

# NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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VOLUME 22, ISSUE 2

MAY 2021

## Hello, Siblings,

As you may have noticed, Sisters in Crime is taking their focus on inclusivity very seriously. In addition to setting standards like an official Code of Conduct, recently, Sisters in Crime National began a tradition of starting their meetings and events by having the speakers give thanks to the Native people whose land they now inhabit. If you are interested, here is a website, <https://native-land.ca/>, that can help start you on this journey. There may be some inaccuracies, but it's a great start and also brings awareness of Native people around the world, not just in North America.

For me, what started out as a simple research project turned out to be a very emotional and revelatory journey, rooted in the Native lands I share with a very famous writer, L. Frank Baum.

I was born in Boston, MA, home to overlapping territories of the Massachusett, Pawtucket, and Wampanoag. In my adult life, I spent a long time in New York City, both Manhattan and Brooklyn. That area had several tribal nations, all Lenape. And now, I live on the Peninsula in Northern California, where the Ohlone, Mukwema, Ramaytush, Chochenyo, and Tamyen lived.

However, the most important and formative part of my life, from age two to twenty-one, was spent in Upstate New York, home of the Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy. Originally Five Nations (Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida,



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## President's Letter, continued

Onondaga and Mohawk), it expanded to be Six Nations when the Tuscarora were forced north in the age of European settlement.

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy was (and still is) a complex and sophisticated political entity that inspired people like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and many “framers” of the United States Constitution. It’s very interesting to find what those framers chose to overlook. For example, women were the ones who controlled the clans and chose the chiefs. They were the ones who decided whether to declare war and made many of the most important decisions.

I lived most of my young life sandwiched between the Onondaga and Oneida lands with some overlap with the Tuscarora and Mohawk. During my high school years, we lived near Rochester, and some of my classmates were Seneca.

L. Frank Baum was born in Chittenango, NY in 1856, almost 100 years before me. He grew up and lived in his father’s house in Fayetteville, the next town over, and that was where I grew up. Before he wrote the Wizard of Oz books, he also lived in nearby Syracuse and tried to sustain a career in the theater before he headed to South Dakota.

Also living in Fayetteville, NY, was his mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage, a famous and founding member of the National Woman Suffrage Association. A woman’s suffragist, Native American rights activist, abolitionist, freethinker, and author, she was an adopted member of the Wolf clan (not clear which Nation) and received the name Karonienhawi—“she who holds the sky” – when she was admitted into the Iroquois Council of Matrons.

L. Frank seems to have been a strong feminist and suffragist supporter. After all, he created a very unique, American tale with a strong female protagonist who did not have to be saved by or marry a prince, in a land populated by good witches and other unique people.

Tragically, he seems to have missed the racism lesson in general and definitely in regard to Native Americans. While in South Dakota, Baum published editorials calling for the elimination of Native peoples at the time of the Wounded Knee Massacre. To say I’ve been horrified is an understatement. How could someone who grew up where I grew up have these views?

For those who are interested in the details of L. Frank Baum’s life, PBS has recently broadcast a special that I found very disturbing and enlightening. It should be noted that several years ago, two of Baum’s descendants apologized for his editorials.

## President's Letter, continued

As for the Haudenosaunee, their political sophistication helped them fight the good fight for their collective and individual sovereignty over centuries, battling local governments, New York State, and the US Federal Government. Although they fared better than many tribal nations, they still suffered and continue to endure bitter defeats and devastating losses.

About fifty years ago, the Oneida Nation managed to arrive at a partial victory and received financial compensation for some of the lands that were stolen from them. I personally remember my parents and their friends being very concerned about the implication of this suit, including the land their towns and houses were built on.

The Oneida chose to use that money to buy back land that had been rightfully theirs. They built a successful casino, Turning Stone, and established a number of profitable ventures on their reservation, the acquired properties, and other investments in Central New York. Over time, they have created a powerful and respected presence extending to the entire community.

In 2015, they opened a second casino in Chittenango, NY called The Yellow Brick Road. I'm not much of a gambler, but I hope they continue to prosper. Take that, L. Frank.

Sincerely,

Susan Bickford (she, her, hers)

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



# Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

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**Saturday, May 1, 12:00–2:00 p.m.**

***Creating a Setting Where Your Characters Can Live and Breathe, with Mary Anna Evans (via Zoom)***

As a writer you must create fictional places where your characters can live lives that feel real and exciting. Still, too much description can weigh your story down. In this workshop, we will explore ways to give your readers an unforgettable world without sacrificing the pacing that will keep them turning the pages. With degrees in physics, engineering, and creative writing, Mary Anna Evans writes award-winning fiction and teaches fiction and nonfiction writing at the University of Oklahoma. Her protagonist lives the exciting life of an archaeologist.

**Saturday, June 5, 12:00–2:00 p.m.**

***Building Character, with Leslie Budewitz (via Zoom)***

No matter what type of fiction you're writing, the best plots flow from the characters. This program will look at several ways to dive into your characters and discover what makes them tick. Writing exercises and a handout will be provided. Leslie Budewitz writes two cozy mystery series and made her suspense debut in April 2021. She has won three Agatha Awards, is a current board member of MWA, and is a past president of Sisters in Crime.

**Saturday, July 3, 1:00-3:00 p.m. (note later start time)**

***Get Your Murder Scene Right, with Judy Melinek, M.D., and T.J. Mitchell (via Zoom)***

Forensic pathologist Judy Melinek and her husband, T.J. Mitchell, are the *NY Times* bestselling authors of *Working Stiff*, a memoir about learning how to do autopsy death investigation, and two novels in a detective series featuring a San Francisco medical examiner. They will be talking to us about getting the murder scene right – the cops, lawyers, investigators, and autopsy. Judy will share real stories of her work in the morgue, using science and teamwork to determine cause and manner of death. T.J. will discuss how he works with his doctor wife to incorporate that science into their work together as a writing team, both in nonfiction and fiction. Their presentation will be followed by a friendly Q&A, so come prepared with your forensic questions!

