

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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Autumn and Elections

Days are getting shorter, the air is crisp and cooler, frost may be on the way to the pumpkin, and Half Moon Bay hosted the country's largest gourd, again!

And along with the winding down of 2022, not a year I'll relive with fondness, it's time to elect officers for the NorCal Sisters in Crime chapter for 2023.

Our bylaws allow for multi-year terms for most board members and officers, and, with the exception of Claire Ortalda, who has been our secretary, all members are willing to tackle another term. The slate isn't finalized, though, because nominations are open for anyone interested in serving either on the board or as an officer.

Currently we have the following: President, Michele, Drier; Vice President, Glenda Carroll; Secretary, Claire Ortalda; Events Chair, Ana Manwaring; Membership Chair, Mysti Berry; Newsletter, Margie Bunting; Speakers' Bureau/Social Media, Susan Kuchinskas; Member-at-Large, Susan Bickford (immediate past President).

Claire has agreed to stay for a short period of time until we have a replacement for her, and Susan Kuchinskas will continue with the Speakers' Bureau but would like to give up her position on the board.



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President's Letter, continued

So, we're looking for a few good people to serve and help us steer the chapter for the next year. Although the position of Secretary is required by our non-profit status, the duties have become easier due to Susan Bickford's recording of all our board meetings by Zoom, so it's a matter of compiling action items from the recordings.

In addition, the seat that Susan Kuchinskas has held on the board will be open.

If you or someone you know would be interested in being on the board or becoming an officer, please let me or any other board member know. In addition, if there are any areas (e.g., events, Speakers' Bureau, anthology) you'd like to work on, regardless of board membership, please let us know that as well.

A slate and election information will be sent out in mid-November, and the election will be held online.

In the meantime, Glenda Carroll has lined up a sparkling array of members for our Fall Author Showcase, and we'll be listening and watching at a hybrid event—in person at Books, Inc. in the Marina and on Zoom—so mark your calendars for November 5 (for you historians, Guy Fawkes Day) from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Hope to see you all there!

Sincerely,

Michele Drier

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



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

Betsy Barker

Donna Braswell

Sharan Campleman

Ron Cook

Julie Donnelly

Kate Hathway

Bruce Johnson

Mary Joyce

D.M. (Donna) Rowell

James Takos

Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, November 5, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Fall Author Showcase

Books, Inc. at the Marina

2251 Chestnut Street, San Francisco

Hybrid Meeting with Zoom

Save the date for our twice-yearly Author Showcase, where members with new books or stories read excerpts from their work. All of the books will be for sale, with time for signing after the readings if you attend in person.

Authors include:

Josie Brown
M.M. Chouinard
Gayle Feyrer (aka Yves Fey)
Vinnie Hansen
Ana Manwaring
Catriona McPherson
Stephen Murphy
Amy Peele
Terry Shames
Lisa Towles



Date: To Be Announced

Holiday Event



Things are still a bit topsy-turvy and plans for the Holiday Event are not firmed up yet. We will have a Zoom holiday get-together in December but are waiting to hear from MWA as to whether they will join us. Stay tuned – we'll have a special event notice to all members to gather, lift a glass, and celebrate a successful year with Sisters in Crime!

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.

August 6 Meeting - *Behind CSI: Mythbusting Forensics in Movies and TV*



Forensics expert, editor, and educator Melissa Kreikemeier's lively presentation compared how TV and movies portray crime fiction and forensics to how things work in the real world. She recommends that authors do their research so their books can be "on the right side of the book believability spectrum." Melissa laid out the myths often found in depicting the crime scene, identifying critical roles, and applying forensic science, then provided suggestions for how crime fiction authors can be accurate and credible, yet still tell an exciting story.

August 27 Meeting - *Drug Abuse: Fact vs. Fiction*

Emergency medicine physician and toxicologist Jen Prosser gave us a comprehensive presentation on opioids and other dangerous drugs, including how authors can avoid myths and pitfalls that affect the authenticity of crime fiction, particularly in the area of drug screening. Other topics included drug abuse, routes of exposure, duration in the body, treatment, potency, transportation, and ethical considerations.



August 31 Meeting - *What Makes a Thriller Thrilling?*

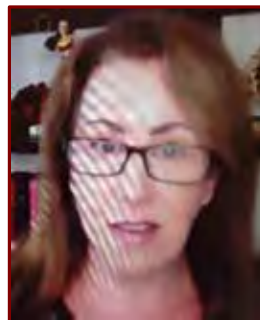
Three thriller authors—Elizabeth Reed Aden, Marie Sutro, and NorCal's own Ana Manwaring—discussed all things thrillers with moderator Shereen Ash of the Marin County Free Library. In addition to defining a thriller and how it differs from a mystery, the panel touched on the thriller's role in pop culture, how to create suspense, what inspires their plots and characters, and what's next for each of them.



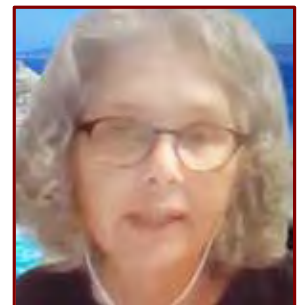
Ana Manwaring



Elizabeth Reed Aden



Marie Sutro



Shereen Ash

In Case You Missed It, continued

September 24 Meeting - *Researching Your Book in a Foreign Country*



Cara Black – live from Provence – gave us her perspective as the best-selling author of 20 books set in Paris on how to make sure foreign-country settings feel authentic. All five senses can be engaged to make the setting a true character in the book and to give the readers an immersive experience. Resources might include old phone books and newspapers, city guides, books about the historical time period, people who live in the area, historical societies, books by other authors who describe locations well, and much more. She suggests: “Be a fiction detective!”

