

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime ✂ Northern California Chapter

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Celebrating spring!

Along with spring—and I know it will get here eventually—the March to October period also brings the convention season.

The season usually kicks off with Left Coast Crime in March. This year in Albuquerque, it was the first large in-person convention since 2020, and several NorCal members attended, some for the first time. Judging from the Facebook pictures and posts, there was pent-up excitement in seeing friends and acquaintances for the first time in months. LCC moves annually from city to city west of the Mississippi. Continuing on . . .

Next up is Malice Domestic, the end of April. Although not specifically a conference of cozy writers, it's the place where cozies are feted annually in Bethesda, MD.

Immediately before Malice is the MWA's Edgar Awards banquet in New York, and there are usually some bleary eyes!

New York is also the home of Thrillerfest, the big daddy of craft and fan get-togethers in early June.

Moving west, California is the place for California Crime Writers Conference, held bi-annually in June in Los Angeles.

Back across the country, Florida is the home of Sleuthfest, in July, and Nashville hosts Killer Nashville at the end of August.



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President's Letter, continued

Generally, next up is the granddaddy of mystery fan conventions, Bouchercon, held between September and the end of October. Like Left Coast Crime, the venue moves from city to city, and this year's convention is in Minneapolis in early September. For those of us on the left coast, San Diego is hosting Bouchercon in 2023.

Then, across the pond to Bloody Scotland, the merryfest of murder in Edinburgh before coming home again . . .

. . . to New England, where the New England chapter of MWA hosts Crimebake over Veterans Day weekend.

Beyond just a calendar listing of cons – and there are many more small, regional conferences, some on craft and some fan get-togethers – there are lots of reasons to spend time and money to go to a mystery convention.

There's the meeting and greeting of old and new friends. Other mystery writers you've long read and admired, debut authors with fresh voices, die-hard fans who've bought every book you've published, publishers' reps, agents, writing teachers. And the panels.

Conference organizers spend weeks developing panels that titillate the attendees' taste for behind-the-scenes looks at what makes a writer tick. And how the process of writing a book sets us apart from "regular" people.

From panels on "how to write humor" to "what about sex" (always popular and playing to a sellout crowd), panels are the heart of a conference.

Don't neglect the otherness and possible randomness of connections, though.

Going into the bathroom at one conference, I happened to notice another woman's name tag. She was from Sequim, pronounced "Squim," a small town on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington where I had had a picnic the week before with my sister.

"You're from Sequim," I said, and she looked at me. "You know it?" she asked, and we had a great short conversation about the town, the Peninsula, and writers who made it their setting.

In the hall at another conference, a woman I didn't recognize came up to me. She said, "I have to thank you. We talked a few years ago at XYZ conference, and you gave me such great advice. I was uncertain about writing and you encouraged me. I now have three published books, and I wouldn't have done it without you."

President's Letter, continued

We live in a fairly small and rarefied atmosphere as mystery writers and readers, and getting together with our compatriots and colleagues is a treat.

In Dallas, at the 2019 50th anniversary of Bouchercon, I looked around the closing ceremonies. All the issues, all the exhaustion, all the petty problems faded away as I watched a crowd of maybe 1,500 people gathered together just to celebrate their love of mysteries.

Pick a conference. Go celebrate!

Sincerely,

Michele Drier

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, May 21, 1:00–3:00 p.m.

Spring Author Showcase

Orinda Books, 276 Village Square, Orinda, CA

It's time again for our twice-yearly Author Showcase, where NorCal members read an excerpt from their most recent book or short story. It's a great way to update your TBR list! Be sure to join us for this **in-person** meeting. Featured authors will include:

Daisy Bateman
Mary F. Burns
M.M. Chouinard
George Cramer
Victoria Kazarian
Ellen Kirschman
Ann Parker
Cindy Sample
Faye Snowden

Saturday, June 4, 12:00-2:00 p.m.

Event to be announced soon on [Groups.io](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#)

Saturday, July 9, time TBD (afternoon)

Historical Chinatown Crime Tour

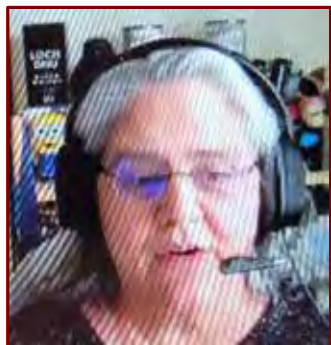
Watch [Groups.io](#) and social media for full details later in May

Paul Drexler, author of *Notorious San Francisco: True Tales of Crime, Passion and Murder*, will lead us through the historical sites and history of Chinatown right into the present. Included will be stories about Ray “Shrimpboy” Chow, head of the Chee Kong Tong, who was convicted of murder and racketeering a few years ago (Paul and Ray are Facebook friends) and the Smith brothers, still in prison, who committed two of the largest jewel heists in SF history, plus much, much more. This event is limited to 25 people and will have a small fee.

In Case You Missed It . . .

If you weren't able to attend our recent events, here's what you missed. Members can find recordings of these events in the Members Only section of our website.