**Look for more details on our website under Chapter Events.**

**About 3 weeks before the event, members will receive Zoom and Eventbrite registration info via email.**

# In Case You Missed It . . .

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

## February Meeting - Annual Meet and Greet

NorCal President Susan Bickford's opening remarks paid tribute to chapter members nominated for Lefty and Edgar awards, and talked about diversity issues and member benefits. Then Ana Brazil conducted a round robin session where attendees at our Meet and Greet each had the opportunity to speak for a few minutes about their writing career, what's coming up for them, how they survived 2020, and more. The event ended with the opportunity to attend one of the breakout sessions for more intimate discussion and fun.



## March Meeting - Author James W. Ziskin

We were fortunate to have author James W. Ziskin as our speaker, on the topic of "Researching your Historical Novel: Know What you Don't Know." Jim is the author of the 7-book Ellie Stone Mysteries series, set in the 1960s, and he has written a new standalone set in India in 1975. His story, "The 25-Year Engagement," has been nominated for both Edgar and Agatha awards this year.

Because his books are set in the past, Jim does extensive research to root out historical errors and anachronisms – language, facts, technology, and zeitgeist – and to create a sense of time. He advises, "challenge every word and reference." And he emphasizes that research must be accurate, effective, and measured.

Jim also pointed out some valuable resources, including: newspapers; period photos and paintings; telephone books; contemporaneous TV shows and movies; period tourist guidebooks, maps, timetables and menus; popular music; concordances of contemporaneous work; almanacs; period advertisements; and much more. Another tip from Jim: let Word narrate your book so you can locate missing words and repetitions.

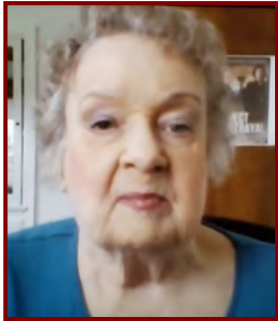


# In Case You Missed It . . . (continued)

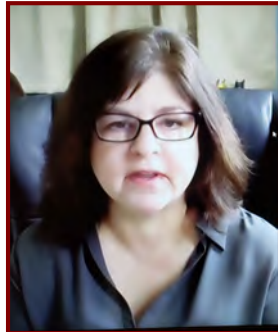
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## April Meeting - Author Showcase

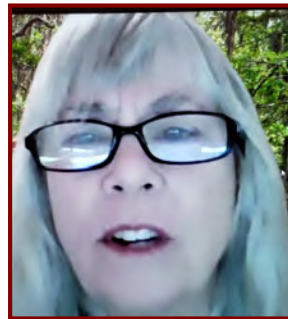
At our first author showcase of the year, we heard from ten of our member authors, reading excerpts from their latest works. Michele Drier was our host. And ten lucky attendees, chosen at random, won gift certificates from Book Passage!



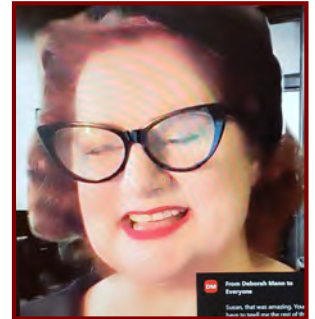
JoAnn Smith Ainsworth



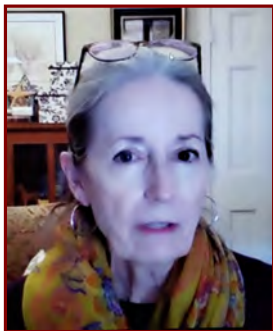
Heather Chavez



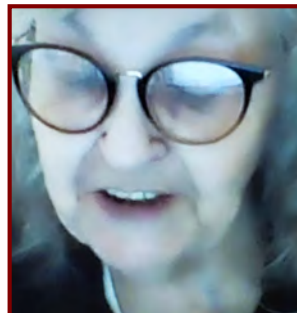
Susan Kuchinskas



Thena MacArthur



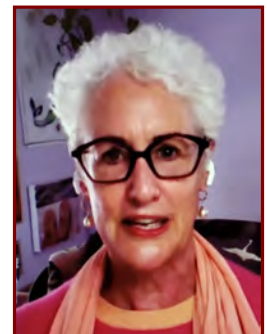
G.M. Malliet



Camille Minichino



Janice Peacock



Amy Peele



Robin Somers



Heather Young



Host Michele Drier

# Book Trailers: My New Addiction by M.M. Chouinard

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My name is Michelle, and I used to be terrified of book trailers.

Okay, *terrified* might be too strong a word, but I was definitely deeply intimidated by them. Not that I didn't like the idea of them, I'd actually seen a few that were really cool. But what I know about filmmaking can fit on the head of a microbe, and to say I'm not a tech savvy person is like saying the surface of the sun isn't the best place for a weekend getaway. I also wasn't sure how I felt about showing my characters, because as a reader I like to construct my own visuals of the people I'm reading about. But, most of all, I didn't have hundreds (thousands?) of dollars to invest in a one-minute clip about my book.

But then a friend of mine, Lisa Towles, did a Facebook Live presentation [<https://www.facebook.com/MWANorCal/videos/859001841331798>] over on the MWA NorCal Facebook page about book trailers. I attended not because I thought I'd ever in a million years make one, but because I wanted to support a friend. Before the thirty-minute presentation was halfway done, I was already in the process of making a trailer for my most recent book.