October 1 Meeting - *Love Hurts (Your Bank Account)*

Cybersecurity expert Robin Stuart educated us about online romance scams, or “catfishing for money.” Unsuspecting victims may be asked for money, gift cards, cryptocurrency, or help with money transfers, or they may be offered get-rich-quick investments. Scammers troll for victims not only on dating apps, but on social networks and anywhere else online. Robin emphasizes: anonymity online is a myth. You can find out more on fbi.gov, justice.gov, ic3.gov, and Scam Haters United on Facebook.



Ants in the Tequila

by Heather Haven



I lead a very small life. I get up in the morning, have coffee, stumble around, and try to wake up. I kiss my husband and pet the cat, or maybe the reverse. I can't always remember. Most days, I sit down and write. Unfortunately, sometimes I have an appointment, errand, or chore that has been relegated to the morning, which is never my idea, but you can't always control the world. I would rather sit down and write in the morning. Hence, mornings are predictably boring, followed by afternoons and evenings of . . . well . . . nothing much.

It's possible my saving grace as a writer is my vivid and unpredictable imagination. I never know where my mind is going to go, taking me and my five senses along. If I witness something or hear a conversation between people or even animals, I am likely to concoct an entire scenario around that. No, I am not a dog, cat, or horse whisperer. It's not just the words I pay attention to, anyway, but the emotions behind them. Plainly put, the world and its inhabitants are grist for my mill even though I have no mill and I'm not completely sure what a grist is. But I do love the phrase. And the sentiment.

Regarding the ants in the tequila, it was not about calling Orkin or Terminix. Our condo is ground level, in the midst of many gardens. I am surrounded by all sorts of living creatures that do not bother to knock and wait to be asked in. I am used to uninvited guests. However, I have never encountered ants in any of our booze before, let alone the tequila. Yet there they were, floating around, dead drunk, not a suicide note to be found. My writer's mind clicked in. Where to go with this?

My instinct said this incident might be an article, blog, or flash fiction. It wasn't novel material. For where was the story? And characterizations? Would I make one of the floaters my protagonist? Would I name him Harry? Or, as the ratio of female to male ants in a typical colony is three to one, Henrietta, Frieda, or Penelope? A lonely guy/gal, having left the nest, out on the town, only to find a pool of tequila too irresistible to ignore? No, no. No novel here.

In the meantime, we threw the nearly full bottle of tequila out, ants and all. Never mind that alcohol is a natural antiseptic, purifying anything it touches. I read that's how the early Romans made such headway in Europe. The legions traveled on their stomachs, with a canteen of watered down wine by their sides to drink, as opposed to the local water. No local water, no dysentery. An inebriated but hale and hearty group of marauders. That's the Romans.

Ants in the Tequila, continued

The sight of those small beasties drifting face down in the Don Julio, happy though they may have been at the end, did me in. I moved on to rum. Then I pondered on how to write about this incident.

Which is how the tale came to be right here, right now. All is grist for the mill, don't-cha-know, even though I'm still not completely sure what a grist is.

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



Beyond Bouchercon

by Vinnie Hansen



One adventure at a conference is leaving it to explore the environs.

My husband, Danny, traveled to Minneapolis with me for Bouchercon. I also have a niece and grand-nephew there, all adding incentive to see more than the inside of the Hilton. Danny and I stayed in a nearby hotel with a free breakfast (important to him) so we could step from our door without being swept up in conference activity. When B-con felt overwhelming, we could retreat. This being our first trip in three years, the overwhelm benchmark was low.

Our hotel reminded us that there were other things going on besides Bouchercon, such as a Twins game, a Vikings game, and a furry convention at the Hyatt. In the elevator, a young woman with a tail proudly showed us her hyena head. The writer in me wanted to follow her to her convention!

Minneapolis proved to be way more than the backdrop for the groundbreaking *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Some takeaways from our short stay: Good food. Impressive art. The amazing Mississippi, of course. And problems that plague many American cities.

Wednesday night, Danny and I walked a mile to meet my relatives for dinner and to visit the Sculpture Garden. We ate at the Dancing Ganesha, such fabulous Indian food that we returned the next night for a repeat of tikka masala and rice biryani.



The Sculpture Garden delivered, from a giant swing (left) to the iconic teaspoon with cherry, spraying mist from its stem onto the geese-filled pond below (right). On our evening stroll, two lovebirds occupied the seat of the giant swing. As they



rocked, all parts of the sculpture moved, except for the tripod.

To beat the heat, Danny and I headed out early Thursday to cross the Mississippi. As Churchill said, “Plans are useless, but planning is invaluable.” We meant to use the pedestrian-only James J. Hill

Beyond Bouchercon, continued

Stone Arch Railway Bridge. A mistake in directions took us over the Mighty Mississippi on the Hennepin Avenue Suspension Bridge. We left this bridge to visit Nicollet Island Park and then walked



along St. Anthony Main, delightful sight-seeing we would have missed if everything had gone according to plan. We used the Stone Arch bridge on our return to the city. Sometimes wrong turns lead to a more scenic route. And even better, I snapped up *The Stolen Hours* by Allen Eskens, one of my favorite crime writers, as a Bouchercon free book; its setting is this exact area!



Bouchercon consumed most of my Friday and Saturday, but Danny ventured on his own to the Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. He was impressed by the MIA's extensive African art collection and its free admission.

We continued to eat our way through the city. On Friday, NorCal writers Susan Bickford, Ana Manwaring, Michal Strutin, and I went to Barrio Restaurant for first-rate tapas, passing by this mural. By Saturday after my Modern Gumshoe panel (the fourth PI panel, including one that very morning in the same room with "gumshoe" in its title!), I teetered on the verge of collapse. But NorCal MWA was buying drinks in the bar, so hey . . . Excellent company and I'm now on a search to find a local vendor of the bar's Proverbs pinot noir. Very tasty to this palate.



Afterwards, Danny and I escaped the conference to dine at Monello, "refined, Italian-inspired fare" next door in the upscale Ivy Hotel. Every meal out in Minneapolis was good.

