

# THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime ✂ Northern California Chapter

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## Our Continuing Reality

More than half of 2022 has come and gone and we're still trying to make sense of the changes in our world.

When the pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, there was confusion, fear, and worldwide lockdowns. The researchers worked rapidly to isolate the virus and develop a vaccine while people hunkered down, wore masks, stayed away from friends and families. The elderly and chronically ill in care facilities were cut off from loved ones, children were home-schooled, people began working remotely, and shopping habits changed.

By January 2021, with the announcement of the first vaccines, the fear lessened a little as long lines formed at vaccination stations, whether at medical facilities or in parking lots—stay in your car, get a shot. Then the second shot and, a few months later, a booster.

People began easing back into their usual lives, going out, shopping, taking off their masks and mixing, traveling, spending time with friends and family at events.

But the virus had some other tricks. First was the Delta variant, followed by Omicron, and now we're at BA.5, possibly the most contagious version. Where will the virus hit next?



## CONTENTS

Page 1:	President's Letter
Page 4:	Upcoming Events
Page 6:	In Case You Missed It
Page 8:	Five Mistakes
Page 10:	No one Wants a Boring Series
Page 14:	Is That Really Facebook or Instagram?
Page 18:	Profile: R. Franklin James
Page 22:	Member News
Page 24:	Question of the Quarter
Page 26:	New Members

## President's Letter, continued

As President Biden was diagnosed this week (July 21), questions continued. He'd been vaccinated, boosted, wore a mask much of the time. Did this mean that everyone still had the potential to contract a variant of Covid?

Yes and no. The virus and its transmission are evolving targets. Vaccinations and boosters are the best precautions, and wearing masks is advisable. Los Angeles County is wrestling with reissuing an indoor mask mandate. Alameda County enacted one in early June but rescinded it just weeks later.

What does this mean for our NorCal Sisters in Crime?

The board is also wrestling with guidelines for the safety of our members. We've had one in-person event, our Authors' Showcase in May at Orinda Books, and had a crowd of about seventy, all masked. We're looking at other events this fall that we can at least do as hybrids – in person as well as virtual through Zoom. There are plusses and minuses to each.

Most of us miss the energy and camaraderie of mingling with friends and colleagues in person.

Conversely, using Zoom has allowed us to open up our presentations to a broader audience and brought us presentations from other Sisters in Crime chapters around the world. We've had attendees from across the U.S. as well as internationally. This not only gives our presenters a larger public and more exposure, but we've also picked up some new members, a phenomenon that many chapters are experiencing.

No longer do you just belong to your local chapter; you can be a member of chapters far removed from you. One of our nearby sister chapters has board members from the East Coast. With new members can come new ideas and programming, but at the cost of having to be virtual. No one will want to travel from New York for a board meeting, but their ideas can be shared easily through the virtual universe.

What does that mean for NorCal? I don't think any of us knows.

What we do know is that we'd love to see and meet our colleagues and friends in person. Give fist bumps, handshakes, or hugs. Catch up quietly on writing projects, friends, and families. We have holiday get-togethers in December and our Meet and Greet in February. Over the past couple of years, these events have been on Zoom . . . how will we handle them in 2022, 2023, and the future?

## President's Letter, continued

The board has authorized past president Susan Bickford to purchase equipment to facilitate virtual/hybrid meetings and events. All of our meetings and presentations are recorded and are available for any member to view, and for the first time, because of the new universe of communication, we've linked with Southern California SinC chapters to present the Sizzling Summer Speaker series of presentations.

On Sunday, August 7, from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., the Los Angeles chapter is hosting the third in the Sizzling Summer Speaker series:

### **Inside the LAPD: A Journey and an Adventure**

with featured speaker Beatrice Girmala of the LAPD and reader/author JT Bartlett

Whether you write police procedurals or cozies, odds are that you have a character in law enforcement. How else to access all those databases and forensic information your protagonist needs to solve the murder?

And our own Cara Black will tell us about doing research in a foreign country on September 24.

Look for these presentations on our website, register and enjoy!

As we move into fall and the Covid virus still determines much of our daily life, we're constantly aware of the pros and cons of get-togethers. If you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns, please let us know!

Sincerely,

Michele Drier

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal

# Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

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

***Behind CSI: Mythbusting Forensics in Movies and TV, with Melissa Kreikemeier***  
*Zoom Meeting*

Melissa Kreikemeier, a freelance editor and forensic science educator, guides crime fiction writers in the use of forensic science in their books through her website, services, and courses. Learn what to include and what to avoid when writing a crime scene.

**Sunday, August 7, 2:00 – 4:00 p.m.**

***Sizzling Summer Speaker Series: Inside the LAPD: A Journey and an Adventure with Bernice Girmala and JT Bartlett***  
*Zoom Meeting*

Whether you write police procedurals or cozies, odds are that you have a character in law enforcement. Beatrice Girmala, a 37-year veteran of the LAPD and highest ranking woman in department history as Assistant Chief in charge of operations, and journalist/historian/author JT Bartlett will take us behind the scenes in this event co-sponsored by the NorCal, LA, Orange County, and San Diego chapters of SinC, and hosted by the Los Angeles chapter.

**Saturday, August 27, 12 - 2:00 p.m.**

***Drugs of Abuse: Fact vs. Fiction, with Jen Prosser, MD***  
*Rockridge Branch, Oakland Public Library, 5366 College Ave., Oakland*

From Jen Prosser, an emergency medicine physician in Arizona, learn about new drugs of abuse such as fentanyl. Learn why random drug screening is a waste of time or, worse, misleading. Learn about internal concealment of drugs—drug smuggling—and how smugglers might end up on a “drug loo” at an international airport. Use this information for your plot, while using misinformation and mistaken assumptions to confuse your characters.