Why? Well, set aside the data Lisa showed about how effective videos are at engaging potential readers—I figured that was nice and all, but since I didn't have the money or the skill, it was irrelevant. But then she perked my attention right up when she said I didn't need money because the software was free (I didn't even have to download it, I could use it online), and that I didn't need any skill besides the ability to write a short ten-or-so-line "script" about my book.

Hey, I thought, I'm a writer. I should be able to write ten or so lines about my book. I've written query letters and back-cover copy and even synopses. In fact, I realized I didn't even have to do *that* part because my publisher had already written the back-cover copy for the book.

So when Lisa got to the part of the presentation where she showed, step-by-step, how to use the software (Lumen 5, which you can find here: [<https://lumen5.com/>]), I figured, okay, let's see how easy this is. I opened the program in a second window and dove in by cutting and pasting my back-cover copy into the program. I waited a few seconds, and sure enough, the program generated a bunch of short clips based on the content words of my "script" and assembled them into a video complete with relevant quotes. In theory, at that point all I had to do was pick some music to overlay the video and download it.

## Book Trailers, continued

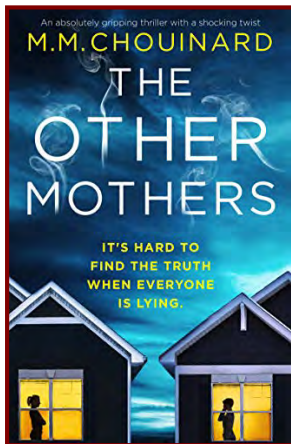
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But I am persnickety by nature. I didn't care for some of the clips the program generated automatically, so I did what Lisa suggested and plugged some different keywords into the library to find alternatives.

That's when things got addictive.

A simple word like "police" brought up a bunch of possibilities, and I got to choose the one that captured the vibe I was going for. Remember when I said I didn't like the idea of showing people in my trailer because I didn't want to bias how my reader pictured my characters? There were so many options to choose from that I was able to pick clips with no people, or with people in silhouette only. No identifying characteristics, nothing that conflicted with my story. In fact, I even managed to build in a couple of Easter eggs only the readers who've finished the book will pick up on. And that was just downright fun.

Ultimately, that first trailer took me about an hour and a half to create (you can see it here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_YPIDUwXqu8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YPIDUwXqu8)). The next one I made took about two hours, partly because I didn't have a ready-made script waiting (see that one here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS9qIoq3Bms>). And for that marginal effort I got videos I can post on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, that I can embed in my website and newsletters, and that I'm sure have tons of other uses I haven't discovered yet.



So, the point is—if you think book trailers aren't for you, you might want to think again. Give Lisa's presentation a shot and spend an hour or two playing around with the software. You might just become as addicted to them as I am. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some trailers to make for the books in my back catalog.

M.M. Chouinard is the *USA Today* bestselling author of the Detective Jo Fournier series, and *The Vacation*. She is obsessed with coffee, family genealogy, Halloween, animals, and (now) book trailers.



# Writing a Series as a Pantser by Michele Drier

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By definition, a pantser is a writer who writes “by the seat of the pants,” someone who doesn’t outline but lightly plans a book.

I’m a pantser, the one who in school wrote the paper first, THEN outlined what she’d written.

This allows me to create all kinds of scenarios, add characters along the way, set up action on the fly. And might become iffy as I find I’m writing series.

The one thing I’ve done with all of my series is to keep track of the characters! I list their names, occupations, and in which book they appeared, a must with the paranormal romance books which are littered with close to a hundred Central and Eastern European characters. Most of the time, I can’t even remember the spelling.

I have three series: the traditional mystery Amy Hobbes Newspaper Mysteries, the Stained Glass Mysteries, and a paranormal romance series, The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles. There are three Amy Hobbes extant--*Edited for Death*, *Labeled for Death*, and *Delta for Death*; two (so far) in the Stained Glass Mysteries and ten in the Kandesky Vampire Chronicles. The latter are like Topsy: they just “grewed.” Ten are published and I’m working on number 11.

I planned ahead a bit in the mysteries and always intended them to be a series. The main characters are the same, but the actual plot changes with a different murder/mystery in each book. The planned-but-unwritten ones have a general mystery plot (who ends up dead and why) but nothing more.

The Kandeskys I initially saw as a trilogy but, as the characters developed, I had to keep establishing plots. Because the series are character driven, a roadmap isn’t necessary. The characters can find themselves in the middle of a variety of situations which don’t have to be plotted out ahead of time. My only roadmap for this series is to continue the thread of the characters . . . they tell me what’s going to happen. My suspicion is that Lee Child didn’t sit down to write all the Jack Reacher books knowing he had a “roadmap” and Janet Evanovich keeps devising quirky situations for her characters. If you have a plot-driven book, although I’m hard pressed to come up with a series like that, some advance plotting might be necessary. But character-driven? No. Think Danial Silva, Robert Crais, Elizabeth George, Agatha Christie, etc. and ad infinitum.

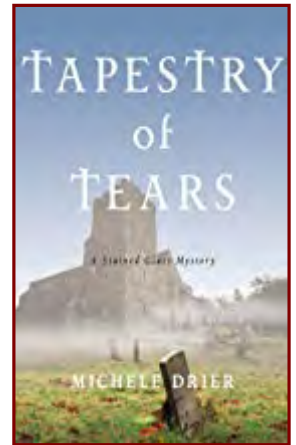
## Writing a Series as a Pantser, continued

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The Amy Hobbes and Stained Glass Mysteries are complete in each book . . . well, I do have a couple of romances simmering. The Kandeskys, on the other hand, have loose ends and one GIANT cliff-hanger in book two, *SNAP New Talent*.