Using public transportation is one of our ways to experience a locale, and the Blue Line from the airport to downtown only cost a buck! On the website it looked clean and modern. In reality, cigarette butts littered the cars. A couple huddled in the front seat of our compartment to do their drugs while an apparently mentally ill man sauntered by holding a banana to his crotch. When the safest-looking people on a train are two semi-soused alcoholics, you know you're in trouble. On our return to the airport, we opted for Uber.

Beyond Bouchercon, continued

The underbelly of Minneapolis slipped out in other ways, too. That first evening, we intended to meet my relatives at the Lotus for dinner, a short mile walk from our hotel. On the way there, a man passed us. He turned and launched a verbal assault which included a threat to break knees. Ours? No one else was around. We hurried on to the restaurant which, in spite of its sticky floor, was doing a booming takeout business. While we waited for my relatives to show, two separate people staggered through the door and pawed up free fortune cookies from the bowl at the front. Very generous of the restaurant but not a place we wanted to eat.

Still, I wouldn't change any part of our adventure. In the words of poet/philosopher Mark Nipo: ". . . underneath all the plans, pressures, and expectations . . . the next step is truly unknown and has never been taken by anyone. Thus, our spiritual charge is to maintain the wonder of the singular explorer that each of us is."

Vinnie Hansen is the author of the Carol Sabala mystery series and the novels *Lostart Street* and *One Gun*, as well as more than fifty short works. Still sane(ish) after 27 years of teaching high school English, Vinnie has retired and plays keyboards with ukulele groups in Santa Cruz, California, where she lives with her husband and the requisite cat.



And speaking of Bouchercon . . . does anyone look familiar?



Sharing Kiowa Culture through the Mud Sawpole Mysteries

by D.M. Rowell

Koh Mi O Boy Dah



At sixty, I wrote my first mystery novel, *Never Name the Dead*. The story had been brewing since my childhood, when I dreamed of being an author someday.

My first novel features Mae, a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur summoned back to the former Kiowa, Comanche, Apache reservation of her youth by her grandfather, a traditional Kiowa. Once in Oklahoma she's known as Mud, a childhood nickname that stuck. Immediately upon arrival, Mud is thrown into an unexpected spiritual quest as she faces childhood foes, judgmental tribe members, artifact thefts, illegal fracking, and a charging buffalo to discover who is guilty of theft and murder.

As *Never Name the Dead* developed, it was natural to add my Kiowa heritage to the series. I was heavily influenced by my grandfather, C.E. Rowell – artist, Kiowa historian, Tribal Elder, and master storyteller. My grandpa, his sisters and his brother shared Kiowa stories and songs with us from my earliest memories. The rhythm of the Kiowa language captivated me. The Kiowa elders all used the old Plains Indian-style sign language while speaking in Kiowa or English. In either language their hands flew in accompaniment to their words, adding a hypnotic show to the already rhythmic sounds.

While my great-aunt Arletta sang Kiowa lullabies and told winter stories, it was Grandpa, the late C.E. Rowell, who taught me the history of the Kiowa people. My grandfather was recognized as the Tribe Historian and Reader of the Dohason and Onko pictoglyph calendars called Sai-Guat, or Winter Marks.



*The Dohason Calendar: one of the Kiowa
Sai-Guat chronicles*

Sharing Kiowa Culture, continued

Of the Plains Indians, four tribes—Kiowa, Lakota, Blackfeet and Mandan—added to their oral storytelling tradition with pictograph markings on hides documenting a significant event that occurred each year. Only the Kiowa noted two events a year, one for winter and the other for summer.



The significant event was so well known within the tribe, it named the year. For example, on the Dohason Calendar (left), the winter of 1833-34 is recorded as Da pi gya-de-sai, "Winter When the Stars Fell." Drawn on the deerskin, above a dark bar denoting winter, are four stars falling from the sky as a Kiowa man slept. It is said that the tribe awoke to a night turned day as an avalanche of falling stars lit up the dark sky.

Newspaper headlines of the period tell of a Leonid meteor storm that brought daylight to the night across the United States on November 13, 1833. We use "Winter When the Stars Fell" to align events in the Kiowa calendars to Western dates.

As a young boy, Grandpa watched the then Tribe Historian and last Calendar Maker, Onco, work on his Sai-Guat chronicling the tribe's final battles, relentless pursuit by the cavalry, and the early struggles of reservation life. From Onco, my grandfather learned Kiowa history and its importance to the tribe.



C.E. Rowell showing tribe members a story from one of the Kiowa Calendars (1999)

At a tribe gathering, Grandpa would start a story from one of the Sai-Guats. He recited the main event for the tribe from a specific year and season; this prompted others to tell stories from their family history. Remembered stories, history and legends would unfold through the night, bringing us all closer as a people with a shared history.

Sharing Kiowa Culture, continued

At home, we would get our own shows. Grandpa would roll out a deerskin calendar. I remember it was wrapped in a once-white sheet, now near brown with age. I would watch carefully as the Calendar was being unrolled. The hair of the long-dead deer was always what I glimpsed first, then as the hide revealed itself, primitive figures and bright colors danced across the cured leather's inside.



Onco Sai-Guat Calendar

Grandpa would seem to gaze into the calendar, then his eyes traveled up, reviewing the art that covered all available wall surfaces until finally he would point at one of his paintings, using it to vividly draw another story of our people, our culture and events.

Summer days, I trailed Grandpa everywhere. He would often visit with family and friends. With every stop, there were stories. I remember him gathering with his friends, several with grey-streaked braids down their backs. They would talk of growing up as the first Kiowas born to reservation life, of the stories heard from their grandparents – the Old Ones. Often silent tears rolled down creased cheeks as stories of dawn raids, starvation, and captured family members thrown into a pit to live for months were retold.



Kiowa camp scene by C. E. Rowell – Sharing Kiowa history

I sat quietly, listened, and heard of Kiowa life before white settlers, of battles won and lost, of daily reservation life, of births and survival. I learned the importance of stories.