**Wednesday, August 31, 4:00 – 5:30 p.m.**

***What Makes a Thriller Thrilling? Three Writers and a Ghost, in Conversation, with Elizabeth Aden, Ana Manwaring, and Marie Sutro***  
*Zoom Meeting*

## Upcoming Events, continued

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Join these three authors as they discuss their own works and delve into the question of why readers crave thrillers. They will explore the essential components of story, plot, and character that result in a compulsive read. This event is sponsored by SinC NorCal and the Corte Madera branch of the Marin County Free Library.

**Saturday, September 24, 12:00 – 2:00 p.m.**

***Sizzling Summer Speaker Series: Researching Your Book in a Foreign Country, with Cara Black***

*Zoom Meeting*

Award-winning, bestselling author Cara Black will discuss the ins and outs of doing research in another country. Cara is the author of 20 books in the PI Aimee Leduc series, set in Paris.

**Saturday, October 1, 2:00 – 4:00 p.m.**

***Love Hurts (Your Bank Account): A Guided Tour of Romance Scams, with Robin Stuart***

*Hayward Public Library, 888 C Street, Hayward*

Veteran cyber crime expert Robin Stuart, who is also a contributing editor to two recent anthologies, walks us through the hows and whys of online dating fraud, who's behind these scams, and how the predators get caught. Your questions will be answered!

**Check out our website for information about our events and links to register.**



# 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.

## May Meeting - Spring Author Showcase

We met at Orinda Books for our first in-person meeting in two years! (The meeting was filmed for those who could not be present.) It was our biannual opportunity to hear our fellow NorCal members read from their recent releases. The meeting was emceed by NorCal Vice President, Glenda Carroll.



*Ann Parker*



*Faye Snowden*



*George Cramer*



*Glenda Carroll*



*Ellen Kirschman*



*Daisy Bateman*



*Mary Burns*



*Michelle Chouinard*



*Victoria Kazarian*

## In Case You Missed It, continued

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### June Meeting - We [Heart] Crime Fiction: What's in a Genre?

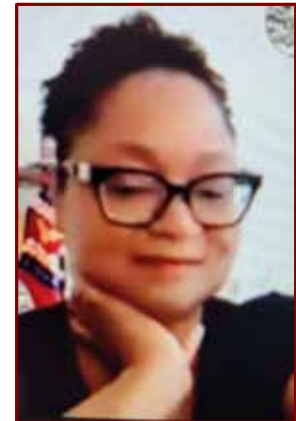
Crime fiction can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. That's why a panel of six SinC NorCal authors encouraged writers to know their genre(s) so they can get their work into the hands of appreciative readers. Panelists included: Daisy Bateman, cozy mysteries; Michele Drier, traditional mysteries; Faye Snowden, Southern gothic noir and police stories; Kelli Stanley, hard-boiled PI novels; Thena MacArthur, diesel punk and steampunk; and Susan Bickford (moderator), thrillers. Panelists discussed their own writing genres as well as the tropes, cliches, and the rules that apply to them, and they answered attendee questions.



*Daisy Bateman*



*Michele Drier*



*Faye Snowden*



*Kelli Stanley*



*Thena MacArthur*



*Susan Bickford*

## Five Mistakes . . . by Alec Peche

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Sisters in Crime NorCal has a range of members at different points in their writing careers. I'll be releasing my twentieth book, *Long Delayed Justice*, on August 25.

It seems like a good time to discuss my mistakes. From the beginning of my first attempt at creative writing in 2012, I knew I only had the temperament for indie publishing and that's true today. That was one big author decision that I got right.

Now I'll move into negative territory. I'll start with my pen name — Alec Peche. I knew I could not write under my real name, Linda Smith. It's a very common name in the United States and there are already five writers with versions of my name. That popularity meant I would have a hard time getting a domain and website, and I didn't want to be confused with the other authors by the same name. I also wanted a gender-neutral name so that male readers would buy my books. The data at the time in 2012 said male readers avoided female mystery authors. I even avoided putting my picture on my books and on my website.

That was a mistake. In 2015, I added my picture and gave up on the mirage of being a male author. I wish I had chosen the pen name of "Linda Something." Recently, I was in a store buying a new writing notebook. The merchant said she tries to read female mystery writers exclusively, so she would've passed on my name if she had not met me and discovered that I was a female. I guess I've come full circle on my pen name saga.

Moving on to my next mistake, I'm a complete failure at social media, and that is a weak position for any author. I'm an introvert and have no desire to share myself or my life with the greater world. There are, of course, authors on the other side of social media, meaning they share too much. I've only signed up for one author's newsletter. I never put much credence in newsletters as I have little desire to read them myself. Even those authors whose books I preorder automatically, I fail to subscribe to their newsletters. My mistake is that I assume all readers are like me.

My third mistake is pursuing passion projects that straddle subgenres. My third series is a passion project. My protagonist is Michelle Watson, a CIA case officer who has the skill of teleportation. I love inventing ways that she can get out of trouble by teleportation. The series has good reviews but the



## Five Mistakes, continued

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sales, are low. Still, I'm writing the third book in the series because it's my passion project.

My fourth mistake is being slow to build my email roster. Again, it's because I don't sign up for other authors' email notifications. I want to enjoy their stories, but I feel no need to learn about their lives or their thoughts while they were writing the story. I try to overcome my aversion to email lists by writing a blog post for those readers who sign up for my list. I also provide a free series prequel through Book Funnel to those who want to sign up for my newsletter, but I don't require that they sign up to get the prequel.

