zoom won't replace face-to-face interaction, it's possible to continue relationships with your writing community, and I'm looking forward to bringing this wider world to NorCal SinC for 2021.



**CLAIRE ORTALDA, Secretary:** A former journalist, ad copywriter, and English instructor, I made the switch from literary writing to mystery writing by immediately joining Sisters in Crime. My short story, "The Recipe Box," was published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* this summer, and last year's "Oglethorpe's Camera" was published in the Anne Perry-edited Mystery Writers of America anthology, *Odd Partners*. A full-length

## 2021 EC Members, continued

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traditional mystery, still looking for a title and a publisher, was short-listed for the Del Sol Press First Novel Prize (judge: Hallie Ephron). In the coming year, I will be looking for ways to increase the perks of membership. As a board, we welcome input and volunteers to contribute their ideas and expertise to our chapter and to consider running for office. [www.claireortalda.com](http://www.claireortalda.com)

**ANA MANWARING, Treasurer:** My first Jade-Anne Stone Mexico Adventures book, *Set Up*, was published in 2018, and the second of the series, *The Hydra Effect*, in 2019. *Set Up* releases as an audiobook in 2021, in addition to the third in the Jane-Anne Stone series, *Nothing Comes After Z*, and my (overdue) memoir of living in Mexico. The Witness Protection Program Poets and FUNdaMentalists (poets' social support) launches in January. I am a former lifestyle columnist, and my reviews of Sisters' books can be found at [www.anamanwaring.com/](http://www.anamanwaring.com/), as well as information on my editing business, JAM Manuscript Consulting. In 2020 I learned how to run Zoom meetings and use the reconcile feature in Quicken. Also, I learned just how much I enjoy writing with others, and I plan to organize more write-ins and support sessions for NaNoWriMo in 2021.



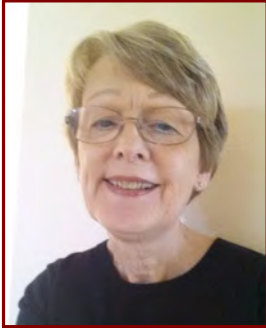
**MALENA ELJUMAILY, Membership:** I am an avid reader of mostly mysteries, but a few other genres as well. I belong to a mystery book club that has been meeting for over 25 years. Several of my short plays (one-act, ten-minute and one-minute) have been produced in festivals around the country. I also love to knit and discovered cross-stitch beaded ornaments during the lockdown. I live in Santa Rosa. 2020 was a challenging year for everyone, so I'm determined to encourage and create harmony in 2021.

**ANA BRAZIL, Events:** I am a longtime student of history and a voracious reader of mystery. My historical mystery novels and short stories feature brash American heroines, the more bodacious the better. My debut novel, *Fanny Newcomb and the Irish Channel Ripper*, won the 2018 IBPA GOLD Medal for Historical Fiction. My current WIP features a vaudevillian-chanteuse-who-knows-too-much, set in 1919 San Francisco. I'm an active member of the Historical Novel Society and a founding member of the Paper Lantern Writers Collective of historical fiction writers. In 2021, I'm hoping to put together monthly chapter meetings that will entertain, educate, and bring us all together. [Anabrazil.com](http://Anabrazil.com)



## 2021 EC Members, continued

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**MARGIE BUNTING, Newsletter:** I am pleased to be starting my sixth year as editor of *The Stiletta*. I am happily retired from an HR management career, and in 2020 I moved from the Bay Area to El Dorado Hills, CA to be closer to my grandchildren (quite a challenge during the pandemic). I'm now a member of Capitol Crimes chapter as well as NorCal. It was a Zoom year for sure—two Toastmasters clubs, two book clubs, a concert or two, assorted social clubs and, of course, our virtual chapter and board meetings. I also did a lot of reading and sweepstaking and some occasional copy editing, and was a proofreader for SinC National newsletter. **Even though we didn't meet in person for most of 2020, I was gratified to receive support from a lot of Siblings who submitted fantastic articles to the newsletter, and in 2021 I encourage even more of you to consider what you can bring to *The Stiletta*.**

**SUSAN KUCHINSKAS, Speakers Bureau:** After holding down a series of random jobs—exercise demonstrator, office temp, stewardess, house painter—it was probably inevitable that I became a writer. I started my career as an architecture and design journalist and then moved into technology when the Internet became a thing. I cover automotive and digital technology as a freelance journalist, as well as writing content for tech companies. My science fiction/detective novel, *Chimera Catalyst*, was published in 2017, and the sequel, *Singularity Syndrome*, was released in February 2020. My crime stories have been published in *Switchblade*, *Shotgun Honey*, and our chapter's *Fault Lines* anthology. I live in Berkeley with my mate, a cat, a dog, and some 60,000 honeybees. <http://www.kuchinskas.com> **In 2020 I learned to take a deeper look at others and realize that beneath the surface, there's a well of goodness and care. I want to remember this and reach out to connect more this year.**



**DIANA CHAMBERS, Past President:** I was born with a book in one hand and a passport in the other. I was soon wandering Paris cobblestones and later, the bazaars of India and Southeast Asia. An importing business led to Hollywood scriptwriting until my characters began demanding their own novels, including two spy thrillers, *Stinger* and *The Company She Keeps*. My historical mystery, *The Star of India*, was published by Penguin Random House India mid-2020. A member of Sisters in Crime, Mystery Writers of America, and Writers Guild of America, I am past president of Sisters in Crime NorCal and continue to serve on our board. [www.dianarchambers.com](http://www.dianarchambers.com) **During the plague year of 2020, I learned the immense value of remote meetings, while at the same time longing for a return to the in-person hugs and handshakes that are such a part of our writers' community.**



# Ten Tips for Getting Words on the Page during Covid

## by Gigi Pandian



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Gigi gave a talk on this topic at our December chapter meeting, and she graciously agreed to put her ten tips in writing for all of us.