When I was twelve, I remember lingering, hoping for another story as Grandpa rolled up one of the deerskin calendars. Mid-roll, Grandpa pointed at me with his chin in the style of the Old Ones and decreed, “You. You will keep these stories alive. You are next.” A chill shot through me as a weight descended. Our eyes locked, and my body trembled with the truth of it. In that moment, I knew I had a responsibility.

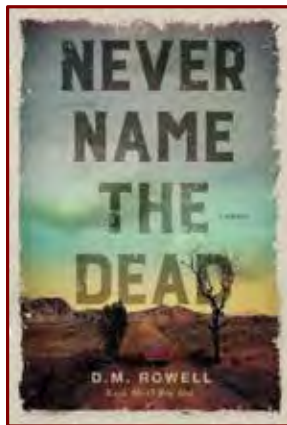
Even now at sixty-three, I remember that moment vividly. It is my turn, my responsibility, my privilege to share our Kiowa stories.

Grandpa taught me about our Kiowa culture through his art, the Dohason and Onco Calendars, history books with corrections carefully noted, and, best of all, visits to tribe elders. I listened and learned, always searching for ways to share our Kiowa stories with others. From Grandpa, I learned Kiowa history and its importance to the tribe.

Sharing Kiowa Culture, continued

Many elders in the tribe broke traditions and allowed me to bring cameras to record them as they shared memories, stories, sweats, crafts, songs, and dances to ensure future Kiowas learned about their culture, history and language. Using the precious footage, I produced two documentaries on the tribe, *Vanishing Link* and *Learning Kiowa*. Working with the Kiowa Tribe, I sought out several of the last native speakers to provide lessons on the Kiowa Language. The elders not only discussed how to speak the Kiowa language with its unique sounds, they also shared precious childhood memories of growing up with treasured grandparents who had been born free in Kiowa Country and died captured on scraps of reservation lands. Many of the Kiowa language lessons are available here, <http://www.dmrowell.com/kiowas.html>.

Blending my background into the Mud Sawpole mysteries seemed a natural way to share Kiowa culture and history with a wider audience—a way to keep Kiowa culture alive.



Like her protagonist, Mud, D.M. (Donna) Rowell comes from a long line of Kiowa Storytellers within a culture that treasures oral traditions. She's an award-winning and nominated producer and writer of several documentaries, including *Vanishing Link: My Spiritual Return to the Kiowa Way*, seen on PBS and winner of TrailDance 2007 Best Oklahoma Documentary. After a three-decade career spinning stories for Silicon Valley startups and corporations with a few escapes to create independent documentaries, Rowell started a new chapter writing a mystery series that features a Silicon Valley professional woman and her Plains Indian tribe, the Kiowas. The first in the series, *Never Name the Dead*, will be released November 8, 2022. Rowell enjoys life in California with her partner of thirty-eight years, their son, and a bossy, feral gray cat.

History is a Mystery

by Priscilla Royal



I love history and write a series of mysteries set in thirteenth century England, but I am all too sadly aware that history is not a favorite subject with most students. Neither the student nor the teacher is to blame for this. There is a tremendous amount to teach, and shortcuts must be taken. Often we are given the important dates with a simplified synopsis of why they were significant. A few exciting characters are thrown in more for color than substance. Eyes glaze. Instruction is droned. Tests are passed, and the whole course is tossed aside with the exception of odd memories such as “Columbus sailed the ocean blue . . .”

This will not be a full rant. I swore I would be brief, and a good rant is often better heard than read. So I will concentrate on one little quibble.

I ardently dislike bland, deceptive, and downright erroneous labeling of eras. What are the “Middle Ages”? What are the “Dark Ages”? Of course, the meanings of those phrases are clear, but how dismissive and prejudiced must our ancestors have been to produce such names for the centuries between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance? I have to laugh when I think of how Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine would have reacted to being told she brought nothing of significance to the period. And was The Plague just a mild cold with buboes?

To be fair, modern historians have mostly debunked the idea that the period between Rome and the Renaissance was devoid of merit. That concept was mostly promoted by those living in the alleged Renaissance and sounds suspiciously like an attempt to puff up their own reputations. Petrarch probably started the idea with the “Dark Ages” image in the mid-1300s. He seemed to believe that nothing of intellectual, economic, or cultural worth had occurred between antiquity and the time in which he flourished. The term “Middle Ages” was born from fifteenth century scholars, another possible example of self-aggrandizement.

As for the term “Renaissance,” the coiners put much emphasis on the “discovery” of anatomy. Really? Just how “real” were their own portraits of rotund babies and plump women? Much art of the earlier years proves the assumption of anatomical ignorance to be wrong. The difference between the Renaissance and earlier centuries seems to be in artistic choices. I am sure that Picasso was condemned for his lack of anatomical knowledge, too. Yet both he and the medieval artist were concerned more for the message than technical details of elbow joints. For the medieval artist, humans were often small (an ego bash for those longing to be front and center in the world), animals were more prominent (they were crucial to our survival in many ways), and humor was common (humor saves us in bad times). In the Bayeux Tapestry, there is the bottom level design where monks expose themselves or cavort with women. Medieval humor was irreverent, ever present, and lusty. It was also a reminder not to take ourselves so seriously that we begin to feel godlike.

History is a Mystery, continued

So I would prefer to look at each century and give it a name that emphasizes a major influence. For instance, the Black Death resulted in big wage increases for the laboring classes because there were fewer to farm or make barrels. By some estimates, half the population of Europe died as well. That might teach us something. A name like “The Pandemic Century” for those years might make a few modern student ears perk up. It never hurts to make history sound as interesting and relevant as it is.

Priscilla Royal writes the Prioress Eleanor/Brother Thomas medieval mystery series. She grew up in British Columbia and earned a BA in World Literature at San Francisco State. A theater fan, reader of history, mystery, and fiction of lesser violence, she belongs to California Writers Club, MWA, and Sisters in Crime. Her first fifteen books were published by Poisoned Pen Press. *Elegy to Murder, Prayers of the Dead*, and her soon-to-be-published novella, *Reaper of Souls*, are independently published. Priscilla’s website is www.priscillaroyal.com.