February Meeting - Members Meet & Greet



Our annual Meet & Greet was an opportunity for all of us – members and prospective members – to participate in a round table to talk about what's new and what's upcoming. We also enjoyed a presentation by Mysti Berry (left) and Janet Rudolph (right) about some great resources to help expose writers to new readers and vice-versa, including contests, awards, blogs, and anthologies.



March Meeting - How to Use Book Brush

Kathleen Sweeney, Manager of Marketing and Customer Service for Book Brush, took us through a detailed and well-received demonstration of the online platform's tools and her own tips and tricks to help writers with marketing graphics, social media promotions, animated cover mockups, and book trailers, to name just a few. Some attendees tried Book Brush during the demo, and there was a lively Q&A session.



April Meeting - Live from London! Rhianna Louise



Bookouture commissioning editor Rhianna Louise joined us from London to provide us with an overview of the agency's digital publishing model. She also covered the author/editor relationship and showed us how to approach manuscript submission. What's hot in crime fiction currently, says Rhianna, are: police procedurals with strong female leads and small-town crime scenes with "a sense of time racing to solve the crime"; cozy crime, typically in a rural setting, with warm characters and a scattering of humor; and psychological thrillers focusing on home and family, with a dark suspenseful hook and multiple twists.



My Killer Accountant

A short story by Ana Manwaring

“I tell you, she’s awesome. Rebecca’s work is killer and she’s cheap. I’ve never owed a dime since I found her . . . I made over a hundred grand last year. I went to H & R Block a few years ago—paid thousands in taxes. Paid them almost \$500, and I had to do all the work . . . Now I just gather it all up in a box and drop it off when I’m ready. It’s like magic. There’s still time. Call her right now . . . Rebecca Tisker. I swear she lives at her desk—she’s a major dweeb, but, I wouldn’t go to anyone else . . . Okay, I will. . . you too, bye.”

I hang up the phone. Delia hasn’t filed her taxes in three years. She should take her mess to Rebecca. Delia’s right though, I really ought to get my accounts ready. I glance toward my desk buried under stacks of papers, mail, magazines, ads—and instantly feel tense and exhausted. Rebecca wants me to summarize my income and expenses. Right. I can’t even clear off my desk. She’s been after me to show up at the appointment prepared, but why, I wonder. We always do it together. Why should I stress? That’s what I pay her for.

The sound of the banging flap covering the mail slot in my door distracts me. I wander into the hallway to pick up today’s pile from the floor. Good, a new *InStyle*. I bet it has all the gowns from the Oscars. I thumb through the rest, tossing the junk mail into a conveniently placed receptacle: solicitation, solicitation, ad, Costco magazine, ad, IRS, bill, bill.

Whoops. What was that? I fish the IRS envelope out of the basket and open it. I’m suddenly tired again. “Holy shit! I’m being audited.”

I toss the bills onto one of the stacks on my desk and dial Rebecca’s number. She got me into this; she can get me out of it. The call goes to voicemail. *I bet she’s screening her calls.* I tell Rebecca’s mailbox the auditor is coming to audit me for the year 2019—two years ago.

“Rebecca, I will expect you in my office at 9:30 on Thursday to handle this. I can’t believe you got me audited.”

Apparently, there was an earlier letter that must have gone astray. I wonder if a copy goes to the tax preparer. That skanky bitch didn’t bother to call me. *Well, she’ll pay now.* I’m angry. I paid Rebecca good money to screw up my taxes. Why else would they audit me? How would they know if I might have been a little lax about adding up my income? She’ll just have to fix it and on her own time. I refuse to throw good money after bad.

My Killer Accountant, continued

Two days later Rebecca says she's too swamped with taxes to attend the audit. *Liar*. I'll have to change the appointment. She tells me to round up all my statements, invoices, and receipts for that year and be ready to prove they are legit. I'm sure I can prove everything, except maybe some of my entertainment and the contract labor, but that's what Rebecca is for. If there is an error, then she made it.

I call the IRS office and change the date to May. *Well, that's done – with no help from the bean counter.*

When I notify Rebecca of the new date, she says that she won't be able to take the box of stuff I spent two days gathering up. She insists that I organize my income and expenses into an Excel spreadsheet and e-mail it to her. She has the nerve to tell me that she wants the info within two days or she won't be able to prepare my taxes on time. What on earth is she doing? There's an entire week before taxes are due. I don't exactly have time to sit around adding up expenses. It's her job!

So what, I missed the first appointment and never got the spreadsheet finished. She should be glad to have my business whenever I choose to give it to her. What else does she do? I dump my box on the seat of my car and drive across town to Rebecca's office. Several cars are parked in front and I have to drive around until I find a parking space. When I finally cross the threshold, the outer office is filled with people waiting, stiffly clutching their folders and briefcases on their knees. *Sheep*, I think.

The table by the inner office door is stacked with boxes and envelopes. Prepared returns overflow a wooden "outbox" and I see that they are addressed to clients for pickup. The copier is spitting out copies into the tray. Rebecca's clients glare at me as I walk straight past them into her office. She's on the phone.

“. . .section 179 expense adjustment for the allowable maximum . . .”

“Here's my stuff, Rebecca,” I interrupt, wearing a scowl, daring her to give me any guff.

She drones on, “. . .depreciation over seven years. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yes, it was unusual. No, I advise . . .” as she waves her bony hand like she's shooing a pesky fly.