My initial publisher didn't pick up the Amy Hobbes series so I don't know if it would be different if that hadn't happened. I indie-publish for lots of reasons and this might be one of them. I like my characters (well, I love some of the guys) and would continue their story any way I can.

All of my books have some romantic tension. None of the female characters are particularly interested in getting married or even having a relationship, but as they meet a man in the course of their work, they become interested. The romantic tension in the Kandesky Chronicles kept the two main protagonists going for ten books. Now I need to figure out if Amy Hobbes (Amy Hobbes Mysteries) or Roz Duke (Stained Glass Mysteries) are going to get totally wrapped up in their male characters.



All the characters grow and change, primarily in the way they understand themselves. In the mysteries, Amy is learning to cope with the hurt her ex-husband incurred when he left her for another woman. She's rebuilding her life and her trust in men, but slowly. In the Stained Glass Mysteries, Roz's husband has been murdered in a drive-by shooting. Although the gunman has been caught, Roz harbors a nagging question: Why was her husband at that mall where he was shot? In the Kandeskys, Maxie must make the decision of whether she's willing to trade eternal life as a vampire for losing all she's ever known. And the men, 500-year-old vampires all, must learn to love a 21st century career woman, a creature they've never met before.

During the writing of the series, the mysteries have shifted slightly. Amy Hobbes is the managing editor of a smaller daily newspaper in Northern California. The plots have changed as the focus of the economy has changed. Each of the books' central plot centers around a real contemporary issue . . . but is it important enough to kill for? The Stained Glass Mysteries don't rely on contemporary issues as much, although the first book, *Stain on the Soul*, hinges on pedophilia in the priesthood.

The Kandeskys have shifted quite a bit. Initially, the violence and tension was from a war with another vampire family. That family has died (or been killed) off, and now the Kandeskys are up against international political issues. They're living in Kyiv, Ukraine and are fighting off Eastern European thugs and gangs hired by the oligarchs. In the WIP, working title *SNAP: Pandemic Games*, the danger is from Russia trying to break up the EU and NATO.

## Writing a Series as a Pantser, continued

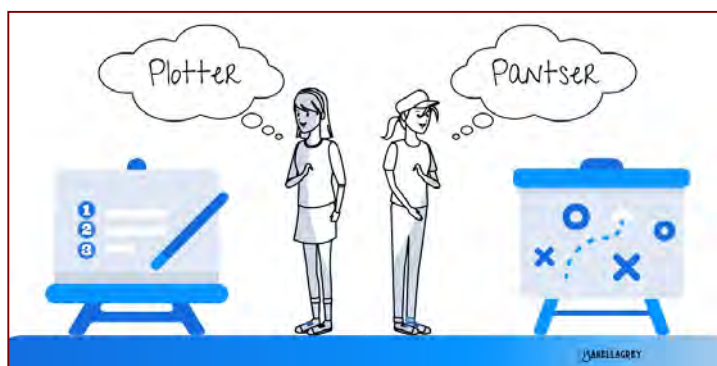
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In a new book, I usually begin with the characters. What are they doing now? What challenges are they having? In the mysteries, this leads to a premise of “what if?” which leads to the plot, or mystery. In the Kandeskys, I usually begin with the events affecting global tensions because SNAP, the Kandesky family’s flagship company, is a multi-formatted international celebrity gossip television show and magazine. And they may be moving toward covering more news instead of gossip.

For me, one of the delights in pantsing, particularly a series, is the unknown. Although I almost always know the ending (not always the murderer), the plot can take interesting twists and the characters surprise me!

Coming in 2021: *The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles, Book Eleven*, *SNAP: Pandemic Games*, and *Resurrecting the Roses*, Book Three in the Stained Glass Mysteries.

Michele Drier was born in Santa Cruz and is a fifth generation Californian. During her career in journalism—as a reporter and editor at daily newspapers, including the *San Jose Mercury News*—she won awards for producing investigative series. Michele is 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. She has 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. Coming in 2021 are *The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles, Book #11*, *SNAP: Pandemic Games*, and the Stained Glass Mysteries, Book #3, *Resurrecting the Roses*.



# Genre Bending Transformation: Your Story into a Play:

Part 2 of 2

by  
Pat Morin



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In Part 1 of “Genre Bending Transformation: Your Story into a Play,” published in the November 2020 issue of *The Stiletta*, I detailed four winning components of a good play: style, theme, character, and dialogue. To summarize:

**Style** sets the mood and spirit of the play: setting, movement of the actors, gestures, tone of speech, pace, comedy or drama.

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

**Characters** interpret the meaning of your words to engage your audience.

**Dialogue** makes and breaks your play – it *is* the play.

In Part 2, I will elaborate on three other important topics to consider when turning your short story into a play: setting, formatting, and where to submit your play.

The *setting* should be described as briefly as possible. It is the most important visual cue as to what will occur in the play. In my play, *The Gatekeeper*, the setting is: “A plaque on a post that reads: ‘Cemetery of Buried Emotions. No stepping on feelings! Keep out!’ There are three cardboard tombstones: anger, envy, and fear. Two chairs and one small table.”

This is very different from novels, where a leisurely amount of time and space and a beautifully lyrical word can lure us into a whitewashed fog.

**Formatting** your play includes the cover page, character page, and first page setup. I use the Final Draft program that does all the formatting for me.

The *Cover Page* is simply the name of your play in the center of the page, followed by the word “by,” centered on the next line. In the middle of the next line is your name. Your name, phone number, and email rest on the bottom left of the page.

On the *Character Page*, playwrights often add a short sentence about each character, or a few adjectives to describe the character’s general behavior. Place and time are also designated.