Why I Wrote My 10 Commandments of Writing by Valerie Brooks

As a NorCal newbie, I thought I'd introduce myself with something that inspired me – the invasive stink bug – and why that resulted in creating my ten writing commandments.

Autumn is my favorite time of year. If it weren't for the smoke from the nearby Cedar Creek fire or the nasty invasion of stink bugs, I'd say it was a perfect fall day in Oregon. But "perfect"? I'd never looked up the definition of *perfect* before.

Perfect: having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics; as good as it is possible to be; without fault.

So what are the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics of a perfect autumn day? From the stinkbugs' viewpoint, it seems to be a perfect fall day. Their desirable elements are apples to feed on (plenty of windfalls) and finding a desirable element, a place, to overwinter – a tight, dry, and cold-protected place like our shop and home. Right now, for the stink bugs, it's as good as it can possibly be. Even the quality of their death (being crushed by a human) is to their benefit because it sends out a nasty odor that attracts others, resulting in more stink bugs.

I have to laugh. Perfection really is a matter of perspective, which leads me to the subject of writing. Maybe perfection can be attained when a manuscript has no grammatical errors. But as far as the choices we make when we write—whether it's POV, theme, style, tone, etc.—it's a matter of perspective. We can always strive to "perfect" (verb: make something free from faults or defects) our craft, but that isn't what we should strive for because (1) you'll never finish your project if that's what you're striving for, and (2) what's a perfect story to one person could be a pile of *merde* to another.

Perfection was drilled into me at an early age—perfect A student, perfect grooming, perfect manners. For example, when my mom was on her way to visit, my husband would find me in the bathroom carefully refolding and color-coding our towels. Why? Because I had a fear of being imperfect in my mother's eyes.

Ah, there's the invasive bug—fear.

It's taken years to fight off fear when I write. I used to loop back over my writing, trying to perfect every paragraph. Now, I write long-hand for the first rough draft. I don't care if the manuscript is messy. In fact, I rather enjoy "messy." When transcribing my hand-written pages, I do so as quickly as possible without correcting them before I go back to revise.

My 10 Commandments of Writing, continued

But what about the story itself and me as a writer overall? What can I do to be the best storyteller possible and not let the fear of perfection kill my creativity? I knew I had an obligation to both the reader and me, so I decided to make a list. And the list turned into my ten commandments.

1. I will strive to write the best novels I can for myself and my readers, but I will not let the idea of perfection invade my process.
2. Even if I have an idea I want to put across, I will always write to entertain first.
3. I believe that fiction writers can change the world and will tackle thematic issues in my work, such as injustice and inequality.
4. I will write to show our humanity so that real three-dimensional characters will develop.
5. I will continue to improve, keep an open mind, and welcome feedback.
6. I will examine the world as truthfully as possible and be honest about who we are as humans.
7. I believe the magic happens when I'm open and receptive, not when I try to force an idea or plot.
8. Fear will not sit down with me when I write. It's my nemesis.
9. The idea of perfection kills my imagination. I will let my first drafts be loose and messy.
10. I love the act of writing, the process, the immersion, and the creative juice. I will honor this gift and the source from which it comes.

So, there they are. I may fine-tune them over time, but writing them down gave me an understanding of what invaded my creative process and, more importantly, reinforced why I write. And as far as perfection goes, we all know there's no such thing, right?

Not even for stink bugs.

Multi-award-winning author Valerie J. Brooks writes femmes-noir psychological thrillers where the women are badass and take center stage. *Revenge in 3 Parts* was a finalist for the Nancy Pearl Book Award, and *Tainted Times 2* won the Book Excellence Award for thrillers. Brooks received an Elizabeth George Foundation grant and was the recipient of five writing residencies. She teaches workshops on writing noir and writes for *Mystery & Suspense* magazine. She lives in Oregon's McKenzie River Valley with her husband, Dan, and their Havanese pooch, Stevie Nicks.

Member Profile: Mary F. Burns



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

Mary F. Burns is a prolific Bay Area writer who most recently has focused on her four-book (so far) mystery series featuring real-life 19th century historical figures as sleuths.

Stiletta: You were born in Chicago, received your BS and MS in English at Northern Illinois University, and taught high school English and French. What led you to move to San Francisco in 1976?

Mary F. Burns: In 1968, when I started college, I met a guy (of course) who had just returned from a couple of years in San Francisco (Summer of Love and all that), and when we were through with our degrees, we loaded up a van (dubbed “Chrome Yellow” because that’s what color it was) and headed West. Even then, SF was compelling, and although it’s changed immensely since then, it’s still good to be here.

Stiletta: Please tell us about your diverse career in employee communications and public relations.

MFB: In 1976, California laid off half the teaching force and I couldn’t find work as a teacher, so I became a vastly overqualified executive secretary at an engineering consulting firm at a salary that was more than TWICE what I was getting paid as a teacher in Illinois! Go figure. There I started a company newsletter, parlayed that into “communications director” at the next firm I jumped to, and inhabited the “PR Ghetto” into which many ambitious women with literary degrees were being funneled in the early 80s. Not complaining! It was great fun being in the vanguard of “corporate communications,” a term that came into being back then.

Being the kind of person who pretty much jumped into new things every seven years or so, I became an account exec at a small graphics design firm, then left to do my own consulting for companies such as Genentech, Bank of America, and Apple here in San Francisco. I managed the “Books-on-Tape” department for a Jesuit publishing outfit, where I also did book editing, and was producer/director of a Catholic Sunday morning talk show, “Body and Soul,” a dichotomy that still resonates for me. Seven years later, I was hired at PG&E (big utility, you may have heard of it in relation to wildfires?), managing a large team of employee communications folks.