I don't budge. Finally the conversation ends.

“It's about time, Rebecca. Let's get this done – and no mistakes this year.” I start to sit down.

My Killer Accountant, continued

“What are you doing, Nedda? Your appointment is tomorrow. I haven’t received your income and expense report.”

“Don’t get snippy with me. You owe me for getting me audited. You can do my return for free.”

“Nedda, when you cheat on your taxes you can expect to be audited.” Her voice rises. “I owe you nothing. What part of *don’t bring me your mess* was hard to understand?” Her voice rises into a high-pitched squeal.

The phone rings. Rebecca ignores it. One of the waiting clients peeks in the door carrying a cheap paper portfolio stuffed to the gills and clears his throat.

“I believe it’s time for my appointment, Ms. Tisker.”

The look she gives him would wither a 100-year-old oak. He retreats to reception and rejoins the flock. I hear whispering through the open door.

“This is what I’ve got Rebecca, and you’ll take it now. It’s the least you can do for screwing up my 2019 return.”

The phone rings again and when it stops, Rebecca’s outer office is abuzz with voices. I hear some woman’s brat ask, “Why is that lady shouting, Mommy?” I want to smack the kid, and Rebecca, who has this crazy glazed look on her face and is bubbling spittle at the corner of her mouth. She’s gripping the edge of her desk so hard her knuckles have blanched. Another client knocks on the door. Rebecca’s cell phone starts to play some loser song from the 60’s.

“What! What do you want? Get out!” Rebecca screams, her arms flailing stiffly over her head.

The cell phone stops, but the fax rings until a recorded message comes on and plays “If you want to make a call, please hang-up and dial again” several times.

“Rebecca!” I command, “Rebecca, get a grip, woman.”

Wild-eyed, she fixes her stare on me.

“You, you demanding chiseler. This is what I think of you and your crap!”

My Killer Accountant, continued

She flings herself from behind her desk and bats my box of receipts from my hands. Papers fly everywhere. She cackles like a hyena.

I scream and slap her across her cheek.

Rebecca's expression turns baleful. She backs away from me and slumps into her chair, then rummages in the desk drawer, muttering under her breath.

Clients are crowding into the doorway, staring. Rebecca springs up, the muttering stops as she points something in her hand at me and screeches, "Want to get out of that audit you, you, shark?"

Too late I realize that the adage is true. The room explodes.

In life, you can count on only two things: death and taxes.

SinC NorCal Events chair Ana Manwaring is republishing her first three JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures and publishing the fourth in the series, *Coyote*, with Indies United Publishing House. Her FUNdaMentalists poetry community, Words at the Root, launched last January and is going strong, and her next chapbook published on September 5. Ana is a former lifestyle columnist, and her reviews of Sisters' books can be found at www.anamanwaring.com/, as well as information on her editing business, JAM Manuscript Consulting.

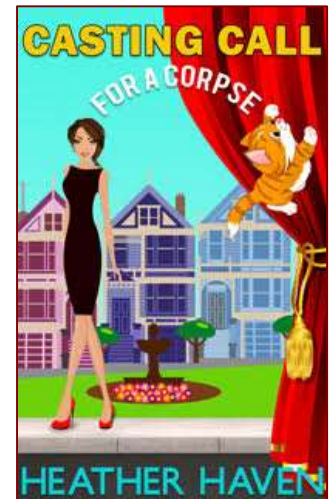




Writing Comedy Scenes for a Mystery by Heather Haven

Writing funny scenes in a mystery can be tricky but rewarding. It can flesh out relationships, add depth and color. As long as it is part of the storyline and adds to the plot and/or characterizations, it can work. And be a lot of fun for the reader, often as a much needed break from tension.

There are three things to remember in writing a funny scene – the setup, the description, and the close. This particular scene comes from *Casting Call for a Corpse*, book 6 of the Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries. The story within the story involves a musical about Florence Nightingale and the Crimean war. In order to help catch a killer, the protagonist's husband, Gurn Hanson, has reluctantly agreed to play a minor role in the production. The scene takes place during previews at the Golden Gate Theater in San Francisco. Previews are a time when a production is still working out bugs and anything can happen. When you throw in bombs, guns, and a large, nervous animal, such as a Bob the Horse, it can often spell disaster. I took hold of that premise and let my imagination run wild. See below.



Gurn entered from downstage right dressed in a French foot soldier's uniform. A seemingly unconscious man, also wearing a French uniform, was slung over Gurn's left shoulder. According to rehearsal, Gurn was supposed to cross to Gaby, playing Florence Nightingale and the star of the show, standing center stage. He was to say his lines, and then exit stage left. However, he halted awkwardly midway between stage right and center. When he tried to walk toward Gaby again, he simply couldn't. Finally, he stood in one spot, looking more or less stupefied.

It didn't take the audience long to figure out why he couldn't move any farther. The wrist of the unconscious soldier had become entangled in one of the many pieces of gelatinous barbed wire jutting out from the fence. Whenever Gurn tried to move forward, the other man's arm would extend as far as possible and then they would have to stop. I don't think it was Newton's law of physics, but something close. It became clear that unless Gurn dropped the man to the stage floor, he had to stay where he was.