When Covid struck, I had a jump-start on mentally processing how to switch gears to work and write from home. Nearly 10 years ago, I underwent chemotherapy cancer treatments that knocked out my immune system, so I had a long stretch of time spent almost entirely at home. I wrote a novel that year that went on to win a Lefty. This year was still a challenge, but here are 10 tips that helped me successfully complete a novel during lockdown.

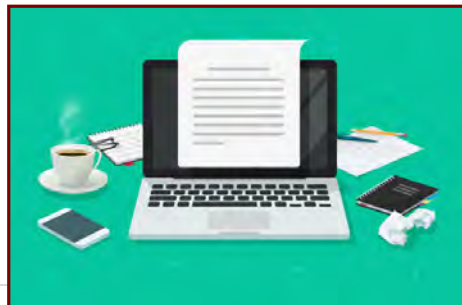
1. **Listen to café sounds or rain sounds.** I'm a café writer, so I miss meeting a friend at a café to catch up for 15 minutes before getting down to work writing. iTunes has many background sounds of cafés, so I found one that reminds me of my favorite café. Some days I feel like visiting the café, and other days a rainstorm does the trick.
2. **Install an app on your computer that saves you from yourself by turning off the internet.** I cannot be trusted. I think I'll look something up "for 30 seconds." It inevitably turns into 30 minutes – or longer. To save me from myself, I use an app that turns off the internet for a specified amount of time. If you forget and try to pull up a browser, you get an inspirational quote instead, such as: *A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.* (I use Focus on a Mac, and many writers I know enjoy Freedom. There are others, too.)
3. **Join an online SinC or MWA writing meetup.** It's amazing how much you can get done in 30 minutes to an hour, and it's so much easier to get started if you know there are online friends there with you. I look forward to when I can see you all again in person, but until then we've got each other remotely.
4. **Find an accountability partner.** Beyond the set times of periodic online meetups, tell someone your goals. It's much easier to keep them if you've said them aloud to someone else.
5. **Try a writing prompt.** A writing prompt (from a book, the internet, or even writer dice) can help your fingers start moving when you don't know what to write next.

## Ten Tips, continued

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6. **Pick up a paper notebook.** The brain works differently on paper than on a computer, so if the words aren't flowing on screen, try a pen and paper.
7. **Go outside, either on a walk or even stepping into your backyard or balcony.** Sitting in a window isn't the same as fresh air, so take that paper notebook outside.
8. **Shift your view inside the house.** I live in a small house and have been doing both my day job and writing job at home for nearly a year. We tried many configurations and realized the simplest one worked best: I do my day job from one side of the desk that gives me one view, and I write fiction from the *other* side of the desk, with a different view.
9. **Find a ritual that tells your brain you're writing fiction now.** My ritual is that I plug in a typewriter keyboard when I'm going to write fiction. The clacking of the keys tells my brain it's time to be creative. Maybe you light a candle with a particular scent, or drink coffee from a special mug.
10. **Go easy on yourself if you've had a bad day.** This is the most important tip! Even with my tricks, I've had some lost days. I didn't stick to the beautiful schedule I planned in my calendar, but I still got this new book done, and I love the finished product. Now it's time for me to get back to work on the next one.

Gigi Pandian is a *USA Today* bestselling and Anthony Award-winning mystery author, breast cancer survivor, and accidental almost-vegan. The child of anthropologists from New Mexico and the southern tip of India, she spent her childhood being dragged around the world on their research trips, and now writes mysteries that are a cross between Indiana Jones and Agatha Christie. Her next *Accidental Alchemist* mystery comes out in summer 2021, and the first *Secret Staircase* mystery (written during lockdown) will be published by St. Martin's Minotaur in early 2022. <https://www.gigipandian.com/>





## The People in My Head

by Margaret Lucke

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A few years ago I took a short road trip with my good friend Penny, whom I've known since our college days. As we drove we chatted, the way old friends do, about our dreams, our daily lives, and the ways we would fix the world if only someone had the good sense to put us in charge. I mentioned the book I was writing, and she asked me this:

"What's it like to have people running around inside your head all the time?"

The question startled me. "What? You mean you don't have them?"

"Not at all. I can't imagine it. Is it like hearing voices?"

Now, Penny is someone with a direct line to the creative process. She's a brilliant cook who serves the most amazing dishes. A talented seamstress who tossed together fantastic costumes out of nothing for our college theater. A devoted lover of art, music and literature. Yet she didn't have people occupying her head? How did her brain work then? How could she possibly think?

Since then, I've discovered that it's actually rare to have a head filled with people. I've met other fiction writers who share this trait, but usually, when I mention it to someone, I get a strange look, as if the person is assessing whether I need the services of my friendly neighborhood mental institution.

Perhaps I do. But I have a hard time understanding how anyone's mental processes could possibly function in a different way.