My final mistake is not thinking about branding earlier in my career. My first two books are *Vials* and *Chocolate Diamonds*. The remaining eleven books in that series have the word "murder" or "death" in the title. I've re-done my book covers once for the entire series to change the font and make them more thriller-looking. I think about going back and changing those first two titles, but then I will need a lot of communication with Amazon to make sure the reviews are linked, as Amazon would likely assign a new ASIN to the books.

Hopefully, you won't make the same mistakes I have. My list doesn't include other mistakes I've made along the way such as bad editors, bad promotions, etc. Some of them, like my pen name, can't be recovered from, but others like the email newsletter list can be a work in progress to improve.

Cheers!

Alex Peche is the Morgan Hill author of nineteen books. Thirteen releases in the Jill Quint, MD, Forensic Pathologist series feature a woman who is a part-time pathologist, PI, and part-time vintner who solves murder mysteries with a team of girlfriends, all with different professional skills that are critical to solving mysteries. The stories are set across the world. There are also 4 books in the Damian Green series about a modern-day MacGyver. The series is set on Red Rock Island in San Francisco Bay, and it's a story about a computer genius teaming with a retired SYPD detective to solve cold cases. The fifth story, *Long Delayed Justice*, will be released on August 25. A third series features Michelle Watson, a 50-something CIA case officer raised in the paranormal town of San Martin. Growing up, she was the only resident of the town without some sort of paranormal skill, so she went to work as a policewoman. After nearly dying in the line of duty, she came back to life with a teleportation skill and thought she could best serve the world in the CIA. The third book in that series, *How Did She Get There*, will be released in late 2022.



## No One Wants a Boring Series: Keeping it Relevant by Emily Brightwell

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You may remember Cheryl Arguile as a former SinC NorCal Sibling and an active member of our Board. Cheryl moved to Nevada a few years ago, but her Mrs. Jeffries Victorian Mysteries, written under the pseudonym Emily Brightwell since 1993, number **41** books to date, with consistently high reader ratings on Amazon! What can we learn from her impressive, long-term success? Read on . . .

Writing a long-running series is both a great joy and a huge headache. The joy comes from watching your characters grow and from crafting stories that build upon the universe that you've created. The headache comes from your efforts to make each book in the series unique and memorable. But if your goal as an author is to write a long-running series (and economically, that's actually a very wise goal for one to have), then perhaps I can share some of the techniques, tricks, and tips I've learned along the way.

But how does a writer make each story stand out? It took a bit of trial and error before I realized that it's difficult to do, but not impossible. The first thing I did was research true crime—both modern and historical. Seriously, you need to spend a bit of time looking at murder through the ages. What I found out was fascinating: murder has not changed much since the dawn of man. Secondly, I realized that one of the biggest mistakes one can make is trying to come up with a rare or unusual method of killing your victim. Both in ancient and modern times, most killers grab the easiest weapon at hand to do their dirty business. Murder is rarely well-planned. But that would make for a rather boring book, so my task is to make the killer seem like such a clever person that they can never be caught or brought to justice. But of course, in a mystery, our job is to make certain that justice is always served.

I've written 41 books in my Mrs. Jeffries Victorian Mystery series, and every time I do a book signing, I am asked how I avoid repeating myself. My answer is simple: I don't. There are some factors in a mystery that will always be repeated because there are only so many reasons that drive people to kill.

To begin with, people are people regardless of where or when they lived. Whether a story is set in ancient China, fifteenth century Japan, 2022 San Francisco, or Victorian England, they all need characters that react in a manner that seems reasonable to a modern-day reader, but which stays

## No One Wants a Boring Series, continued

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within the boundaries of their own culture. People haven't changed all that much since Cro-Magnon Man crawled out of their caves as modern humans. When I'm writing, I keep this in mind.

All human beings have the same emotions: love, hate, jealousy, compassion, empathy, misery, etc. Admittedly, how they express those emotions is often culturally defined, but that doesn't negate the fact that all of us from every point of time or any past period of history feel those same emotions. If I'm writing about an upper-class English aristocrat who loathes someone enough to commit murder, I make certain I have him acting and reacting to the events and characters in the novel in keeping with the customs of his class and position in society. I also make sure that every book in the series has a variety of characters from all different classes. That is one of the best ways of keeping a series fresh – when you're writing your manuscript, characters from different social and economic classes make your books distinct from one another.



*First in the series, 1993*

For example, the upper-class aristocrat is going to react differently to the police showing up at his home than an East End dock worker. Both of them will sneer at the authorities – the aristocrat because he thinks he's a superior person and the dock worker because he's grown up in poverty, doesn't have any hope his life will get better, and considers the forces of law and order are there to protect the rich and powerful. How they each respond to the protagonists solving the crime will help your reader see each character in the novel as a separate individual rather than just a suspect.

Another method to keeping your series interesting is to put the crime and the characters in a "semi-closed" environment. I've never used a completely "closed" environment, one where all the characters are stuck together on a ship, a train, or even an English country house cut off by a collapsed bridge. In other words, the story is set someplace the suspects and protagonist cannot leave. Agatha Christie used that device often (*Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, etc.) and though it's a lot of fun, I've just never come up with a scenario that I wanted to use. But a semi-closed environment is one I've used dozens of times.

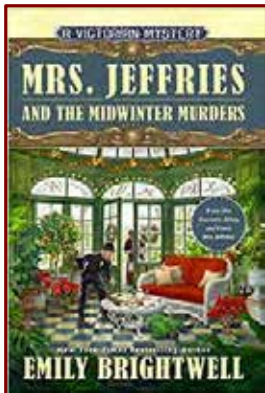
You don't put your characters in an isolated community; you put them in a specific community. For example, in my current manuscript, my semi-closed environment is an archery club in West London. That's where the murder happens and as naturally follows, it's where I've put my suspects. In previous books I've used specific industries such as shipping, warehousing, or pubs as well as leisure/community activities such as garden clubs, a lighterman's ball, or a wedding to make the story unique. You get the point – by using different and specific backgrounds for your books, you differentiate them from one another.