I went to law school at night while working there, passed the bar in 1998, and left PG&E to work for a time at a small marketing firm in Sausalito. (Jacqueline Winspear of *Maisie Dobbs* fame had also worked there, but she left a week before I started!) It was a firm that specialized in marketing

Member Profile: Mary F. Burns, continued

consulting to law firms, so I was trusted by lawyers because I was one, and I created websites and marketing materials. From 2000 to 2006, I ran my own consulting firm again—GetReal PR—with clients such as PETCO, CalAAA, and some law firms. My final corporate gig was Charles Schwab, from which I retired (early!) in 2009.

Stiletta: You mentioned you have a Juris Doctor degree from Golden Gate University. How have you used your law degree in your career or your other activities?

MFB: I wanted a law degree because I felt my mind was growing stale and slow, and I had always been fascinated by the law. Legal studies taught me how to think differently, scrutinize everything, and suspect everything, which goes against my trusting and transparent nature. But I think it has helped me as a writer of historical fiction—all those research skills! And again, as a writer of mysteries—all that fine-line-drawing between what’s legal and what’s ethical, for instance.

Stiletta: What led you to start writing and what did you want to write?

MFB: I have been writing since I was ten or so, after having spent a year in bed with rheumatic fever. I read constantly, especially the Nancy Drew Mysteries, which I believe was the beginning of my love of detective and mystery stories. I was the “artistic” one in my family of seven kids—most of the others became accountants, computer types, teachers. My first short story was about a sad but evil clown (I have always disliked clowns), and my next big attempt was Beatles Fan Fiction (1964, right?). I wrote poetry and stories throughout high school and college, and my career, as described above, was writing “corporate fiction.”

But in the late 90s (a few years after that “guy” who led me to SF passed away), I bought a Harley Davidson, started doing poetry performances in the cafés in SF, fell in love and got married. Then in 2000, newly released from corporate drudgery, I went to my first writers’ conference (Mendocino Coast Writers) and started a novel set in Mendocino in 1959 that eventually became my *Ember Days*—written and re-written several times over the next 12 years or so and finally finished and published in 2015. But by that time I had written and published three other novels.

Stiletta: Your John Singer Sargent/Violet Paget Mystery series features real-life historical figures as amateur sleuths. What made you decide to build a mystery series around these two?

MFB: I was entranced by Sargent’s paintings, having seen them for the first time in 1999 at an exhibit in D.C., and immediately embarked on writing an historical novel about him (*Portraits of an Artist*). After it was published in 2010, I couldn’t get his voice—and especially, the other major voice in the novel, his friend Violet Paget (aka Vernon Lee)—out of my head. So I decided to turn the two of them into amateur sleuths in a mystery series. I had been reading the wonderful Oscar Wilde Mysteries by Gyles Brandreth, so I knew it could be done. Following the typical pattern of the Holmes and Watson

Member Profile: Mary F. Burns, continued

team, I decided to give Violet the lead role of “Sherlock” and write in her first-person voice; Sargent would be the affable, amiable Watson to her keen-minded Sherlock. I started the series when they were both 21 (they had met as children, age 10, in Rome—both their families wandered around Europe and the UK constantly, always on the move), and each book moves forward a year or two. That gives me the opportunity to have them grow and develop, become more self-aware and conscious of their growing fame, their stumbles, their influence and life events—Sargent and his painting, Violet and her writing.

Stiletta: While the sleuths investigate murders in the 19th century, the books also have connections to earlier historical periods. What other time periods and events have you featured?

MFB: This is one of the elements I love best about writing this series (and other standalone novels I have written)—using two time periods as counterpoints to reflect different eras, ideas, culture, approaches to life. Of course, the events in both time periods end up being connected. I have had John and Violet (basically late Victorian Age, 1880s-90s) become involved in mysteries that are tied to events that occurred in 1539 in Glastonbury (*The Spoils of Avalon*), 1750s in Venice (*The Love for Three Oranges*), an epic span of years beginning in 1500 in France and up to their own time (*The Unicorn in the Mirror*), and one that reaches back to early biblical days (*The Eleventh Commandment*).

Stiletta: The latest in this series, *The Eleventh Commandment*, was released earlier this year. Are there more on the way?

MFB: Yes! I am working on the next one now, which takes place in 1886 in Broadway Village in the Cotswolds, where Sargent lived and painted his “comeback” painting, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. The other time period is yet to be determined.

Stiletta: How do you research your historical books?

MFB: Various ways: reading lots of history and biography, internet research of course, and sometimes visits to the actual sites—either before I write or afterwards. I have just returned from a two-week visit to the village of Broadway to research for the next mystery.



Stiletta: Your book covers for this series are absolutely gorgeous. Please tell us more about them.

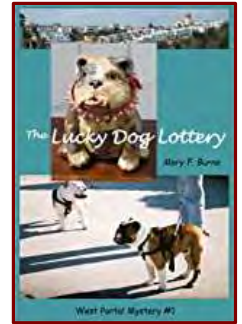
MFB: I create them all myself, and I also create book trailers for each of my novels, using PowerPoint (a real benefit from having been a corporate communicator). PowerPoint has an amazing range of features that produce great videos and book

Member Profile: Mary F. Burns, continued

covers. I love doing the covers and the trailers almost more than writing the book itself!

Stiletta: You have written one other mystery series, the West Portal Mysteries based in your own neighborhood, and many other non-mystery books. Can you tell us a little about those?

MFB: The West Portal Mysteries (only two of them) started as a laugh, using my best friend and her two bulldogs as the main characters. They were a lot of fun and taught me a lot about writing mysteries. They have been very popular in my own neighborhood, and I still get asked to write more of them whenever people see me in the local bookstore.