Gaby, an old trooper, realized something was wrong. Changing her blocking, she walked over to Gurn who looked as if he would pass out at any moment. She fed him his line couched in a question. "Tell me, soldier, were you going to ask me to please save your friend?"

Writing Comedy Scenes for a Mystery, continued

Gurn opened his mouth, but no sound came forth. He may have seen many tours in Afghanistan as a soldier himself, but being onstage in front of eight hundred people was a new form of terror for him.

Gaby braved on. "I know if you could but speak," she ad-libbed, "You would ask me to save your friend. So why don't you bring him to the field hospital?" She gestured to offstage.

Gurn's jaw worked back and forth several times. He looked out into the audience with rapidly blinking eyes. Still, he could utter nothing.

"It's right over there. Go," Gaby finally ordered, pointing to a spot offstage.

Gurn tried to walk in the direction indicated but once again, had to stop when the other man's arm was pulled to full extension. Also, the wire seemed to become more tightly wrapped around the "unconscious" actor's wrist with each tug. The actor began to struggle, trying to get off Gurn's shoulder. Panicked, Gurn reached behind himself and the man. He gave the offending, taut wire a mighty yank as only a former Navy SEAL, who is in really good shape, can do. Which was really bad.

What happened next reminded me of the nursery rhyme "This Was the House That Jack Built":

This was the man who yanked the wire
That jerked the fence
That pulled the scrim
That toppled the backdrop
That crashed to the floor
That spooked the horse
That hauled the wagon
That galloped onstage
That raced to the exit
But not before pooping
Downwind of upstage

A bemused audience watched the entire set crash down upon itself behind onstage actors who stood frozen in place. Once the dust settled, Gurn realized he was free of the wire that had been holding him and his companion captive onstage. Lines forgotten, Gurn made a sprint for the wings but not before running into one of Bob the Horse's deposits. "One of the larger ones."

Writing Comedy Scenes for a Mystery, continued

There is more and it does go on, but I have to say the readers seem to enjoy this scene immensely. It not only showed a side of Gurn not seen before but gave the reader more of an insider's look at the theater, something I know very well. So it is often writing about what you know. And if I can throw in a good laugh now and then, one that doesn't impede the storyline, pacing, or the mystery, itself, I will do it. That stated, though, NOTHING is as important as the mystery. That is first and foremost. The occasional laugh is just a bonus.

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



The Writer in the Movie: What Films Can Teach You About Writing *Misery* (1990) by Neeraja Viswanathan



Ask any writer about their worst nightmare, and it's hard to imagine coming up with anything scarier than Rob Reiner's film *Misery* (1990), based on horror master Stephen King's 1987 novel. It has everything a writer fears: brutal criticism, endless demands for rewrites, and being at the mercy of crazed fans.

Paul Sheldon (James Caan) has just finished a serious literary novel – a far cry from his popular historical romances featuring heroine Misery Chastain. But after he crashes his car in a snowstorm, he wakes up with two broken legs in the home of uber-fan Annie Wilkes (Kathy Bates), who pulled him from the wreckage. But Annie's adoration of her favorite writer disappears after she realizes that he has killed Misery off in his latest novel. Becoming increasingly unhinged and violent, Annie terrorizes Paul into writing a new sequel bringing Misery back to life. The injured and bedridden Paul, meanwhile, tries to escape before Annie kills them both.

The Writer



King revealed that he wrote *Misery* while he was attempting to kick his cocaine habit, but the story really succeeds because of its understanding of how writers think. Paul wants more than anything to be a respected literary writer, one who is beloved by critics as well as fans. His new novel is his pride and joy, but Annie, first objecting to the novel's style and subject matter, and then to punish him for killing the character of Misery off, forces Paul to burn the manuscript.

Even non-writers cringe when Paul weeps and sets the pages on fire, knowing he is dependent on Annie for food and medicine. But for writers, the pain is visceral. In the euphoria of finishing a book, we tell ourselves we'd die before destroying it – but would we really feel this way if faced with the reality of that choice?

Another facet of the story is that while Paul is physically helpless and his clever attempts to outwit Annie fail, his storytelling ability, which hooked Annie in the first place, is what eventually saves him. As he writes the sequel to her specifications, he keeps her on tenterhooks about how he's going to

The Writer in the Movie: *Misery*, continued

bring *Misery* back. It's this manipulation of this weakness – the desperation of a reader to know what happens next – that finally evens the odds and gives Paul his best chance to fight back and escape.

The Takeaway

Paul makes a living writing books he can't respect that are immensely popular with people he doesn't respect. You can see the condescension in his eyes when he's faced with the homely Annie Wilkes, with her pedestrian tastes and her gushing adoration of his despised novels. But Annie, like many fans, forces him to take her seriously, one way or another.

Paul is faced with the same conundrum that many authors face when they veer away from their usual style or subject matter and try something new. No author wants to disappoint their readers, but it's impossible to always give them what they want. What is always important, however, is to never underestimate their devotion to the books they love – something Paul learns the hard way.

Neeraja Viswanathan is an attorney, journalist and author of *The Street Law Handbook* and the *Infamous Woman of History* series. She is currently working on her first mystery novel and blogs about books adapted into movies at *Mystery On Screen* (<https://mysteryonscreen.com>). She loves horseback riding and Golden Age mysteries and lives in Oakland with her pup Spike and her cats Merlin and Jasper.