## No One Wants a Boring Series, continued

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But that's not the only way to make an individual story stand out—one that is also effective is playing around with Point of View (POV). As much as I try to do scenes in one specific POV, if I think the story calls for it, I'm not afraid to show my reader the POV of other characters in the same scene. Lots of editors object to this technique, but so far, my readers seem to be fine with it.

The best way to use POV to make individual books stand out is to let your villain express the motive that drove them to kill. This can be a very, very powerful technique. Especially if you do your job in such a way as to make the murderer's motives justified in their own mind. Additionally, there are some kinds of motives that can be used to make your murderer a bit sympathetic. I'm not saying that premeditated, cold-blooded murder is ever justified; it isn't. But there are some circumstances when your killer's actions seem understandable. For example, your villain is killing the person they hold responsible for the death of their child or for ruining their life or the life of a loved one. You generally do this at the end of the book, when the murderer is confronted by the forces of law and order. If you do it right, your reader won't ever forget it.



*Latest in the series, 2021*

Also, don't be afraid to use real events as a background to your story. If you're writing historical mysteries, do some research and determine what might have been going on in time period/place you've set your book. For example, I once used Queen Victoria's Jubilee as a background. It wasn't a pertinent part of the plot, but it made the story stronger and added some valuable color and pizzazz. If you're writing contemporaries, turn on the news or grab a newspaper and use whatever clicks into your mind as fitting into the world you've created. This is a potent tool for keeping your series fresh and interesting. You want your readers to see the world you've created by using the "props of reality" from the real world.

Writing mysteries is incredibly rewarding, but it's also difficult, and I'm certain we don't get paid enough. I understand that it can also be very confusing. So, in the interests of clarity, let's do a quick recap:

- 1) Research true crime, both historical and modern. You'll be surprised by what you stumble across.
- 2) Understand that all human beings, regardless of the time period or place, have the same emotional, mental and physical needs. How they express those needs is usually defined by their culture. So be clever in how you craft their characters. If your killer is a highly strung chef from Italy, make sure their actions are consistent with how someone from that background would act.

## No One Wants a Boring Series, continued

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- 3) Don't worry about making your murder method "unique." Seriously, I can't stress this enough. I recently read a book by one of my favorite mystery authors, and the method used to kill the victim was simply too unbelievable. Frankly, it ruined the entire experience for me.
- 4) Use the dialogue, class, and social position of each character to differentiate them from one another.
- 5) Play with the POV of both the protagonist and the antagonist.
- 6) Don't be afraid to generate some sympathy for your killer—not justification but understanding.
- 7) Let real-world events into your work. Yes, it will date it, but it will be dated anyway just by the kind of technology that is mentioned in your text.

In closing, I can honestly say these methods have worked for the 41 Mrs. Jeffries novels I've written. I sincerely hope that some of you will find them useful as well. Best of luck to all of you.

Emily Brightwell was born in the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia. Her family moved to Southern California in 1959, and she grew up in Pasadena. After graduating from California State University at Fullerton, she decided to work her way around the world and took off for England. She didn't get any further than that because she met the man who would become her husband in Leeds, Yorkshire, and married him in 1976. While working in international shipping in Long Beach, she decided to pursue her dream and become a writer—which, of course, is the best job ever. To date, Emily has written over 50 novels in three genres—romance, young adult and, of course, mystery. *Mrs. Jeffries and the Midwinter Murders*, her latest book in the Mrs. Jeffries series, was released in November 2021. Emily lives in Carson City, NV and is currently working on *Mrs. Jeffries Aims to Win*, the 41<sup>st</sup> book in the series.





## Is That Really Facebook or Instagram Contacting You? by Robin Stuart

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We've all heard about scammers preying on authors with agent/editor/publishing deals. If you haven't, this November 2021 article from the Author's Guild is a great place to start: <https://www.authorsguild.org/industry-advocacy/%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8Bavoiding-publishing-scams/>. Did you know cyber criminals are targeting us, too? They're setting their sights on social media accounts with large followings and blue check marks. The goal is taking control of Facebook and Instagram pages and accounts in order to run malicious ads. These ads may simply garner views and clicks (typically for scammy products and services), or they may use your account to impersonate you to entice your followers to participate in get-rich-quick fraud and cryptocurrency scams.

That's a lot of information packed into one sentence so let's break it down.

No social networking platform is a public service. Facebook/Meta/Instagram, hereinafter "FB" for ease of reference, exists to make money. The easiest and most common method by all social network platforms to monetize is advertising. It's a huge business and is also FB's primary source of revenue. As such, the ecosystem for advertising is complex and incredibly effective. FB collects data about all of us based on our online behaviors – what we click, what we "like," what we "follow," etc. – in order to provide the capability to serve highly targeted ads to subscribers, followers, and viewers.

In the online ad business, views and clicks have monetary value. Those who participate in this revenue stream are advertisers, FB itself, and the person or entity hosting the ads. You can read more about their ad ecosystem here: <https://seekingalpha.com/article/4471770-how-does-facebook-make-money>. But the "entity hosting the ads" means you (or your publisher). When someone's eyeballs are served an ad, people make a nominal amount of money. This is called Cost Per View or CPV and earns an average of \$01-\$0.10 (US). If someone clicks on an ad, everyone makes more money, called Pay Per Click or PPC, which earns an average of \$.50-\$2.00 each. Now, consider the amounts of money at stake if thousands, tens of thousands, or millions of viewers, followers, and subscribers view or click on ads. I'll take the mystery out of it for you – the ramifications are in the billions of dollars each year. Cyber criminals like money, too, so they take over as many accounts as they can to get in on the action.