I've had people wandering around in my brain ever since I can remember. They're my equivalent of imaginary playmates. They tell me stories, ask me questions, give me answers, and help me clarify my thinking. I've heard that writing is a lonely profession, and in lots of ways that's true. But even when I'm at my desk by myself, I'm never really alone.

Some of the people in my head turn into characters in my novels and short stories. Often what sparks a story is a snatch of conversation that comes drifting through my brain. That sets me on a journey to discover who's talking, and how they're connected to each other, and what they're discussing and why. Gradually the story emerges.

## The People in My Head, continued

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My first novel, *A Relative Stranger*, began this way. Walking to a bus stop, my mind let me overhear a late-night phone conversation. The woman who answered the phone clearly found the call unwelcome. The man who had called sounded desperate to connect with her. When I reached my destination, I wrote the conversation down. Who were these people?

The woman turned out to be a private investigator named Jess Randolph; the caller was her estranged father, turning up after many years to ask for her help because he was the prime suspect in a murder. Was he guilty? Would she help him? What would they do next?

I may be making the process sound easier than it is. The people in my head don't always want to be promoted from random guest to Story Character. Once they have me intrigued, they all too often ignore me. They fight me off or hide behind the curtains. They take a vow of silence. Sometimes they disappear. And sometimes, gradually, after I beg and plead and cajole, they start to reveal their secrets. At last the story is underway.

Margaret Lucke writes tales of love, ghosts, and murder, sometimes all three in one book. Two of her novels (*Snow Angel* and *A Relative Stranger*, an Anthony Award finalist) feature artist/private eye Jess Randolph, and two others (*House of Whispers* and *House of Desire*) star Claire Scanlan, a real estate agent who specializes in haunted houses. She is also the editor of SinC Norcal's anthology *Fault Lines*. Margaret teaches fiction writing classes and has published books on writing craft. [www.margaretlucke.com](http://www.margaretlucke.com).



# Will Write Cats for Hire

## by Camille Minichino

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In May, the third book in my new series will be released. But this article is not about the books; it's about the contract for the books. The 3-book series was a Work for Hire.

You might say everything we write is a work for hire in that we would like to be paid for our efforts (dare I say, talents). But if you've never had a "technical" Work for Hire contract, you might not know the difference.

To summarize my 12-page Work for Hire contract: the publisher owns the copyright and the specifics of the series—title, characters, plot line, and other elements—and can assign any other writer to any of the books in the series. They even own the pseudonym, which is fine with me, because I already have enough of those.

Some phrases from the contract might give you further insight:

- written by the Writer for the Publisher's series
- the Writer is performing services as an employee-for-hire
- the Writer is an independent contractor and not the Publisher's employee

If you're confused by the seeming contradiction between second and third bullets, I refer you to my agent, who apparently vetted those words and assured me I should sign.

The big deal in a Work for Hire is that phrase "specifics of the series." The contract came with a bible. Not *The Bible*, of course, and not quite the "pitching" bible we associate with screenwriting, but similar to the latter.

The bible I signed on for gave me the main characters, including their names, ages, occupations, and brief history; the location; and the plot, including the murder victim and suspects. If it sounds like I just had to fill in the blanks, that's not too far off.

Piece of cake, right?

The rub: one of the main characters is A Cat. An orange tabby, to be exact. He is pictured here in miniature, with all his toys, in a typical scene from the books.

## Will Write Cats for Hire, continued

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Anyone who has known me for more than ten minutes knows I'm not a cat person. Or a dog person. Or even a goldfish person. Nothing other than human will receive any attention, affection, or (especially) maintenance from me. And no, I've never seen a "cute" one.

So writing the cat became a research project. As an exercise for my writing students, I had them write a cat anecdote or describe a typical pose. One student created a Pinterest page for the cat. Friends sent videos and pages of graphics. I built the mini scene for further inspiration. By the way, it turns out you can't easily buy a miniature cat; you have to buy a bag of 24 of them. Thus I now have 23 cats running loose on my crafts table. Some are pictured here. Note the one that's enamored of Ann Parker's latest book.

Anyone want a 2-inch cat? Specify the color and it's yours.

I've never been a fan of "write what you know." Only God can come up with 80,000 words for every contract deliverable by sticking to what he knows.

Takeaway: I say write what you can learn.

I'm happy to report many positive reviews that included at least one version of "Wow, I can tell you really love your cat!"

I say, "Wow, I really am a fiction writer!"



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*, was released November 24, 2020. Camille is a Past President of SinC NorCal. <http://www.minichino.com/>

## Member Profile: Leslie Karst

Seventeenth in a series to introduce our members to each other

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Leslie Karst is a former attorney, lifelong musician, and culinary school graduate who has four novels published in her Sally Solari Mystery series, with a fifth installment to follow and a new series on the horizon.

**Stiletta:** You are that rarity, a native Californian, born in Southern California. What brought you to the northern part of the state?

**Leslie Karst:** Yes, and in fact I'm almost a third-generation Californian! (My grandparents all arrived in Southern California as youngsters, back in the 1910s and '20s.) But although I grew up primarily in SoCal (with stints in Columbus, Ohio, Latin America, and England, due to the peregrinations of my law professor father), when it came time to decide on a college to attend, I set my sights elsewhere—up north, to the newly-created UCSC. Small classes, no grades, and set amidst a redwood forest—what was not to like? I've been in Santa Cruz ever since.