## Transforming Your Story into a Play, Part 2, continued

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Here is a sample Character Page:

### CHARACTERS

THE GATEKEEPER (OF BURIED EMOTIONS) Male, 25ish

CAMILLE female, lawyer, 40+

### PLACE

Astral Plane

### TIME

Present

On the *First Page*, the title of your play should be placed in the header at 10-point, so it shows on each page. The page number should show at center bottom.

For short plays, one only needs to place the Scene number – all in capitals. Many plays do not have the AT RISE section shown below, although I like the setup to be clear and concise.

Characters are always capitalized and centered, with dialogue under the character name. Short character action or feeling is expressed in parentheses, skipping one line after character name. Action or setting outside of character, some movement around stage, is sometimes italicized, sometimes in parentheses.

Here is an example of a first page from one of my plays:

### SCENE 1

SETTING: A plaque on a post reads: “Cemetery of Buried Emotions. No stepping on feelings! Keep out!” There are three cardboard tombstones, anger, envy, and fear. Two chairs and one small table.

AT RISE: CAMILLE, dressed in all black, sneaks up to the Cemetery of Buried Emotions in the Astral Plane, holding a shovel. Red and white lights flash, a siren also sounds. THE GATEKEEPER, dressed in a long robe, catches her.

## Transforming Your Story into a Play, Part 2, continued

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GATEKEEPER

What are you doing? You can't go in there. That's a crime!

CAMILLE

(drops the shovel)

I'm so sorry, but I'm desperate! I couldn't think of any other way to get my old feeling back. You're the Gatekeeper, right? But, how did you know I was here? I'm sleeping, aren't I? Dreaming?

GATEKEEPER

You are asleep. We're meeting on the astral plane. Your spirit has separated from your body. And obviously, your evil spirit wanted to steal from us.

Hey, you're the spirit of Camille Berger, right? The lawyer. I buried a feeling of yours six months ago. You should know better!

Sit. Let's talk.

(They sit, and THE GATEKEEPER places his computer and manual on the table.)

CAMILLE

Yes. That's me. It's hard to get used to this out-of-my-body-into-my-spirit-stuff while I'm sleeping. Anyway, we have a problem. You buried the wrong feeling and I want it back.

GATEKEEPER

I couldn't possibly have buried the wrong emotion. And I most certainly can't give it back.

CAMILLE

Are you still the Gatekeeper here?

## Transforming Your Story into a Play, Part 2, continued

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You can find more formats by the Dramatists Guild at <https://www.dramatistsguild.com/formats>

So, you pulled all the components together into a play. You powered up your plot and characters, cut out all the description and unnecessary sentences such as “It’s a nice day, isn’t it?” Remember: “show, don’t tell.” Too much exposition kills a play—stop explaining and excessive dialogue, keep the character conflict coming, and the words crisp—think noir. The audience is a participant to every moment and reacts, often as one, to your words and actions.

Now that you are finished, where do you send it? How do you get the word out about your piece? My first recommendation is to join a playwriting group such as Playwright Center of San Francisco, <http://www.playwrightcentersf.org>, with beginner’s questions, support, and places to send your work. PCSF has replicated SinC’s goals for playwrights. They also have opportunities for submissions.

I hope this helps anyone who would like to convert a short story into a play. I have found it easier than converting a play into a short story. Please feel free to email me with any question you may have at [Patriciamorin \(at\) yahoo \(dot\).com](mailto:Patriciamorin@yahoo.com).

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](http://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](http://www.patriciamorin.com).





# Writers, Gardeners, and Bakers

by Margaret Lucke

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“Where do you get your ideas?” is said to be the question that writers are most often asked. And many writers—I’m one of them—tend to respond with a version of: “Hey, ideas are everywhere. Just reach out and grab one as they come floating by.”

Okay, I grabbed one. And it’s lying there in a lump. Now what?

Here’s a secret. Generating that first idea, all by itself, is not enough to generate a story, to set characters, setting and plot percolating in a writer’s brain.

Many of us have had the experience of starting a story with enthusiasm, only to have it come to a screeching halt when we reach page 3 or chapter 7. One problem that can lead to this unhappy result is that the writer expects an idea to be larger than it is, to give them more answers than it will.

Remember analogy questions on tests in school? They ask you to make comparisons: X is to Y as Z is to \_\_\_\_\_ (choose the correct answer from a, b, c, or d).

Here’s an analogy about writing that many people believe:

*An idea is to a writer as a seed is to a gardener.*

What could be more obvious? We talk this way all the time: This story grew out of an experience I had when . . .

And what could be easier? You tuck the seed into the dirt of your imagination, water and nurture it, and the story blossoms forth, the way a tulip emerges from its bulb or an acorn yields an oak tree. It’s as if the idea contains some sort of DNA that makes the story inevitable.

There’s only one problem with that analogy – it’s wrong. It’s based on misperceptions.

I like this one better:

*An idea is to a writer as flour is to a baker.*

When you’re baking, flour is the starting point. It may be an essential ingredient, but you need to add many more ingredients in order to turn the flour into cornbread or apple pie or chocolate cookies.



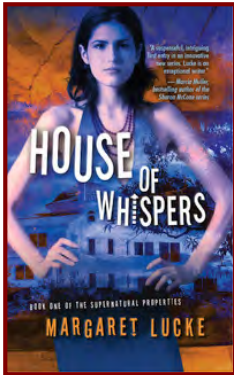
## Writers, Gardeners and Bakers, continued

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Writing a story is similar. You begin with the flour idea – that initial spark that kickstarts the story process. Then you add chocolate, sugar, and egg ideas, or apple and nut ideas, or ginger and molasses ideas. Each idea builds on and yet changes the final story – like other ingredients in a recipe.