## Is That Really Facebook or Instagram Contacting You? continued

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Another great use for stolen FB accounts is to lure viewers, followers, and subscribers into investment schemes. These days, cryptocurrency is a basis for the always popular something-for-nothing scams or claims of big money returns in exchange for nominal investments. While a detailed discussion of the cryptocurrency market is beyond the scope of this article, what I will say is when people invest in anything because they saw a social media post claiming outrageous returns, what you're likely doing is feeding the poster's bank account while draining yours.

The favored target for these scams is FB brand influencers and those with fan followings. *That includes authors.* The scammers trick their targets by impersonating FB with dire warnings of page deletion, content removal, trademark or copyright infringement, among a growing cadre of lures to hand over your account credentials. They'll often even mimic a multifactor authentication (MFA) challenge. So how do we avoid falling victim? It's rare that I speak in absolutes so please heed my usage of "never" and "always" below.

First and foremost, always use unique, complex passwords on all of your online accounts. You can use a password manager to make it simpler (such as 1Password or LastPass) or go old school and keep a notebook. Whatever works for you. Whenever possible, use MFA, as well. MFA makes your accounts more secure by requiring a code in addition to a password, typically using text or an authenticator app (the latter is preferable).

While these are good, general hygiene tips, they won't help if you do the bad guys' job for them by handing over control of your accounts because they tricked you into it. Authors have been contacted by scammers by phone, by email, and by direct message. In each scenario, the scammers gave themselves away but only to a trained eye. Here's how to spot them:

- Under no circumstances whatsoever will FB ever proactively call you to warn, notify or otherwise alert you to a problem with your account. Never. Ever. At all. I'm serious. They have 1.6 billion account holders – no offense, but you're just not that special to them.

- Text alerts from FB do happen, but only if you've set them up to notify you of specific account activities. You control this in your profile settings. They will never proactively text you to alert you of copyright or trademark violations or content issues or make other legal threats.

- All modern email clients reveal the true sending email address in all messages. Some make it easier than others. For example, Gmail will show you both the display name (what the sender wants you to see) and the real sender (the full, real email address). Other platforms may require you to hover over the displayed sender name to see the real sending email address. Under no circumstances will you ever receive an email from Facebook, Meta, or Instagram from a gmail.com, outlook.com or any

## Is That Really Facebook or Instagram Contacting You? continued

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other address besides their own domains which are facebook.com, fb.com, or instagram.com.

- Look for misspellings in emails in the displayed sender name, subject line, or email body and odd grammar. Many scammers reside in locations where English is not the primary language, which makes for sometimes odd or incorrect phrasing.

- Hover your mouse over any links in the email to reveal the true URL. Under no circumstances will a real email from Facebook, Meta, or Instagram lead to a link that's not on facebook.com or instagram.com.

- If the link does show a real Facebook or Instagram URL, it should look like this: <https://www.facebook.com/help/1234667891011121> Note the "/help/" – this indicates a subpage on Facebook's domain. Other real URLs may have "/security/" or "/privacy/" instead of "/help/." The bad guys can't structure their links this way – with "/help/" right after "facebook.com" – because no one other than FB can host links named "help," "security," or "privacy" in this manner on their platforms. Instead, the bad guys try to trick your eye by including official-sounding words in the space where you see the user or brand name, such as "https://www.faebook.com/ContentCopyrightHelp/posts/" followed by a bunch of numbers. What this URL actually decodes to is a FB user name of ContentCopyrightHelp, which is a page set up by the bad guys. Yes, FB takes these down as fast as they find them.

- Another bad guy trick is to show a link in the email that's just a display but leads somewhere else. This is a simple trick using HTML. To verify the link in the email body, hover your mouse over the URL. Depending on your email client and browser, the real web address will be displayed at the bottom of the screen or directly above the mouse position. It should match what's displayed. If not, proceed with caution. Copy the real link address and paste it into <https://urlscan.io/> to get a reputation assessment.

- Instagram scammers will try similar tricks with emails and texts, or they may send a direct message (DM) to your page with a request for some action – click a link, send them a screenshot, etc. If you comply, this lets the scammer know they've hooked you. Under no circumstances will Instagram ever contact you this way.

When in doubt, contact FB. There are a number of ways to accomplish this. This article rounds it up nicely: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/tips/2022/04/07/how-to-contact-facebook-help-center/7247319001/>.



## Is That Really Facebook or Instagram Contacting You? continued

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If you do fall victim, Scam Haters United, a group that fights online scams through education and direct assistance may be able to help. The easiest way to contact them is through their Facebook or Instagram pages:

<https://www.facebook.com/SHUisteamwork/> <https://www.instagram.com/scamhaters.united/>

Bad guys thrive when they can make you panic. The point is to scare you into being sloppy. Don't let them. If you receive a call, a text, or an email with alarming or distressing information, stop. Take a few deep breaths. Think before you click. Always.

Robin Stuart is a veteran cyber crime investigator and contributing author to the short story anthology *Fault Lines: Stories by Northern California Crime Writers* and *Shattering Glass: A Nasty Woman Anthology*. She consults on all things cyber security for Fortune 100 companies, authors, screenwriters, and media outlets including BBC and Now This News.





## Member Profile: R. (Rae) Franklin James

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

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Rae James is a California native, growing up in Oakland and graduating from UC Berkeley. Now retired from a public policy and public service career, she is a full-time crime fiction novelist, boasting three series and two telefilm adaptations to date.