Who is the Hero?

by Kenneth Gwin



Mysteries and thrillers are written around heroes, though often about the anti-hero instead. Usually this genre requires a damaged, broken man (most often a male) recovering from an angry, though predictable divorce, a life plagued by alcohol, self-doubt, perhaps a war wound, a suppressed need for violence, and a wandering moral compass. The hero is the man (again, most often) for the day, an idealized expression of time and place. Finding the hero is often the point of storytelling.

Beside my fascination with stories of intrigue, on occasion I venture into literature for literature's sake, or popular literature, at least. I can be picky, but I'm not a snob. Valuable lessons in life can be found in unlikely places.

A Gentleman in Moscow was recommended, perhaps as medicine, something good for the soul. Set in Moscow after 1920, it is the story of a young Russian count under house arrest in a garret room in a fine hotel. He's lost nearly everything in this turn of fate: his status, privilege, and freedom. Of course, he could have been shot or sent to Siberia. Is this a mystery/thriller? Yes and no. Still, inside is a suspenseful, devious, and well-planned caper, with insights and thoughts about the hero as archetype and role model.

I believe the thesis of this story can be found in its exploration of objectivity, patience, and the avoidance of self-pity (handy ingredients for any hero). *A man must master his circumstances or otherwise be mastered by them* is a theme throughout the book.

As part of the story, the Count is asked by a certain intelligence officer of the Russian government to teach him French and English so he might better interact with and understand his opposition. Over the years they examine every aspect of Western culture. In their investigations, they eventually get to discussions of Hollywood. They view a generous sampling of films, from musicals and comedies to westerns, and *film noir*. Here, the KGB official notes the many and varied ways in which the masses are repressed, manipulated, and placated by what he calls distractions and blatant propaganda. But it turns out, even in Moscow during the Cold War, they know about comrade Sam Spadsky (Sam Spade). And while a mythical bejeweled Black Bird may represent avarice and the misguided idolization of kings and popes, this KGB man loves his Humphrey Bogart. This is someone he identifies as a man of intent.

Who is the Hero? continued

Toward the end of the book, the Count insists they watch *Casablanca*, which they've already watched several times in the past. The officer is less inclined. He sees this as a *woman's* film but is soon captivated by the unfolding drama. He declares that Humphrey Bogart, in his portrayal of *Monsieur Rick*, to be the perfect personifications of the hero. Wary, but seemingly unaffected by living under the watchful eyes of the Nazis, our hero remains aloof, cynical, but focused, all the while attending (unseen) to every detail. Our hero seems indifferent to the corruption, greed, and the moral ambiguity of the world around him (declaring he'll stick his neck out for no one). But when he encounters the woman who broke his heart set to escape with the man inspiring nations to fight against the Nazis (a man Rick also recognizes as a hero), he must decide between right and wrong and the greater good. Here, the choice is made, the action taken.

In Sam Spade we find another example of cynicism and moral ambiguity. Even while he's sleeping with his partner's wife, falling for the prime suspect in a murder, and everyone around him is swimming in a pool of greed and deceit, when a man's partner is killed, a man's supposed to do something.

Real heroes in literature are memorable and complicated.

As for the hero in *A Gentleman in Moscow*, the story of our Count is an epic journey trapped within the walls of a grand hotel. It examines the need for sober adaptation in changing times. It is a decades-long chronicle of patience, self-discipline, quiet cunning, and honor among true friends. It is not a dissertation on cynicism. While the Russian operative sees the guarded hero in Humphrey Bogart, the man the Count appears to be is not the man that lives inside. Heroes are complicated. Here is another man of intent hiding behind manners and gentility. Heroes can teach. When action is needed, action is taken.

Kenneth Gwin is a visual artist living in San Francisco. He is a fan of both mysteries and thrillers, with a special interest in espionage, conspiracies, and disinformation. He thinks everything you really want to know is behind that curtain. What's there, you ask? That's the mystery.

Memories of Left Coast Crime, Albuquerque 2022

See anyone you recognize in these photos taken at LCC 2022?



LCC 2022 Memories, continued



Memories of Malice Domestic 2022



Member Profile: Victoria Kazarian

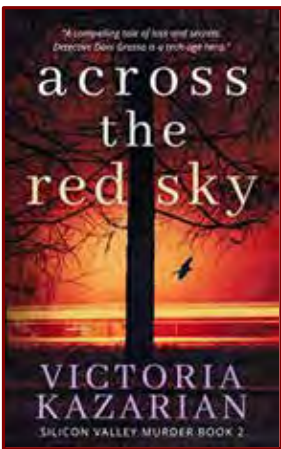
Twenty-second in a series to introduce our members to each other



Victoria Kazarian is a Silicon Valley local who started working in tech companies, transitioned to teaching, and is now looking forward to full-time writing.

Stiletta: You are a resident of San Jose. Have you always lived and worked in Silicon Valley?

Victoria Kazarian: I went to work in the tech industry right after college. My dad was an engineering manager in Silicon Valley, and I followed him right into it. Since I was an English major without a technical bone in my body, I eventually ended up in marketing, but my first job was writing user manuals for a financial software startup. That company inspired my second mystery, *Across the Red Sky*—in which the CEO of a software startup is murdered.