The synergy that occurs when two or more ideas come together is what makes the story happen. As with a cake in the oven, a chemical reaction takes place in the imagination as the story is written. The final product is more than the sum total of its ingredients – it becomes something new and whole. The ingredients can't be uncombined again, or separated out.

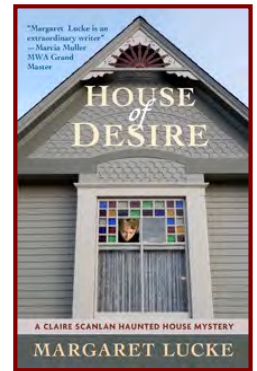
A conversation about houses triggered an idea for a paranormal suspense tale: what if a real estate agent realizes the property she's selling is haunted? Promising notion, but there's no story there. Okay, let's choose the haunted house – what kind of place would flavor this recipe well? When I took a visitor to the see the dramatic view of the coast at the Muir Beach overlook north of



San Francisco, I decided this bluff above the ocean would be a great place to set the house. I modeled the structure itself on a friend's home in Hawaii. Still no story. Why is it haunted? What happened there?

Then the ghost in the house whispered a few opening lines into my ear.

I tossed her words into the mixing bowl of my imagination, added more ideas, and took a few out again. The tasty (I hope) result was *House of Whispers*, the first of my Claire Scanlan Haunted House mysteries. The second in the series, *House of Desire*, came out last June, and the third is in the works.



May some great ideas come together for you. Happy baking ... I mean, happy writing!

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).



## Member Profile: Michal Strutin

**Eighteenth in a series to introduce our members to each other**

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Michal Strutin is a newcomer to crime fiction, but writing is in her blood. She's already the author of eight books of non-fiction and one historical novel, and she's a longtime journalist. Her article, "Research Tips for Writers," can be found in the August 2020 issue of *The Stiletta*.

***Stiletta:*** Your Amazon bio indicates you are a "San Francisco returnee." How and when did you return, and from where?

***Michal Strutin:*** We were living in Johnson City, Tennessee—in the heart of Appalachia—where my husband was biochemistry chair at the medical school and I was writing natural history and travel books. I loved the music, the crafts, and the Appalachian Mountains, but it was time to return to California, where three of our four kids live. Survive on a nature writer's royalties in the Bay Area? Ha! I received my Information Sciences master's in 2006 and got a research librarian job at Santa Clara University.

***Stiletta:*** Please describe some of the highlights of your career as a journalist.

***MS:*** My first job was at the *SF Bay Guardian*, where I learned a lot about editing and a lot about grifty Bay Area politics. From there, I went to *Rolling Stone* and it was just as deliciously weird as you might imagine: Hunter Thompson drinking whiskey in the women's restroom, typewriters thrown out the window, wine tasting at 2:00 a.m. on a 36-hour deadline. When *Rolling Stone* moved to New York, I stayed as copy chief of the newly launched *Outside* magazine. That's where my nature inclinations and work synced. Then I spent years as managing editor of *National Parks* magazine. Every day I went to work saving the national parks. I also had a brief gig at *The Washington Post* and edited one table away from Gwen Ifill, a hero of mine.

***Stiletta:*** You have written books about natural and cultural history. How did you decide what you wanted to write about?

***MS:*** Often, one book led to another. George Huey, a terrific photographer I worked with, said the national parks were looking for someone to write a book on Chaco Canyon and culture. They saw my *National Parks* creds and read my feature articles, and I was in. That led to two books for the *Smithsonian Guides to Natural History*: the *Great Lakes* and the *Southeast*. I chose and wrote about the best natural areas in each of those regions. "Foot-based" research? I was in heaven. The Great Lakes

## Member Profile: Michal Strutin, continued

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book led to *Places of Grace: the Natural Landscapes of the American Midwest*. The *Southeast* book led to *Florida State Parks*, a guide that includes recreation and natural history.

**Stiletta:** You have also written travel books. What was your favorite destination?

**MS:** So many great destinations! I love the Everglades, by foot and canoe. The Wolf and Niobrara rivers are scenic, peaceful, and wild. I stepped into the Wolf as dawn broke and a hatch of delicate mayflies flew up, encircling me, glittering gold in the sun's slanting rays. What a moment. An Appalachian rhododendron grove in full, pure white bloom. Sleeping on a mat in the Negev Desert for my *Discovering Natural Israel* book, watching the moon rise from behind sculpted mountains. Anywhere, any time in Chaco.

**Stiletta:** Later in your career, you worked as a research and academic librarian, most recently at Santa Clara University. How did you find time to write books while you carried on your full-time careers?

**MS:** I remember moaning to my son, "How will I ever finish this book?" He said, "Mom, just wake up an hour and a half earlier. Ninety minutes of writing before work and you'll get it done." He was right.

**Stiletta:** You branched out into fiction a few years back. Tell us about your historical novel, *Judging Noa: a Fight for Women's Rights in the Turmoil of the Exodus*, published in 2018.

**MS:** At a women's retreat, a friend told me about the five daughters of Zelophechad in the Bible: the first written instance of women suing for their inheritance rights. They pursued their case and, eventually, won. I don't know what it got them, but this was 3500 years ago, women's rights during the turmoil of the Exodus. Extraordinary. Lots of drama, action, and character depth. I just had to write about it.

**Stiletta:** What led to your interest in writing crime fiction? What can you tell us about the mystery trilogy you are writing that is set in the late Renaissance, and when can we expect the first in the trilogy?