**Stiletta:** You started writing in early childhood—what did you write and why did you stop after high school?

**Rae James:** It's a memory that I cherish. My best friend from elementary school had a wonderful attic. We would huddle over blue-lined binder paper, writing tales of pirates and damsels in distress. We were 8 years old, and our stories may have lacked all the basic elements of good writing, but they were entertaining.

**Stiletta:** Please tell us a bit about your former career, including your stint as Deputy Mayor for the City of Los Angeles.

**RJ:** I enjoyed working as a public servant. I graduated from UC Berkeley and came away convinced that I wanted to "make a difference." Public policy was my entrée, and I found myself drafting legislation for local and state officials. You can blame me for text in past voter pamphlets that defies understanding. But the energy of being in the middle of watching laws and government happen led me to using my writing to argue for or against a desired action.

When Richard Riordan asked me to be his Deputy Mayor, I was gobsmacked. He is a wonderful man and opened so many doors for me. He let me do what I thought best. In Los Angeles success is redefined every day. It was during my time as Deputy Mayor that I received a letter from the then-President of the United States, Bill Clinton, congratulating me on designing and producing a neighborhood revitalization program that continued for many years after my departure—I felt I had finally made a difference.

**Stiletta:** What inspired you to start writing mysteries?

**RJ:** It all started with *1001 Arabian Nights* (thank you, Mom) and Nancy Drew. I have always loved to read. Books were my friends and libraries were where I was happiest. In high school I read F. Scott Fitzgerald. It was as if the final tumbler had opened the lock. To tell stories like Scheherazade, solve clues like Nancy Drew, and craft like Fitzgerald brought it all home for me. That's how I wanted to

## Member Profile: Rae James, continued

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write.

**Stiletta:** Tell us about your 6-book Hollis Morgan Mystery series, beginning with *The Fallen Angels Book Club* in 2013. What is the premise and what inspired it?

**RJ:** I can actually remember the premise that got me started. I was taking a Novel Writing IV (I had already taken I, II, and III) online class at UCLA. There were thirty students from around the world. On alternate weeks we would write, and the following week we would critique each other. We had a classmate who was very unhappy that anyone would, or could, edit their writing. After several threats to hunt us down, and "you'll be sorry" later, they were dropped by the instructor.

My brain got to thinking about what kind of people who loved books could also be sociopaths. Ah . . . what about a book club? But like most ideas for a book, I had to create a scenario that was not only entertaining and page turning but absolutely plausible – what if???

White collar ex-cons who share a parole agent and want to assimilate back into society--except members are being killed like plots from their reading list . . . what could go wrong?



**Stiletta:** You have since launched two series – The Remy Loh Bishop Mysteries in 2019 and the Johanna Hudson Mysteries in 2021. Tell us about the protagonists of each of those series.

**RJ:** Remy Loh Bishop is mixed race. She has a Chinese mother and African American father. Her home life nourished her independence and determined mind. In book one, *The Appraiser*, she is an appraiser for an antiques showroom in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has a knack for researching and valuing items. It was her hobby while she earned degrees in criminology and DNA forensic analysis. She was employed as a forensic lab technician with the DA's office until she was asked to resign under the suspicion of evidence tampering. Now Remy carries a clipped article from the *San Francisco Chronicle* labeling her the reason why a killer still runs free. She reads that article every morning before starting her day; it's the motivation that drives her to solve the killing and clear her name. Until then, she sees her life in shreds.

Johanna Hudson, (*The Inheritance*) owns Legacy Consultants along with her friend and partner Ava Lowell. Legacy is a recently started genealogy research enterprise that specializes in unraveling clients' lives as well as their ancestors. Johanna is scarred by the killing of her husband and 3-year-

## Member Profile: Rae James, continued

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old daughter in a car accident two years before. She brushes away what she sees as her mother's overprotectiveness and is attracted to clients who have tragic stories and muddled searches.

Methodical and questioning, she shines on delivering deep research. No one else is going to suffer on her watch. Currently, she's unofficially assisting the Sheriff's Office with missing persons.

**Stiletta:** Are there similarities among your protagonists, and are their stories related to your own experience and interests?

**RJ:** Hmm . . . Remy is about facing down those who would misjudge you – belief in yourself and not giving up. Johanna is drawn to those who others walk away from. She combines her sharp mind with her compassion.

**Stiletta:** Earlier this year, Lifetime TV produced two telemovies based on your Hollis Morgan series, slightly retitled *Fallen Angels Murder Club* and starring Toni Braxton. We'd love to hear about your experience having your books optioned, seeing them turned into TV movies, and visiting the set. Did the final results meet your expectations? Are there more on the way?

**RJ** I was contacted via email by one of the studio owners to purchase an option on my six-book Hollis Morgan series – I thought it was spam. Once my publisher checked things out, they said the offer was legit. I was in a daze.

I signed a contract for my movie rights, then several months passed as they sought a director and a distributor. About six months later, I was told that the movie had been sold to A&E/Lifetime, and that the book characters were "casted." The goal was to go into production in summer 2021. It was also at that time that I was told that Grammy Award-winner Toni Braxton was playing the lead.

They encouraged me to come to the set and see the movie being made. I was ecstatic. International travel during Covid wasn't easy, but they managed to make me feel like a celebrity. I had a chauffeur, an airport escort, and a personal assistant. Brain Power, the studio who made the movies, had a Toronto crew (approximately 100 persons) that were fantastic. Creative, energetic and kind, they comprised a dream team. But the most gratifying and life-changing moment for me was when crew members, and Toni Braxton herself, came up to me and said they wouldn't be there but for me. Remembering their words still causes me to take a deep breath.