When I got bored writing the manuals--which happened a lot--I invented a cast of characters to use in the examples. The CFO was Bud Bullwinkel; the executive assistant was Bud's passive-aggressive wife, Beryl; and the rather sassy head of accounting was named Cherry Gelato. I had some fun with it, and it developed into an ongoing narrative, which should have given me a clue that I was in the wrong profession.

Stiletta: What motivated you to switch careers from marketing to teaching high school English a few years back? What have you learned from your teaching career that is useful to your writing career?

VK: After I took time off to stay home with my kids, I knew I wasn't interested in going back to working in tech. Through a friend, I had the opportunity to teach English to high schoolers in a public charter school for students who don't fit in a traditional school setting. I never thought I'd be a teacher, but I had the chance to try it out for a year and loved it. I felt like my brain woke up. I was reading literature, picking it apart and studying why it worked. I fell in love with stories and with sharing stories with my students. I saw the power of stories to capture a slice of experience and to make people think. It was the perfect preparation for writing.

Stiletta: Your literary career started with some award-winning short stories. Please tell us a little about that.

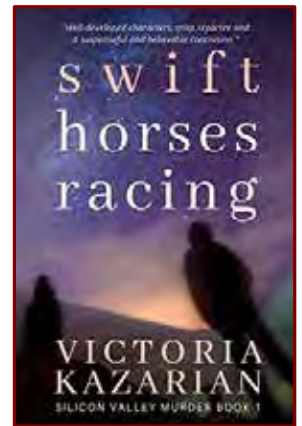
VK: The year I started teaching, I was writing a lot of short stories. A friend of mine told me about a short story contest on the Central Coast with a deadline a month away. Deadlines get my adrenaline moving more than anything else—I take them as a personal challenge. I sat down and wrote a story in first person about a woman with dementia navigating her morning routine. She's an unreliable

Member Profile: Victoria Kazarian, continued

narrator. It took me about a week to write, and when I'd finished it, I really liked it, so I decided to submit it. I made a deal with myself. If I did well in the competition, I'd do more writing. My story won first place.

Stiletta: How did you transition from short stories to mystery novels?

VK: I wasn't sure I could actually write a novel until I did it. I'd written short stories and I'd done two years of NaNoWriMo—at least proving I could write 50,000 words twice. But I struggle with attention deficit disorder. Weaving strands, plots, and clues together in a novel seemed overwhelming. It took a combo of "pantsier" writing and then stopping periodically to outline, so I could make sure I knew where I was going. And then lots of revision, which I secretly love. That book became *Swift Horses Racing*, the first book in Silicon Valley Murder, released last spring. The second book came together more easily. I now had a feel for how a book flowed, and I knew I could do it again.



Stiletta: You are currently working on the third book in your Silicon Valley Murder series. Who are the protagonists and how are the stories influenced by where you live?

VK: My protagonists in the Silicon Valley Murder series are Detectives James Ruiz and rookie Detective Daniela Grasso, of the fictional Monte Verde Police Department in the western hills of the valley. Ruiz grew up in East San Jose, the son of a house cleaner, and is out of his element in upscale Monte Verde. Grasso grew up in a wealthy, sometimes-too-close-for-comfort Italian family that runs a local grocery chain, Grasso's Fine Foods. They are not at all happy with her choice to become a detective.

There is a huge income disparity in Silicon Valley. One of my goals in this series is to show this realistically. Service workers struggle the most, even those whose families have lived here for generations. I also know police officers and teachers who drive in from the Central Valley before the sun comes up to do their jobs, because they can't afford to buy a house in Silicon Valley. These people contribute so much. I don't want to see what the valley would be like without them.

Stiletta: You say in your Amazon bio, "Character arcs are my jam." Please elaborate.

VK: I love when characters grow and change from their experiences. The pressure of solving a tough case, especially under time constraints, is a great crucible. My protagonist Jimmy Ruiz struggles with

Member Profile: Victoria Kazarian, continued

his marriage and the possibility of losing a stable home, unlike the one he grew up in. He's learning to let go of control, and young Dani Grasso is learning to stand up to her family, risking the loss of their approval. Grasso and Ruiz come from very different backgrounds, and they learn from each other. I have another character, introduced in book 1, who will have a redemptive arc in book 3. Redemptive arcs are my favorite, as a reader and as a writer.

Stiletta: Are you planning other mystery novels or series in addition to your current series?

VK: Yes! As well as writing the third book in Silicon Valley Murder, *A Tree of Poison*, I'm writing the first in a culinary cozy series, *Drop Dead Bread*, about a woman who is relocated with her professor father under the federal witness protection program after she turns her husband in for selling tech secrets. She starts a bread bakery in a small town, trying to keep a low profile, until the body of a male model shows up on the back step of her shop.

Writing a cozy is a challenge since the Silicon Valley Murder series is more of a police procedural. I've been reading some great cozy authors and familiarizing myself with the tropes. I'm having fun with the bread puns.

Stiletta: How do you find time to write while employed full-time?

VK: It's been a challenge, definitely. I learned that I can't do both jobs and do them as well as I'd like. I'm teaching fewer classes this year, and it will be my last year of teaching. As of June, I will be writing full time.