**MS:** I love reading mysteries. I started with Nancy Drew, gobbled up Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes, and never stopped. I set this historical mystery trilogy in the late Renaissance because the 16th century exploded with advancements in science, technology, art, and international commerce. Plus political intrigue. My two amateur sleuths are something of an odd couple, which makes for crossed communications and unintended consequences.

## Member Profile: Michal Strutin, continued

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The first book is set mostly in Venice, especially the Venice ghetto. The second in Istanbul. The third in Split. And, of course, things happen on ships. I learned a lot about sailing ships of that time and visited one in San Diego. I took a short sail around SF Bay on a slightly newer model and, along with a couple dozen others, learned how to “heave ho,” raising a sail. I’ve got the second book plotted, the major plot points for the third book, and I’m halfway through draft two of the first book. So it will be a while.

**Stiletta:** I understand that one of your passions is urban farming. What should we know about that?

**MS:** I love tomatoes, particular varieties, like black cherry and Paul Robeson. You’ve got to grow good tomatoes to eat good tomatoes. Right now, my Italian broccoli is bolting, so on to summer veggies. I’m also a native plants gardener. A Janey Appleseed, I’ve planted native gardens wherever I’ve lived: East Coast, Appalachians, Denver, and here.

**Stiletta:** You indicate on your website, [www.michalstrutin.com](http://www.michalstrutin.com), that people haven’t changed much over the millennia. How did you come to that conclusion, and has it influenced your writing?

**MS:** The material culture and technology may be different from one century to another, but the crises that people face are most often driven by needs that have driven people for millennia: power, love, greed, jealousy . . . all of that human stuff. Looking back and seeing conflicts big and small, similar to those in our time, helps me put people and events in perspective. And it helps me write three-dimensional characters.

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

**MS:** Ana Brazil, who also writes historical fiction, introduced me to SinC and I’m just getting to know SinC members in our NorCal chapter. The workshops have been super-useful. There’s lots of craft to learn in writing mysteries. SinC introduced me to Jane Cleland and, during the pandemic, I’ve become a devotee of Cleland’s free monthly webinars on mystery writing. They are informative and good community builders.

**Stiletta:** What else would you like the members of NorCal to know about you?

**MS:** I’m really enjoying mystery writing, but sometimes it drives me bonkers: “Why did I include that malachite-hafted knife? Is it a clue? A red herring? Why can’t I remember where I put it?”

Michal Strutin was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

## Member News



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### *New and Upcoming Releases*

*Deadly Delights* by Laura Jensen Walker, book #2 in the Bookish Baker Mysteries, featuring Teddie, will be released on June 8 by Crooked Lane Books.

*The Venice Sketchbook*, a standalone by Rhys Bowen, will be released on April 13 by Lake Union Publishing. Set in Venice in three time periods, a young woman uncovers the keys to her aunt's secret life.

Terry Shames' short story, "Double Exposure," came out in February in the anthology *Bullets and Other Hurting Things: A Tribute to Bill Crider* from Down and Out Books, edited by Ollerman.

*Swift Horses Racing*, Victoria Kazarian's debut mystery novel, will be released April 20 by Fog Hollow Books.

Vinnie Hansen's story, "Try Again," will appear in a future issue of *Mystery Weekly*.

Susan McCormick's middle-grade medical/STEM fantasy, *The Antidote*, about a boy who can see disease, will be released May 5 by Wild Rose Press.

*Match*, book #2 in the Transplant Medical Mystery series by Amy Peele, was released April 13 by She Writes Press.

### *Public (Virtual) Appearances*

Ann Parker and Camille Minichino will be on a "Meet the Authors" panel presented by Diablo Valley College on Zoom on Wednesday, May 12 from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Other authors on the panel include Joe Mele, David Flower, HJ (Jim) Brennan, and Chuck McFadden.

Ellen Kirschman will be the moderator for a panel, "Police Psychology in an Era of Social Unrest: Counseling Cops in a post George Floyd World," presented by Palo Alto University, June 25 from 10:00 a.m. to noon.

## Member News, continued

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### *Awards and Recognition*

*Mortal Music*, book #7 in Ann Parker's Silver Rush historical mystery series, is a finalist for the 2020 INDIES Book of the Year Awards in the History category. Winners will be announced June 17.

Congratulations to Catriona McPherson, who won the 2021 Lefty Award for Best Historical Mystery Novel for *The Turning Tide*.

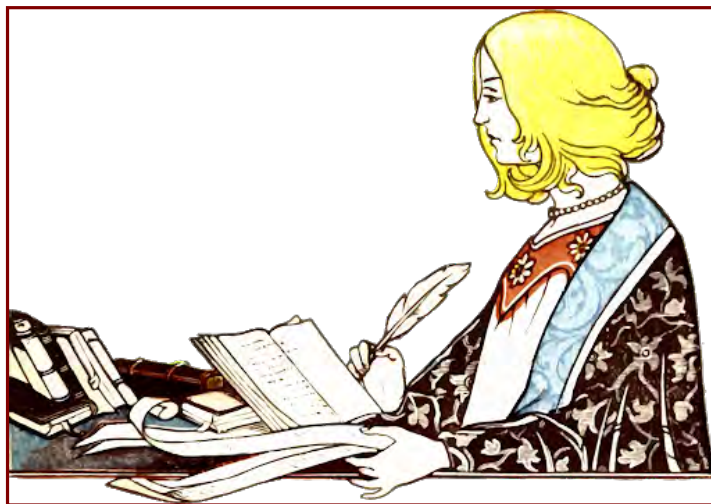
Congratulations to our NorCal siblings who are nominated for this year's Agatha Award nominees. For Best Historical Novel: Rhys Bowen for *The Last Mrs. Summers*; Catriona McPherson for *The Turning Tide*. For Best First Novel: Laura Jensen Walker for *Murder Most Sweet*. Award winners will be announced at More Than Malice: A Virtual Crime Fiction Festival, July 14-17.