It is awesome when you hear your words from your book come from someone else's lips. Due to the visual medium of movie making, much of the book plot had to be reconfigured. I was prepared. Like a parent, I placed my "baby" in the hands of others.

## Member Profile: Rae James, continued

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Regarding future movies, I understand that the cast really enjoyed working with each other, so who knows. Also, the studio is showing some interest in my new Johanna Hudson series. It's been a wild but definitely wonderful ride.

**Stiletta:** Please describe your writing routine.

**RJ:** Initially I plot outline the book by chapter and then scene summary within the chapter. I write a minimum of 500 words a day – every day, preferably in the morning. If I discover I've written my characters into a corner, I write a completely different scene from my outline. It usually works to provide the hooks to link up the troubled scene. While I rarely hold to my outline, it serves as a guideline when I'm stuck.

**Stiletta:** Why did you decide to write as R. Franklin James rather than Rae James?

**RJ:** My agent told me that men didn't buy mystery books written by female writers, hence, J.D. Robb, P.D. James, J.K. Rowling. I'm glad to say I don't think that it's true anymore, if it ever was.

**Stiletta:** What books do you have coming out next?

**RJ:** *Look Twice*, the second book in my Johanna Hudson Mystery series, will be released this August.



**Stiletta:** Do you have any guidance for aspiring authors regarding your publication journey (or anything else)?

**RJ:** Only what I tell myself: never give up. I'm still learning craft. Tell your story. Write what you like to read and there will be an agent and/or an audience for your work. Join and learn from a critique group, read your work out loud, use conferences to network . . . and never give up.

**Stiletta:** What would you like your fellow SinC NorCal members to know that I haven't asked?

**RJ:** That I eavesdrop. Some of my best ideas come from listening (and mis-hearing) fragments of conversations.

Rae James was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

# Member News

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## *New and Upcoming Releases*

*Hot House*, book #1 in the E&A Investigations series by Lisa Towles, was released on June 15 by Indies United Publishing House.

Mysti Berry edited and published *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 3: The Color of My Vote* on May 15. A charity anthology that raised \$10,000 for Democracy Docket to help fight voter suppression, it features several Sisters in Crime members, including Ann Parker, Camille Minichino, and Patricia (Pat) E. Canterbury.

*Hold*, book #3 in the Medical Mystery series by Amy S. Peele, will be released on October 4 by She Writes Press.

*Renewal*, book #6 in the Aimee Machado Mystery series featuring a hospital librarian by Sharon St. George, was released on July 12 by Camel Press.

Susan Kuchinkas' short story, "A Burning Man," was published in *Tough Crime* magazine (after seven rejections).

## *Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!*

*Hot House* by Lisa Towles was the first place winner of The Book Fest 2022 literary awards in the Mystery & Crime category.

Gigi Pandian's short story "The Locked Room Library" is short-listed for an Anthony Award (its third major nomination of the year!).

Susan McCormick's *The Fog Ladies: In the Soup* is a finalist for Killer Nashville's Silver Falchion Award for Best Cozy. Her *Family Matters* was a finalist for Chanticleer's Murder and Mayhem Award.

At the recent Chanticleer Authors Conference in Bellingham, WA, *Match*, book #2 in Amy S. Peele's Medical Mystery series, won a first place CLUE Award (Suspense/Thriller) and her series took first place in Murder Mysteries.

Kudos to our Macavity Award finalists! Best Mystery Short Story: G.M. Malliet for "The White Star" and Gigi Pandian for "The Locked Room Library." Best Nonfiction/Criticism: *How to Write Mysteries: A Handbook from Mystery Writers of America* edited by Lee Child with Laurie R. King. Best Historical Mystery: Rhys Bowen for *The Venice Sketchbook*.

## Member News, continued

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At the Public Safety Writers Association conference in Las Vegas, July 13-17, George Cramer received awards for two of his pieces in the following categories: Poem Unpublished – second place for “Sand Creek.” Flash Fiction Writing – second place for “Coming Home.” George was also a panelist for three topics: blogging, historical fiction, and programs used by writers.

### *Training To Be Delivered*

Ellen Kirschman is excited to join the faculty at the Book Passage Mystery Writers Conference, August 5 to 7. She graduated from this conference in 2016 and says it gave her a start on her mystery writing career.

### *Miscellaneous*

Gigi Pandian is happy to report that Minotaur Books has picked up books #3 and #4 in her Secret Staircase mystery series that began with *Under Lock and Key*. Book #2 will be out in 2023 – watch for more details soon.

G. M. Malliet reports that *The Washing Away of Wrongs*, book #8 in the Max Tudor series, has been sold to Little, Brown and will be released in September 2023.



## Question of the Quarter



***Other than crime fiction, what types of books do you enjoy reading? Can you recommend a book you have read that is not crime fiction?***

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I read literary fiction. The last book I read in that genre was *The Translator* by Nina Schuyler. It was wonderful. ***Ellen Kirschman***

I read a lot of biography and autobiography. One recommendation is *Eleanor of Castile* by Sara Cockerill. ***Priscilla Royal***

While I don't approve of his political beliefs AT ALL, I have read most of the works by P. G. Wodehouse and continue to do so. That he was a man who could create hilarious visual scenes with the written word is undeniable. In these troubling times, I often need to escape to the silly worlds he created. I am currently reading *The World of Jeeves*, a collection of short stories. Twenty minutes of that book and my blood pressure lowers considerably. ***Heather Haven***