**Stiletta:** Tell us about your education and how it led to your career as an attorney.

**LK:** As an undergrad at UCSC, I studied English literature and Romance languages (and proudly represented the Fighting Banana Slugs as a member of their fencing team). Then, after graduation, I stayed on in the town, waiting tables and playing guitar, singing, and writing songs for a New Wave rock band called Enigma (no—not *that* Enigma; they became famous and we didn't).

After six years of fun and frolic, however, and coming to the realization that I was not in fact going to become a rock star, I determined to find a “real” job. It took some soul-searching—as well as the advice of a family friend who was also my art teacher and wife of a Stanford law professor—but I eventually decided to follow in the footsteps of my father, and ended up at Stanford Law School.

**Stiletta:** Can you share a bit about an interesting case you experienced working for your law firm?

**LK:** The Grunsky Law Firm in Watsonville, where I worked for twenty years as their research and appellate attorney, has many areas of specialization—everything from land-subsidence, to probate, to personal injury defense, to municipal law. But some of the most interesting cases I worked on were those representing UCSC, my alma mater. We'd be hired as local, on-site attorneys by the UC counsel up in Oakland when the matter was likely to go to trial, and I was involved in a variety of

## Member Profile: Leslie Karst, continued

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those cases, including tenure battles, a scuba diving accident, and a disgruntled student who received a lower grade than she deemed she deserved. (See what changing from narrative evaluations to grades can do?)

But the case that stands out the most to me is the one involving the tree-sitter: Back when the last of the buildings up on UCSC's Science Hill was being constructed, a group of students protested the planned felling of some redwood trees, and a daring and enthusiastic woman scaled one of the tallest of the stand and spent several months living up there, having food hoisted up and detritus lowered down via long ropes. As I recall, she finally descended, not because of any legal victory on our part, but because the weather grew dangerously cold and rainy with the onset of winter. I still think about that case every weekend when I cycle up to campus and pedal past the Science Library.

**Stiletta:** Music has played a continuing role in your life. How has your love of music influenced your writing?

**LK:** Music has indeed been an enormous part of my life since childhood, when my parents introduced us kids to such greats as Ella Fitzgerald and Beethoven (as well as a fabulous recording of Mother Goose songs, performed by the inimitable Cyril Ritchard, Celeste Holm, and Boris Karloff). My siblings and I all studied wind instruments from a young age, performing in our school bands and orchestras, and I continued to play the clarinet throughout my college years. But after that, the pop music bug struck, and I switched allegiance to rock 'n roll and later, country-rock music, with a band I formed with my sister called Electric Range (you can find links to the CD we recorded on my author website, <https://www.lesliekarstauthor.com/> if you're so inclined). In more recent years, however, I've returned to so-called "classical" music, singing alto in our local community chorus.

My protagonist, Sally Solari, is also a music aficionado, with tastes running from Elvis Costello to Robert Earl Keen to Puccini, and I employ music—what she listens to in the car or while relaxing in the evenings with a bourbon-rocks—to illustrate her mood and feelings throughout the books.

In *A Measure of Murder*, the second of the series, Sally too joins a local chorus—one that's singing the Mozart Requiem. My idea was that it would be fitting to feature that particular piece in a murder mystery, not simply because it's one of my favorites, but also because this magnificent requiem for the dead is wrapped up in an intriguing mystery of its own, having been unfinished at the time of Mozart's untimely passing at age thirty-five.





## Member Profile: Leslie Karst, continued

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**Stiletta:** Another one of your passions is food and cooking. What made you decide to go back to school for the culinary arts and how have you used that education?

**LK:** Although I was good at my job, I was never truly in love with being an attorney, and as I would wade through murky case law and convoluted regulations and statutes, I'd often daydream about what I might like for dinner that night—not to mention for a different life. I'd been obsessed with food since junior high school, when my best friend and I would try out exotic recipes from the recently-released Time-Life cookbooks, and I still enjoyed cooking new dishes for myself and my wife as a way to exercise my creative impulses. Okay, I thought, *why not take some cooking classes at the local community college?*

So I did. And I was hooked. After two years of afternoon and night sessions—all the while still working as an attorney—I had completed an A.S. degree in culinary arts. I'd never intended to become a line cook or restaurateur, so I didn't give up my day gig as a lawyer, but I did use my newly-acquired skills to throw many fun and lavish dinner parties. And, it turned out, the culinary arts degree ended up being useful for my second career as mystery author. Read on . . .

**Stiletta:** How did you start writing mysteries?

**LK:** After twenty years working as an attorney, I retired from the law, but then immediately turned my thoughts to some other possible vocation to occupy my time and mind. Since I'd been a legal writer for the whole of my tenure at the law firm, it made sense to keep on writing, but what, exactly? I'd long been a fan of mystery novels, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that crafting the twists and turns of a murder mystery isn't so very different from the detailed work involved in drafting a legal brief: both require great organization, the careful placing of facts, and above all, the telling of a good story (ya gotta hook and then convince the judge, after all, right?).

So what kind of mystery would I write? Food seemed a no-brainer, given my passion and expertise for the subject, as well as the popularity of the culinary mystery genre. And I also knew I wanted to set the series in my own town. But what, specifically, would be the hook?