Stiletta: What type of publishing did you decide on and do you have any lessons learned for fellow members of NorCal?

VK: I always assumed I would pursue getting an agent and publish traditionally. When my father was diagnosed with a serious heart condition, that accelerated my timeframe. I decided to give indie publishing a try because I could get my first book out sooner. I'm learning about so many aspects of publishing and marketing, which will also help me if I pursue traditional publishing or go hybrid.

I came to indie publishing with a lot of misconceptions. One thing I've learned is, an indie author has to write to market – or their business will fail – so the emphasis is on writing what will truly grab the reader and writing it well. I've found the indie community to be an incredibly supportive bunch. Like mystery authors, indie authors are great at reaching out to help new writers.

Stiletta: What personal benefits have you derived from membership in Sisters in Crime?

VK: Sisters in Crime has given me the resources and encouragement to launch my writing career. Most of my time in SinC has been during the pandemic years, so I've been able to hear authors and

Member Profile: Victoria Kazarian, continued

experts from SinC chapters all over the country online. The meetups and write-ins have also helped me make personal connections. I can't wait to go to a show or conference so I can meet these people in person!

Victoria Kazarian was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



... to our newest members (joining SinC NorCal from January 1 through March 31, 2021)

Sharon Alva	Barbara Graham
Beverly Allen	Kenneth Gwin
Cynthia Badley	Tammy Qualls
Edward Bassett	Patrice Ragona
Valerie J. Brooks	Shelley Riley
Tami Carter	Charlotte Stuart
D.Z. Church	Linda Townsdin
Harriet Fox	Neeraja Viswanathan
June Gillam	

Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

"The San Francisco Chinatown Mayoral Caper," a Tanner Sullivan short story by Pat Canterbury, will be published in *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 3: A Crime Fiction Anthology*, edited by Mysti Berry, released on May 15

Vinnie Hansen's short story "World Civilization" appears in the 6th issue of *Indelible Literary and Arts Journal*, an international quarterly.

Augusta Hawke, first in a new series by G.M. Malliet, will be released on July 5 by Severn House. Reprints of three of her short stories are also available on Amazon: "Agony Aunt: A Santa Fe Mystery;" "The Bartender: Crime Cut Short," and "Whiteout," a Macavity Award nominee and a finalist for the *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* Readers Award for best short story.

Cara Black's 20th installment of the Aimée Leduc Investigations in Paris, *Murder at the Porte de Versailles*, was released on March 15 from Soho Crime.

The Answer to His Prayers, the fourth Dot Meyerhoff mystery, is now available as a paperback, as well as an ebook.

Her Silent Prayer by M.M. Chouinard, book #5 in the Detective Jo Fournier series, was released April 7 by Bookouture.

A Killing Rain by Faye Snowden, book #2 in the Raven Burns series, will be released June 21 by Flame Tree Press.

Dismal Harvest, by Daisy Bateman, book #2 in the Claudia Simcoe series, was released on March 15 by Seventh Street Books.

The Eleventh Commandment by Mary F. Burns, Book #4 in the John Singer Sargent/Violet Paget Mystery series, was released on March 12.

Thonie Hevron's short story "Johnny Walker" is included in the anthology *To Serve, Protect and Write: Cops Writing Crime Fiction*, released in February.

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

Member News, continued

Public Appearances (in person or virtual)

Ellen Kirschman is happy to be part of the Capitol Crimes SinC chapter's Killer Workshop, May 14 in Rancho Cordova.

Ann Parker will be speaking at the Presbyterian Women Book Club at the First Presbyterian Church in Livermore, California on Friday, May 20 at 10:00 a.m.

Ann Parker will be speaking at the San Ramon Valley Newcomers Club on Thursday, July 21 at 12:00 p.m.

Awards and Recognition

Congratulations to Gigi Pandian, whose short story "The Locked Room Library," published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine's* July/ August 2021 issue, was nominated for an Agatha for Best Short Story.

Congratulations to Heather Haven, whose book *The Drop-Dead Temple of Doom*, book #8 of the Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries, won the Entrada Publishing Incipere Award "for exceptional writing" for Clean Mystery.

Congratulations to Susan McCormick for being a Finalist in the 2021 Mystery & Mayhem Book Awards for Cozy and Not-so-Cozy Mysteries for *The Fog Ladies: Family Matters*. Award winners will be announced at the Chanticleer Authors Conference Banquet and Ceremony on June 25.

Congratulations to Gigi Pandian, whose book *The Alchemist's Illusion* is a finalist for the G.P. Putnam's Sons Sue Grafton Memorial Award, to be given out at the Edgar Awards.

Congratulations to Laurie R. King who, along with Lee Child, won an Agatha Award for editing *How to Write a Mystery: A Handbook from Mystery Writers of America*.

Miscellaneous

Vinnie Hansen is looking for fellow writers who would like to read a free advance copy (ebook format) of her novel, *One Gun*, and post a review before its June publication. Contact Vinnie at vinnie@vinniehansen.com

Question of the Quarter

What is your solution for writer's block?