I read a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction beyond mystery and crime fiction. History is a passion, particularly medieval European, and one of the books I recently enjoyed is *River Kings: a New History of the Vikings from Scandinavia to the Silk Roads* by Cat Jarman. I'm also reading *The Bright Ages* by Matthew Gabriele and David M. Perry, a response to what is called the Dark Ages, Europe between about 500 and 1000 CE. There was a lot of politics and innovation that we don't normally learn about. I also read biography and started on a new Sylvia Plath one, as well as literature (*A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman, *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles). I look for clear, concise writing, themes that stretch my imagination, a wry sense of humor and metaphor, and a setting that takes me there. ***Michele Drier***

In addition to crime, I read literary fiction and science fiction. I love books that add a speculative element to crime. Two of my favorites: (1) In *Sleepless* by Charlie Huston, a plague of insomnia eventually kills people, but not before they go insane from lack of sleep. An undercover LAPD cop working the narcotics beat uncovers a conspiracy that may be at the root of the plague. Raymond Chandler meets Michael Crichton. (2) In *The Gone World* by Tom Sweterlitsch, special agent Shannon Moss has to solve a murder that takes place in multiple alternate universes. It's hard to describe, but someone else said it was "True Detective meets Inception." I'll go with that. Literary writing, complex characters, and a twisty plot that can't be disentangled from the speculative elements. ***Susan Kuchinskas***

I enjoy historical fiction and one of my favorite authors is C.W. Gortner—he writes in first person so you're in the character's head. I have read most of his books. Some of my favorites are *Mademoiselle Chanel*, about Coco Chanel, *Marlene* (about Marlene Dietrich), and *The First Actress: A Novel of Sarah Bernhardt*. He takes great care in his research, and I appreciate learning history that way. ***Amy Peele***



## Question of the Quarter, continued

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I just ordered the sequel to *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*, which is titled *The Book Woman's Daughter*. The author is Kim Michele Richardson. I read the first book more than a year ago, and I'm still waiting to find a book that measures up to how much I enjoyed Richardson's novel. Its genre has been described as historical fiction. The book is inspired by the real-life, blue-skinned people of Kentucky and the intrepid Kentucky Pack Horse Library Project of the 1930s. As I am a retired librarian who grew up riding horseback, the book seemed to have been written with me in mind as a reader. In spite of that, I would recommend it to anyone who enjoys fiction based on fascinating and perhaps little-known historical facts. **Sharon St. George**

I recently read *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt. One of the narrators is a captive octopus nearing the end of his life and one is an older woman selling her home and moving to a retirement community. I cried for chapters at the end. This book made me laugh and also touched me deeply. **Susan McCormick**

Like most writers, I suppose, it's easier to say what I don't read. For me that would be fantasy and speculative fiction, or anything understandable to a 12-year-old. My favorite novel in a long time is Lauren Groff's *Matrix*. A finalist for the 2022 National Book Award for Fiction, *Matrix* is an amazing, fictionalized character study of 12<sup>th</sup> century Marie de France. Here she is an abbess, businesswoman, and warrior for the nuns in her charge. The plotting is riveting and the writing memorable. **Camille Minichino**

I love to read history that gives me insights into true events that read like novels. Think of Barbara W. Tuchman and *A Distant Mirror*. My favorite has been Alastair Horne, particularly *The Fall of Paris* (the Paris Commune and the Franco-Prussian War). Recently I read *Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and Germany's March to Global War* by Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman—more of an academic read, but a very compelling explanation of how the course of WWII flipped 180 degrees in only a week, assuring the Allies' victory. **Susan Bickford**

Kate Atkinson is one of my favorite authors. She does write mysteries (see her various books featuring Jackson Brodie). She has also written a smaller novel about espionage (*Transcription*). But I'd like to recommend *A God in Ruins*. Soon I'm asking myself the question "why did my friend recommend this book to me?" More than a hundred pages in, it's only a meandering story about family life in an idyllic British town after WWII. I don't get it. I have no interest in the British family. However, things soon open to an amazing and complex world of feelings. The central aspect of this incredible epic is its description of the lifetime of Teddy. Once a child playing in that idyllic garden, soon he's flying a bomber over Dresden at the peak of WWII. Few books can encapsulate the meaning of life, relationships, family, struggle, and heartbreak. I would recommend this book to anyone who would like a full meal of literature. By the end, I was in tears. **Ken Gwin**

## Question of the Quarter, continued

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I read everything! I just finished Malcolm Gladwell's *Talking to Strangers*, a fascinating take on communicating with strangers and where we go wrong, and I just finished *French Braid* by Anne Tyler, who always makes me cry as she depicts so well how people long to connect and seem to just miss. (Do you see a theme here?) My favorite novel, which I always recommend, is *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki. In it a Japanese American writer living on an isolated island in the Pacific Northwest finds a barnacle-covered plastic bag holding a diary that had washed ashore, most likely from the tsunami that destroyed Sendai. The diary follows the thoughts of a suicidal Japanese teenager wanting to chronicle the life of her Zen nun 104-year-old great-grandmother as her final act. It also shows how reading the diary affects the writer who found it, moving back and forth in time between the two protagonists. It touches on death, quantum mechanics, love of life, global warming, and the nature of being. All that and it's funny, too. When I mention this book to people who've already read it, they always say, "I loved that book." *Laura Boss*



**... to our newest members (joining SinC NorCal from  
April 1 through June 30, 2022)**

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Stephen Murphy  
Michelle Potter  
Mark Shrayber

## 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 Manwaring**, Events (anamanwaring [@gmail.com](mailto:anamanwaring@gmail.com)), with meeting and venue suggestions and **Margie Bunting**, Newsletter (mbunting [@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbunting@sbcglobal.net)), with newsletter article suggestions and submissions.

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