I started thinking about how Santa Cruz had long been a sleepy beach community, full of Italian fishermen, farmers, and retirees. But with the advent of the university in the late '60s, the town had started to attract a new sort of inhabitant—students and hippies; later, hipsters and techies; and then, more recently, the food revolution had descended full-force upon the town's surprised old-timers. One day, as I was wandering down the historic fisherman's wharf, it hit me: What would happen if a local Santa Cruz gal found herself caught between the world of her family's old-fashioned Italian seafood restaurant and that of the newly-arrived, politically-correct foodies? Yes, I thought, *the perfect backdrop for a culinary mystery.*

## Member Profile: Leslie Karst, continued

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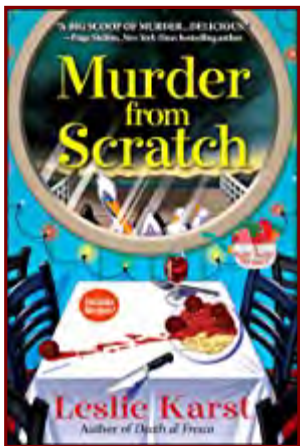
**Stiletta:** Your protagonist in the four books is Sally Solari, an ex-attorney and Santa Cruz resident. What other similarities and differences are there between you and Sally?

**LK:** It's true that there's quite a bit of me in Sally. Most obviously, we both have a passion for food and cooking. In addition, we're both recreational cyclists and share the love of dogs, opera and Elvis Costello, the Giants baseball team, and single-barrel bourbons. And like my protagonist, I too can be a bit snarky at times.

But Sally is far braver than I—perhaps even too risky. I'd never have the nerve to investigate an actual murder. (Then again, I'd make for a pretty uninteresting sleuth, as well.) And I'd never dream of running a real-life restaurant; the work is far too stressful and exhausting, and takes up too much of your life. But make-believe running one in my books is loads of fun!

One of the best perks of being a writer, however, is that you're provided the opportunity to give your characters all sorts of traits and possessions you *don't* have, but might wish you did: hence, Sally's tall, lanky build, her Italian heritage, and her cool, creamy-yellow '57 T-Bird convertible.

**Stiletta:** It's fascinating that each of your Sally Solari mysteries occurs in a different season and focuses on a different sense. Tell us how you came up with the idea.



**LK:** As I was plotting out the first book in the series, *Dying for a Taste*, it occurred to me that the experience of eating involves not simply the sense of taste, but all five of the human senses. The artful presentation of a dish and its shapes and colors; the heavenly aroma of a slow-roasted chicken; the crackle in your mouth as you bite into a freshly-baked baguette; and the sound of that crunch as you chew. These all combine to create the joyful experience of eating. So why not, I decided, incorporate each of the five senses into the books I was writing about food and cooking?

The first book was obviously going to focus on taste (though the concept of “taste” in the story is metaphorical as well as literal). In the second, *A Measure of Murder*, where Sally joins a local chorus, the sense is of course hearing, and she ends up solving the mystery, in part, from things she hears. *Death al Fresco* has Sally taking a plein air painting class, and many of the clues in the mystery are visual ones. And in the most recent book, *Murder from Scratch*, it is the heightened sense of touch possessed by Sally's young blind cousin, Evelyn— with whom she investigates the death of Evie's mother— that is key to their solving the mystery.

## Member Profile: Leslie Karst, continued

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As for the seasonal theme of the series, that came about more organically. The first book was set in springtime and, since the stories revolve around Gauguin, a French-Polynesian restaurant known for sourcing its ingredients locally, I made sure to research the seasonality and availability of the dishes Sally cooks at the restaurant. And as the series progressed, so did the seasons—and the change in menu at Gauguin—which ended up being a great additional hook for the stories.

**Stiletta:** Will there be more Sally books? There are five senses, so perhaps the sense of smell still needs to be explored?

**KL:** I have indeed written the fifth book in the series, tentatively entitled *The Fragrance of Death*. And yes, it concerns the sense of smell—or rather the lack thereof, since on page one Sally wakes up having lost her ability to smell due to a nasty sinus infection. (No, it's not Covid; the book takes place several years earlier.) Much of the mystery focuses on an artichoke farm up the coast from Santa Cruz, whose tagline is “Thistle make you hungry!”

**Stiletta:** Tell us about your new series, set in Hawai'i. Why Hawai'i and who is your protagonist? When will we be able to enjoy the first in the series?

**LK:** My wife and I have been splitting our time between Santa Cruz and Hilo, Hawai'i for twelve years, originally enticed to the island by my volcano-obsessed parents, who'd take us on day-long hikes in search of places where the latest lava outbreaks could be seen up close. So when it came time to start thinking about a new series, the Big Island was the obvious location, with its glorious and dramatic landscape, splendid culture, and yes, delicious cuisine!

The protagonist of this new “Orchid Isle” mystery series, the first of which is tentatively entitled *Molten Death*, is Valerie Corbin, a retired caterer who comes to the Big Island with her wife, Kristen, in search of distraction following the loss of her brother and her own brush with death. But when she alone witnesses a body being blanketed by hot flowing lava and no one else believes her, Valerie becomes consumed by the mystery of the body in the lava, determined to find out what happened. Thrown into a Hawaiian culture far from the luaus and tiki bars of glossy tourist magazines, however, Valerie soon begins to fear she may be the next one to end up entombed in the shiny black rock.

I've only just finished the revisions to the manuscript, but here's hoping it'll be available in print sometime soon!