I have written two biblical historicals, *J-The Woman Who Wrote the Bible* and *Isaac and Ishmael*, plus two standalone novels, *Of Ripeness and The River* and *Ember Days*. I wrote *Of Ripeness and The River* during Covid (what else was there to do?), and it is a very special book for me, a kind of “alternative fictional autobiography.” It started with my pondering the question, “What would my life have been like if I had turned around and left San Francisco (having found out a dark secret) and gone back to the Midwest?” This, coupled with a mysterious recurring dream fragment I’d had all my life, led to this dual-time-period book in which the main character explores these issues, helped along by a diary of Jack London’s. I have also ventured into non-fiction with another “Covid” book called *Reading Mrs. Dalloway*, a literary essay that rejoices in the wonders of Woolf’s masterpiece.

Stiletta: You have gone the self-publishing route with your books. What advice would you give to authors who are considering self-publishing?

MFB: I started with an agent and a publisher but gave up on them after a few years of no earnings, no support, no interest. Self-publishing (I do it all through Amazon and Draft2Digital) requires persistence, ease with computer stuff (such as pdfs, jpgs, uploading files, setting up accounts) and as much DIY as you can manage. I have only submitted one book to a professional editor (being one myself helps), and I create all my covers and trailers myself. I have marketing skills that I (reluctantly) put to use to market my books (it’s a drag, as you all know, but must be done), and I’m good at using computers. The more you have to farm out to other people to do, the less likely you are to be able to recoup your expenses.

Frankly, given what I spend on traveling for research, ads, etc., I will probably never recoup my expenses, but the thing is: I HAVE TO WRITE. I’m not happy when I’m not writing. It doesn’t matter that I have only sold 58 books this month (most of them e-book format), as that’s 58 people who are reading what I love to write, and that’s good enough for me. E-books are getting much easier to create and publish, and Print on Demand is really the only way to go with print books, given environmental concerns and the price of printing.

Member Profile: Mary F. Burns, continued

Take a course in using Amazon or Ingram Spark if you're unfamiliar with how it all works. Amazon is free; Draft2Digital, a middleman to shop your e-books to other internet sources such as Barnes and Noble, Kobo, and GoogleBooks charges a 10% fee. Ingram Spark charges some fee but I have tried to use them and found it much too difficult, even for me, although the main benefit with Ingram Spark is that they "own" the wholesale catalog from which bookstores can order. No bookstore will ever order your book from Amazon, so I supply local stores with my books on consignment.

Stiletta: What other activities are part of your literary life?

MFB: Being an academic at heart, I have joined two literary societies: The Henry James Society and the International Vernon Lee Society. "Vernon Lee" is the nom de plume of my sleuth Violet Paget (her real name). I have now presented papers at conferences for both of these societies and will have a paper published in the Winter edition of the *Henry James Review*. I hope to continue more activities with these groups.

Stiletta: What else would you like your fellow SinC NorCal members to know about you?

MFB: When I wrote my first two mysteries, I charted out everything in advance, and had a rather "technical" approach to the mystery itself. I was nervous I would get it all wrong, that they wouldn't be plausible. They were fine. But as I grew more confident with my writing, I found that I am naturally an organic, seat-of-the-pants type of writer. I have an idea for a story, I do some initial research, I start writing, I do research along the way, and the story just keeps coming. For the Sargent/Paget mysteries, I do a heck of a lot of research first. Then at some point when I can't bear it any longer, I just start writing! I almost never know exactly who the "murderer" is until the last few chapters of the book, and often I'm rather surprised to find out who actually did the deed! That can mean going back and editing scenes and dialogue here and there to make things consistent, but it works for me! I know a lot of authors who say that once they're really into writing the book, the characters take over and start saying and doing things pretty much on their own, and you're just there typing it all out as it happens. I just love that, as it keeps the mystery of writing itself alive and happening.

Mary J. Burns was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

New chapter member D.M. Rowell announces the upcoming release of her debut mystery, *Never Name the Dead*, on November 8 by Crooked Lane Books.

The Ridders, a political thriller by Lisa Towles, will be released on November 30 by Indies United Publishing House, LLC.

The Housewife Assassin's Antisocial Media Social Tips by Josie Brown, book #21 in the Housewife Assassin Series, was released on February 18 by Signal Press. The next in the series, *The Housewife Assassin's Manners, Missiles and Mayhem*, will be released on November 22.

What They Saw by M.M. Chouinard, book #6 in the Detective Jo Fournier series, will be released on November 16 by Bookouture.

Peril in Paris by Rhys Bowen, book #16 in the Royal Spyness Mystery series, will be released on November 8 by Berkley.

Murder at the Jubilee Rally by Terry Shames, book #9 in the Samuel Craddock Mystery series, was released on October 4 by Severn House.

Bitter Draughts: a novel of Paris, with murders by Yves Fey, #2 in the Paris Trilogy, was released on March 26 by Tygerbright Press.

One Gun, a standalone by Vinnie Hansen, was launched on June 28 via a webinar from Bookshop Santa Cruz.

Abiding Conviction by Stephen M. Murphy, book #3 in the Dutch Francis Thrillers, was released on July 5 by Oceanview Publishing.

Coyote: Terror and Pursuit Across the Border by Ana Manwaring, book #4 in the JadeAnne Stone Mexico Mysteries, will be released November 16.

The Alchemist of Riddle and Ruin by Gigi Pandian, book #6 in the Accidental Alchemist series, was published on August 28 by Gargoyle Girl Productions. Gigi's new short story, "The Christmas Caper," a locked-room mystery novelette, was published by Minotaur Books on October 11.

Member News, continued

Public Appearances

D.M. Rowell will appear at two “Meet the Author” events to celebrate the launch of her book, *Never Name the Dead*: November 12 from 3:00 to 4:30 p.m. at Full Circle Books, 1900 NW Expressway in Oklahoma City, OK; and November 21 from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. at Fabulosa Books, 489 Castro Street in San Francisco, CA.

Rhys Bowen will be appearing live at the Poisoned Pen bookstore in Scottsdale, AZ on November 1 to launch her new book, *Peril in Paris*.