Small treats work on me: 100 words = a cup of tea; 1,000 words = a walk round the garden; 2,500 words = buy a book. *Catriona McPherson*

I take a day off and go to the wine country for a peaceful drive and nice lunch. *Priscilla Royal*

I address writer's block by switching to a different creative endeavor. I make greeting cards, create recipes, or tend to my garden. After that break, I can return to writing. *Chris Knoblauch*

I re-read the last chapter I've written, then I go for a long walk and just let my mind wander and try to "hear" the next sentence come to me or play out the next scene . . . what is the next logical next step in the story? What character are we expecting to hear from next? Then when I get back, I sit down and put on a piece of music, always instrumental, that I have chosen as the background for the mystery or novel I'm working on, and just start writing whatever comes to me. That will usually do the trick. Sometimes a glass of Prosecco helps, too! *Mary F. Burns*

If you are a professional writer, you work every day. Some days are easy and you forge ahead, other days are hard and you pull out every word. Give yourself a daily word count and don't stop until you've reached it, no matter how terrible the words seem. You can always edit what is on the page. *Rhys Bowen*

I don't have writer's block, just the opposite sometimes. Recently I started my fifth Dot Meyerhoff mystery with barely an idea in mind. Plotting is hard for me. I was determined to know the whodunit and why and how the book would end. No such luck. So I just started writing à la Stephen King. Dreamed up a couple of characters, resurrected others from previous books, and started writing. I'm 10K words in, still don't know who did what and why, but I'm having fun. And I think I have a book. What helped the most? Accountability to my 1:00 SinC drop-in writing group. Just showing up there most days kept me going. Thanks, sisters. *Ellen Kirschman*

I've never had the kind of block that leaves writers in a tragic state, stumbling around, drinking too much, agonizing over whether they will ever write again. I suspect that might be a literary trope anyway. If I'm stuck, wondering if I've manipulated my characters into a corner, or wondering if I'll meet my deadline with something that isn't saggy or riddled with unforced errors, I leave the computer, take a walk, do the laundry, feed the cats, anything to give myself a break from unproductive thoughts. Later, and that might mean 3:00 a.m., there will be an aha moment. Of course! If I simply add a short scene where the police inspector asks her a leading question that points here in another direction . . . If I rewind back to the café and have a stranger enter . . . Like a lot of SinC authors have said in the past, I find turning my attention and worry away from what looks like a big problem opens some mental door for fresh thinking. *Susan C. Shea*

Question of the Quarter, continued

Get outside, take a walk, unplug. Give my brain a chance to clear out. *Alanna Weaver*

Do nothing. That's my most effective weapon against writer's block. At least, it appears I'm doing nothing. I pose the problem to my brain and let my subconscious chew away on it. One day—or perhaps in the middle of the night—like an old Commodore computer, it dredges up the solution. I've never had much luck trying to force an answer. Of course, this technique works best if a person is not up against a deadline. *Vinnie Hansen*

Write. That sounds facetious, but the act of putting words down on a page or a computer screen or even longhand can sometimes prime the pump. It can be anything—my personal favorite is making lists. I make lists for shopping, books to read, to-do lists, future projects . . . anything that's been running through my mind. If I get it on a list, I can forget about doing it immediately and that slows the squirrel cage in my brain.

Leave your story for a bit and take a mental tour of someplace. As you roam around the place, notice some things and write descriptions.

Write something other than your work. A journal entry, a poem, a letter to a friend. If you're working on a novel, pull out one already-written scene and turn it into a short story. This doesn't have to be for publication, but it's a way to get deeper into your plot or characters.

Don't beat yourself up about it. It's a temporary dilemma, and the thoughts and words will begin to spill again, possibly at 4:00 a.m.! *Michele Drier*

I have two tricks. First, take a walk to get away from screens and paper, take some deep breaths, relax and notice the world around me. Nine times out of ten, I end up wishing I had a pen and notebook because I get inspired to work through whatever got me blocked to begin with. If that doesn't work, I employ trick number two, sit down and write literally anything with no goal except to demolish the blockade. One time, I wrote "Mary had a little lamb. Had." That took me off and running on a farm animal crime spree story that was just plain silly but got the creative juices running again so I could get back to the project at hand. *Robin Stuart*

I have two solutions: (1) Sleep on it—often the next step forward manifests by morning and I just need to take that one step, then take the next, etc. (2) Sit down and have my character think (or say) what I'm experiencing right then . . . such as "She shook her head. 'Things are such a mess. I have no idea what to do here or what's going on' . . . I might mutter on in this vein for a bit on the page, but then

Question of the Quarter, continued

eventually the story moves forward. (Sometimes I delete this bit of inward-directed angst in the rewrite; sometimes, if it makes sense, I leave it in.) *Ann Parker*

When I was writing the first book in the Trisha Carson series, *Dead in the Water*, I often felt like I didn't know what to write next. When that happened, I went out to the backyard and cut the grass. I had one of those old push mowers and it was deep into summer. Maybe it was all the sweat and feeling like I was going to pass out, but when I went back to the manuscript, I, at least, had the next line. I also had the best-looking grass on my street. *Glenda Carroll*

Reminding myself why I wanted to tell this particular story helps when I lose my momentum. Reading poetry and losing myself in masterfully combined words and beautiful images also refreshes me. *Mary Adler*

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



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