## Member Profile: Leslie Karst, continued

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**Stiletta:** What crime fiction authors have inspired you?

**LK:** As a teenager, I devoured all of Dorothy L. Sayers' novels, then later turned my sights on other Golden Age mysteries, as well as more hard-boiled/noir stories by the likes of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. But it wasn't until I first read Sue Grafton that it occurred to me that I myself could actually write a mystery novel.

Grafton's debut, *A Is for Alibi*, came as an awakening to me. Here was a book in the traditional "weary PI" style, yet written by and featuring a woman. And as I read on, I realized she'd created a sort of hybrid between the hard-boiled and the cozy—the story of a private investigator with no strings attached ("My apartment is small . . . I don't have pets. I don't have houseplants.") yet with a big heart ("I'm a nice person and I have a lot of friends."). But most important, the novel was full of humor—a tad on the snarky side, yes, but who doesn't love that?

Numerous authors have since emulated Grafton and, as a result, the line between "soft" and "hard" crime fiction is now far less rigid, allowing for a variety of new sub-genres, such as what I like to call "snarky cozies" and "heartfelt noir." And when I first picked up a pen to jot down ideas for my Sally Solari series, it was Sue's voice I heard in my ear, telling me, "Yes, you can do this—you too can write a snarky cozy!"

**Stiletta:** You are a contributor to two blogs—Chicks on the Case and Mystery Lovers' Kitchen. Please give us a plug for these two sites: what can a reader expect of each?

**LK:** Chicks on the Case (kick-butt mysteries, fun, fearless sleuths!), is where my fellow Chicks and I share stories about writing and life, as well as hosting a variety of other mystery writers, reviewers, and bloggers with fascinating stories of their own. If you're looking for a site that's upbeat and entertaining and where you can learn about terrific new mysteries and authors, this is the blog for you! <https://chicksonthecase.com/>

And if you're a fan of food and cooking, you'll definitely want to check out Mystery Lovers' Kitchen, which features a delicious new recipe every day—with helpful photos of the process—from one of the blog's fab culinary mystery authors. Not only that, but we host lots of book giveaways, as well! <https://www.mysteryloverskitchen.com/>

**Stiletta:** How have you benefited from your membership in Sisters in Crime?

**LK:** I wouldn't be a published mystery author today were it not for Sisters in Crime. Soon after I started writing the first of my Sally Solari series, I joined SinC and was overwhelmed by the generosity and warmth of its members. From workshops, to manuscript swaps, to encouragement and helpful advice from its sisters and misters (including some very celebrated authors), the support I received through this marvelous organization was—and continues to be—invaluable. And

## Member Profile: Leslie Karst, continued

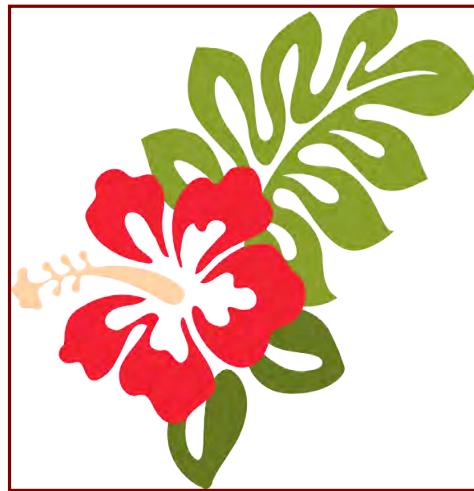
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not only that, but through Sisters in Crime I've found a community of like-minded souls and have made friendships that I know will last a lifetime.

*Stiletta:* What would you like fellow members to know about you that we haven't asked?

*LK:* As some of you already know, I was fortunate enough to get to plan, prepare, and host a small dinner party for Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her husband some years ago, and I've penned a memoir of the experience called *Cooking for Ruth*. The manuscript—which details not simply the planning and hosting of the dinner, but also many fascinating tidbits of RBG's remarkable life—is currently looking for a home, so fingers crossed.

Leslie Karst was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



## Member News



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### *New and Upcoming Releases*

Susan Kuchinskas' short story "Shattered" appeared in *Terror House*. Her story "Gator Baiter" was published in *Rock and a Hard Place*.

Vinnie Hansen's creative non-fiction work, "Geography Lessons," appears in the Winter 2021 issue of *Catamaran Literary Reader*, published December 2020. Four road trips create a route out of rural South Dakota – one a trip to see a dead body, one a rescue, one an elopement, and one an escape.

*Aloe and Goodbye*, first in the Ruby Shaw Mysteries by Janice Peacock, was released December 10 from Vetrari Press.

Ann Parker's eighth book in her Silver Rush historical series has a title and a date. *The Secret in the Wall* will be released in February 2022.

*Tapestry of Tears* by Michele Drier, book #2 in the Stained Glass Mystery series – and book #16 for Michele – was released in December 2020.

The paperback edition of *No Good Deed* by Heather Chavez releases February 16.

*Scot on the Rocks* by Catriona McPherson, book #3 in the Last Ditch Motel mystery series, was released February 2 from Severn House Publishers.

*The Mirror Dance* by Catriona McPherson, book #15 in the Dandy Gilver series, was released January 21 from Hodder & Stoughton.