Michele Drier will visit Capitol Crimes Book Club on Zoom on November 8 from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. to discuss her latest book, *Tapestry of Tears*, book #2 in the Stained Glass Mystery series. You can register at <https://capitolcrimes.wildapricot.org/event-4967583/Registration>.

Ann Parker will be on a virtual panel, Writing About San Francisco as a Place, for the Mechanics’ Institute, November 18 at noon. Writers Gary Kamiya and Edmund S. Wong will also be on the panel, and Mechanics’ Institute librarian Taryn Edwards will moderate the discussion. The event is free and open to the public, and registration is required. For more information and to register: <https://www.milibrary.org/events/writers-lunch-writing-about-san-francisco-place-nov-18-2022>.

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Lisa Towles announces that her 2021 thriller, *Ninety-Five*, won a 2022 Reader’s Favorite Silver Medal in YA Thriller. Also, Lisa’s forthcoming political thriller, *The Ridders*, was the American Fiction Awards winner in the thriller/crime category and a finalist in the thriller/political category.

Training To Be Delivered

Margaret Lucke will present an online Writing Lab workshop for the Palm Springs Writers Guild on Friday, January 13, 2023. Timed for the start of the new year, the workshop is designed to help you take a big-picture look at what you want to accomplish with your writing in the months ahead. It will give you strategies for each step of the process, from finding the initial idea through putting the story down on the page, to getting it published and out into the world. Details can be found at <https://palmspringwritersguild.org/event-4906708>.



Question of the Quarter



How do you (try to) ensure the cover of your book will attract the readers you are targeting?

When I got my rights back from my traditional publisher and plunged into self-publishing, my online marketer and I created new covers for my Dot Meyerhoff series. It wasn't easy. We settled on a series of doors, each reflecting something about the story, with a lopsided "In Session" sign. Dot's a psychologist, so the doors symbolized the door to the mind. And the lopsided signs symbolized that, behind those doors, all was not well. I think it worked. *Ellen Kirschman*

For a self-published author, having a professional looking cover is crucial. An amateurish cover suggests the written work is also amateurish. I contacted a cover designer who had done contract work for a former publisher. He knew the books and that I liked his work. I knew he was reliable and professional. You do need to decide if you want individual covers for your books or a series look. Ask for recommendations from other indie authors and check out examples of designers' work online. Do not hesitate to ask for cost or suggest changes in design. Get a written contract. *Priscilla Royal*

My cover artist and I spend a tremendous amount of time coming up with various cover concepts around 3-4 months before the release date. It takes a village to design a cover, so I begin by including several concepts in my monthly newsletter and ask the subscribers to vote for their favorite. I also tell them to feel free to make suggestions. Based on their suggestions, we usually whittle it down to two choices. In the early days we might have as many as four different concepts. Then I post the covers on Facebook and wait for those responses. And I don't have long to wait because people LOVE to share their thoughts. And I'm happy to include them in the process. That way readers feel invested in my books and my series. *Cindy Sample*

I seldom have a say in my covers. Target readers are chosen by my editor, who introduces my new covers with: "I'm so excited. Here's your new cover. I absolutely love it. I think it's so perfect. What do you think?" Then, a few books ago, my publisher began putting cats on my covers, when there was no cat anywhere on the pages of the books. More than one reviewer complained, "I expected a cat. Where was the cat?" And most recently, I did a Work-for-Hire series set in Alaska that featured a cat, and those covers had the cats overshadowed by a moose. Go figure. *Camille Minichino*

An undercurrent in all my books is swimming, especially open water (OW) swimming. This is a niche that I try and target on the covers of my books. I'm fortunate that the cover designer, Rich Burns, is a graphic designer and a teammate on Tamalpais Aquatic Masters, an adult swim team. He knows exactly what will attract the OW swimmer, but not turn off everyone else. Although this is a niche, it is a very small niche, so we have to reach a broader audience. Also, I wanted a cover that didn't look like any other cover out there. That's what Rich designed for me. *Glenda Carroll*

Unfortunately, traditionally published authors often have no say in this. The rights to choose and design the cover are owned by the publishing house. My publisher did ask for my opinion about my

Question of the Quarter, continued

covers, but they didn't have to. There were a few minor changes my agent and I wanted with the first book, and the publisher did take care of those. *Susan Alice Bickford*

Since I'm traditionally published, the publisher decides on the cover design. Not much more I can say about that. 😊 *Ann Parker*

I do research on what sells in my genre. Like everything else, it changes with the times. Most of my book covers are done by my publicist, but I like to know why they chose what they chose. If one can go by me, I am heavily influenced by a cover and often impulse buy a book based on that. I don't know what that says about me, but there we are. *Heather Haven*

My first book, *Edited for Death*, was published by a small press. It wasn't a match made in heaven, but I loved the cover they did. Shortly before the publication date I got an email from the artist who did my cover. The publisher was in Connecticut, but the artist was in Auburn, about 40 miles east of me. It turned out she had been a graphic artist with McClatchy at the *Sacramento Bee*, and I'd been an editor with the *Modesto Bee*. Since that introduction, Karen has done all my covers, and I'm crazy about her (she does a lot of work with Sisters across the country).

Since most of my sales are ebooks, we try to keep the number of elements down to just a few but still reflective of the main theme so they don't get lost in a thumbnail size. The fonts for the title and my name are always the same for branding purposes. I send her the first few chapters (usually first drafts) with a few generic suggestions (the book is set on the south coast of England, foggy, old churches, etc.), then we go to lunch and flesh out the idea. Most of my readers are women in the 40-65 age range and the books aren't thrillers, so the covers aren't brooding or scary.

For the 11-book Kandesky Vampire Chronicles series, she uses more drawings than photographs and a distinctive font or the series title, SNAP (the name of the international conglomerate the vampires own). I have one standalone psychological thriller set in San Francisco, and for that, *Ashes of Memories*, we went with a photo collage. *Michele Drier*



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