"A Murder at Morehead Mews," by G.M. Malliet, published in the July/August 2020 issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, has been nominated for a Derringer award in the novelette category.

Cara Black is excited that her first standalone thriller, *Three Hours in Paris*, came out in paperback and is nominated for a Dashiell Hammett award.

Laurie R. King's *Riviera Gold* is nominated for a Sapere Books Historical Dagger award, set in any period up to 50 years prior to the year in which the award is made.

*The Fog Ladies* by Susan McCormick is on the short list for Chanticleer's Murder and Mayhem Award.



## Question of the Quarter



***What is the most original weapon you have used in a book or story, or the most original weapon you have read in another author's works?***

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I once killed a man with Viagra (he had a heart condition), then killed him a second time by cutting him out of the book. ***Ellen Kirschman***

I thought of this only yesterday, as I put one in my trolley in the supermarket. In a short story, Roald Dahl has a woman club her husband to death with a frozen leg of lamb, which she then roasts and serves to some cops on a meal break from hunting the murder weapon. ***Catriona McPherson***

There are two unusual ways people died in my books. In one, the bad guy is thrown into a pit with stakes sticking up and his leg is impaled. One of the good guys is in the pit and pushes the bad guy's leg off the stake so he bleeds to death. Good guy had been a medic so he knew what the result of his action would be. In another book, when the bad guy is running to get away in a train yard, he runs across a car filled with grain even though the good guys are telling him not to do it. The grain is bridged, which means it looks solid but has hollow underneath the top. Bad guy breaks through the top and the grain eventually compresses his lungs and he can't breathe. He suffocates to death. Slowly. The reader understands why it is impossible to extricate him from the grain. All true. ***Mary Adler***

My protagonist once had to use the suspect's eternity scarf to subdue her during an altercation. I have two eternity scarves, but since writing that scene, I've never worn them again. ***Sharon St. George***

The most interesting murder weapon I've ever heard of was an icicle used to stab someone. I can't recall who invented this! It was an old-timey novel and I'm sure someone here will know. ***G.M. Malliet***

I'm becoming more and more creative in my weaponry. *Dying for a Donut* - powdered sugared the apple farm owner to death. *Dying for a Diamond* - killed someone with a pointed silver chopstick in their carotid artery. *Dying for a Deal* - killed a timeshare salesman with a trophy from the Rotary for customer service (that's not that unique but it is kind of funny). *Dying for a Double* - unfortunately charcoal-broiled someone with a blacksmith's tongs (one of my more grisly acts). ***Cindy Sample***

The Paternoster Pea: Used by Paul Doherty in a medieval mystery, it was apparently used as a "trial" to prove guilt or innocence. Lethal if chewed, thus breaking the surface and letting the toxic part loose. If swallowed whole, it caused no problem. ***Priscilla Royal***

## Question of the Quarter, continued

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In a short story, “Captain Wexford’s Dilemma,” I used a brass nut as my killing device. Based on a true incident, I had a character effect repairs on a ship’s boiler using one brass nut painted to look like steel. When the ship got underway, the brass nut melted. Super-heated steam burst from the boiler, killing—essentially cooking—people in the boiler room. Murder is so much fun! **Charlotte Hunter**

In my first book, someone was hit over the head with a pickle jar\* and garroted with a cheese wire. And the one that just went to the editor has (spoiler) a death by giant cheese press. I’m worried that it’s only a matter of time until the National Cheese Association sends me a strongly worded letter. \*It was a very large pickle jar. **Daisy Bateman**

I am currently writing my latest Alvarez Family Murder Mystery, *The Drop Dead Temple of Doom*, and in it, there is a death by a poison dart frog and another by a fer-de-lance snake. Stay out of the jungle, folks! **Heather Haven**

I’ve had several odd weapons. In *Opus Murder*, I planned to kill my victim with an arrow from behind the organ pipes in a church as the victim, a concert pianist, moved to the crescendo of Beethoven’s Opus 110. I was repairing a fence with my neighbor, who also happens to work in the Santa Clara County Crime Lab as a fingerprint expert, and he suggested I use an ice arrow, so there would be no fingerprints. I had to research how to do the ice arrow and how to keep it cold until it was released from the bow at the victim. That’s what I call neighborly helpfulness! I got the idea for this story when I attended Bouchercon in Toronto and sat in the church listening to a free noon concert. *Forensic Murder* was set in Australia and New Zealand, and I couldn’t resist going after the deadly animals that live to kill people. So I had gray sea slugs, Kapido spiders, jellyfish swarms, tiger snakes, a poisonous New Zealand plant, and I used a drone to sever a zipline, killing the zipliners when they dropped to the ground. All in a good day’s work for a mystery author. **Alec Peche**

Blue scorpion venom in *Black Beans and Venom*. **Vinnie Hansen**

Fine slivers of bamboo mixed in water to cut/puncture the stomach walls and cause the victim to bleed to death internally—used in *A Tale of Robbers and Cops*, to be released next spring. **George Cramer**

I can’t tell you because they come at the book climax(es) at the end of *A Short Time to Die*. Revealing these would give away the ending. You’ll have to read to find out. Bwah ha ha! **Susan Bickford**

It’s hard to come up with an original weapon! I don’t know how original it is, but in my first Samuel Craddock book, *A Killing at Cotton Hill*, there is a cane used to good effect. Maybe more originally, in my short story, “You Kill Me” in *Unloaded 2*, edited by Eric Beetner, I used a toaster as a weapon. **Terry Shames**



## 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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