### *Public (Virtual Appearances)*

Camille Minichino will moderate a virtual panel, "Women's Work," for the AAUW on Saturday evening, February 11, exact time to be announced. Josie Brown, Michele Drier, and Catriona McPherson will discuss their journeys in the world of publishing and what it means to be a writer in challenging times

## Member News, continued

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### *Awards and Recognition*

*Suspense Magazine* named *Snowed Under* by Mary Feliz one of its Best of 2020 in the Cozy Mystery category.

Congratulations to our NorCal members who are award nominees. Lefty nominees for Best Historical Novel include Laurie R. King for *Riviera Gold*, Catriona McPherson for *The Turning Tide*, and Ann Parker for *Mortal Music*. Daisy Bateman is a Lefty nominee for Best Debut Mystery Novel for *Murder Goes to Market*. Heather Young is a nominee for the Edgar Award for Best Novel for *The Distant Dead*, and Laurie R. King is a nominee for the G.P. Putnam's Sue Grafton Memorial Award for *Riviera Gold*.

### *Training Delivered*

Margaret Lucke will be teaching "Writing Genre Fiction" for UC Berkeley Extension this spring, exploring the craft behind mysteries and thrillers, of course, along with science fiction, fantasy, romance, horror, and more. Learn the techniques essential to all fiction while examining the characteristics and reader expectations of the individual genres. Class sessions will take place virtually via Zoom at 10:00 Tuesday evenings starting February 23. <https://tinyurl.com/genre-fiction-class>

### *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.

Brother member George Cramer is working hard at promoting authors and their work, especially those who are part of SinC. In the last few months, he has posted several members on his blog, including Alec Peche and Margaret Mizushima. Soon other members will be answering questions about writing, their background, and their books. If you are interested in one more way to promote your work, give George a holler at [gdramer\(at\)msn.com](mailto:gdramer(at)msn.com) or visit his blog at <https://gdramer.com>.

## Question of the Quarter



***Do you ever read (or re-read) mysteries written 50+ years ago?  
Which authors and what attracts you to them?***

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Most of my favorite mystery authors wrote 50+ years ago. I first fell in love with Dorothy L. Sayers, then discovered Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, Patricia Wentworth, Josephine Tey, and of course Agatha Christie. These women were among those who first developed the detective genre as it is today. But they didn't merely plot satisfying whodunits. They created memorable characters, explored the depths of human nature, exploited the possibilities of the English language, and paved the way for the work and recognition of all the women writers who came after them. I could read them endlessly. ***Katherine Bolger Hyde***

I recently read *Innocent Blood* by P.D. James. It was written in 1940. I picked it up because a friend said it was her favorite ever book. It was a masterpiece. The writing and the plot took my breath away. I compulsively made notes on those sticky little papers. By the time I was finished reading, the book looked like it was covered in feathers and ready to fly. ***Ellen Kirschman***

I don't like reading anything old, not even yesterday's newspapers. I blame Mr. F, my high school history teacher, who was really the football coach masquerading as a teacher. History class meant memorizing the names of battles—their dates and their winners—with the occasional King or Queen thrown in. And that old saw that "we'll be doomed to repeat it," well, we do anyway. What I care about now are new writers, new books, what readers latch on to, the current state of language, the inspiration of the present. ***Camille Minichino***

My father and grandfather were avid readers of mystery and history. I managed to keep some of my dad's books, and even became a third-generation reader. *The Chronicles of Quincy Adams Sawyer, Detective* by Charles Felton Pidgin is seven stories spanning 316 pages, printed in 1912, with black and white block prints throughout. It's early noir, with twists, and much more drama. A quick example from the short story "Golden Belt": "Look at myself. According to tradition I have not only the exact build, but also the features and mind of Hugo Blannett. Can it be possible that Hugo Blannett so cleverly hid his secret of the treasure that only his own reincarnated mind could discover it? Am I the reincarnation of Hugo Blannett?" My dad actually bought me my first *Alfred Hitchcock Magazine* in the middle 1960s. They were my favorite stories. ***Pat Morin***

I decided at the beginning of shelter-in-place to read all of Rex Stout and Agatha Christie. I'm up to 1973 with Stout. He started in 1934 and ended in 1985. I'm up to 1939 with Christie. She started in 1920 and ended in 1976. Still great reading. I think lots of people must still be reading Dorothy Sayers since sequels (from other writers, obviously) are still coming out. ***Amelia Mosely***



## Question of the Quarter, continued

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Here are two of my favorite oldies: (1) *The Talisman Ring*, Georgette Heyer (1936). Long before Columbo, Heyer wrote a mystery in which the question isn't whodunit—we know the culprit from the beginning—but rather how the murderer's guilt can be proved and an innocent man exonerated. To that end, a disparate assortment of characters are thrust together in a small inn, eventually allies in a quest to find the talisman ring that will Reveal All. Clever, witty, even laugh-out-loud funny dialogue, two romances, a delightfully dim brother, and Heyer's conviction the semicolon cannot be used too often . . . all these make this one of my favorite go-to oldies. (2) *The Daughter of Time*, Josephine Tey (1951). An untraditional mystery in which Inspector Alan Grant, confined to a hospital bed for weeks with a broken leg, attempts to unravel the narratives—true, false, hostile, sympathetic—that arose around Richard III and the Tower death of his two nephews. Solid writing combines with interesting historical research, revealing for example the not-entirely-saintly Sir Thomas More's history of Richard written to please Henry VIII, not the cause of historical truth. While not an exciting mystery, Tey utilizes the form to make clear her pro-Richard views, and in my opinion she succeeds. And, for what it's worth, I came away convinced Grant (Tey) was right about Richard. I also frequently open Raymond Chandler's *The Long Sleep* (1939) to study his often-brilliant handling of humor and metaphors. **Charlotte Hunter**

I have just recently reread two wonderful mysteries. I feel these are two novels that once you read, you will always remember! Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*, was selected by the British Crime Writers' Association as the greatest crime novel of all time. It was the last book Tey published shortly before her death and is one of only eight novels she wrote during her lifetime. Blurb: It's a 1951 detective novel concerning a modern police officer's investigation into the alleged crimes of King Richard III of England. Margaret Millar's *A Stranger in My Grave*, written in 1960, is one of the reasons she won the Edgar Allen Poe Award, Woman of the Year Award by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1965, and the Grand Master Award by the Mystery Writers of America in 1983 in recognition of her lifetime achievements. Blurb: A nightmare is haunting Daisy Harker. She walks a strange cemetery in her dreams until she comes to a grave that is her own, and according to dates on the gravestone, she's been dead for four years. Both writers seem to go somewhat unread these days, which is a shame because both could write one helluva mystery. **Heather Haven**

I have gotten hooked on the British Library Crime Classics that Poisoned Pen Press took on some time back. The Golden Agers were amazing on plotting but have gotten the reputation for being weak on character and a bit plodding. The series finds books and authors that are often long out of print and/or unfairly ignored. The wit in many is so refreshing. Character development is much better than advertised. And plodding? Hardly! It isn't easy to pick a favorite, but John Bude, CS Sprigg, Mavis Hay, George Bellairs are some good places to look. **Priscilla Royal**

I go back to the old stories from time to time. There are a number of well-known women writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but men tended to dominate the field. I like the classics written by Raymond

## Question of the Quarter, continued

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Chandler for his sleazy take on Los Angeles in the day. *The Big Sleep* is a good example. Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* would be hard to beat. He has written one of the best scenes in fiction: "I hope to Christ they don't hang you, precious, by that sweet neck . . . The chances are you'll get off with life. That means you'll be out in twenty years. You're an angel. I'll wait for you . . . if they hang you I'll always remember you." You can't write better than that. **Ken Gwin**

I never re-read books, unless they show up as the monthly read for the Mystery Book Club I coordinate through local indie bookstore Towne Center Books. Along that line, I do read (for the first time) "older" books if they show up on our list. For instance, for January's meeting we're discussing a recent reprint of *The Rate Began to Gnaw the Rope* by C. W. Grafton (Sue Grafton's father), which was first published in 1943. **Ann Parker**

I recently read *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Masterful and with a terse and spare style of writing, but sadly so filled with a casual sort of racism it would never pass muster today. **GM Malliet**

I used to re-read *Rebecca* because I was so shocked when I read it the first time (I was 13 or so). Same for Agatha Christie books. I can't think of one in recent years. I don't tend to re-watch movies either, no matter how old or new. **Susan Bickford**

I re-read Dorothy L. Sayers frequently, especially *Strong Poison* for the beginning of the Vane/Wimsey romance and *Busman's Honeymoon* for its glorious ending. Also *The Tiger in the Smoke* (Margery Allingham) because it's got a splendid take on the banality of evil and the power of good. And *A Surfeit of Lampreys* by Ngaio Marsh for my favorite fictional family and a wonderfully creepy and yet subtle exploration of madness. **Catriona McPherson**

Fifty years ago? I'm more inclined to read mysteries that were written almost 100 years ago. (And it was my pleasure to be on the "Golden Age of Mysteries" panel at 2020's Bouchercon.) I often re-read favorite and inspiring passages from copies of Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* or *Busman's Honeymoon*. In addition, I've re-read some Agatha Christie in the last year, and I also read John Dickson Carr's *The Devil in Velvet*. What attracts me? The historical authenticity, the emotional resonance of the characters, and often, the sheer cleverness of the plots. **Ana Brazil**

Yes, I re-read Agatha Christie, especially "in times of trouble," which 2020 definitely was. I like the novels with Poirot or Miss Marple as the sleuth, especially those in which the viewpoint stays with the sleuth or, in Poirot's case, with Captain Hastings. (One-viewpoint mysteries of whatever era are my preference.) I've asked myself why I re-read them (and also re-read the Sue Grafton alphabet series, Terry Shames' Samuel Craddock series, and Dick Francis), and I have come to this conclusion: each of the sleuths in these works exudes a sense of "Don't worry—I've got this covered." They are calm and confident and never get rattled. Ever. They think things through, they

## Question of the Quarter, continued

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face up to evil unflinchingly, and they handle it (solve the mystery/fix the problem). I wish *I* could think things through instead of being a hysterical mess, could face up to personal and national bad news with some sort of solution, and “restore order” to my life. I don’t seem to be able to do so very well, so it is very, very nice to put myself in the hands of competent detectives whose every word, thought, and action says “No worries! I’ve got it.” And they do, book after book. *Claire Ortalda*



Thanks to Carole Taylor for suggesting these questions. If you have any suggestions for future **Questions of the Quarter**, please send them to [mbunting@sbcglobal.net](mailto: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), with meeting and venue suggestions and **Margie Bunting**, Newsletter (mbunting (at) sbcglobal.net), with newsletter article suggestions and submissions.

### SinC NorCal Executive Committee

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