

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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Spring, Hybrid Meetings, and AI

Spring has taken its own sweet time showing up this year.

Usually by mid-April, outdoor lunches become the meal of choice, but this year only Easter was warm enough.

I spent my teen years in Humboldt County, moving from the East Bay when I was in middle school, so rain was a fact of life for several years, and now, living in the Valley, it's welcomed. This year, though, the bees had to be fed a sugar syrup because they couldn't fly in the cold and rain.

President Biden is declaring the end of the Covid-19 pandemic and we're slowly inching into "normal", although a percentage of us are still masked in social settings. My forte isn't futurism, but I think remote living will be with us far beyond any official announcement.

We are moving our NorCal chapter into this new world by offering all our programs and presentations in a hybrid format, both in person and accessible by Zoom, and opening our exposure to a wider audience. In our programs, we've had people attend from across the United States, as well as Europe and Asia.

A friend and NorCal member has recently moved to Portugal and was lamenting that the Author Showcase would be live on Zoom at 10:00 p.m. her time, so when we chatted via text, I told her that we also record our programming and it's available



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President's Letter, continued

on our website to listen/watch anytime.

At the risk of sounding old, although I've finally had to admit I guess I am, this communication is way beyond any that I could have imagined growing up.

And thanks to our immediate past president, Susan Bickford, we're harnessing this new reality. Susan has led a series of workshops on hybrid meetings, and these workshops are recorded and available on the website for any member who wants to learn how this is handled.

I recently had a Zoom meeting with another SinC member in the Midwest. The topic? AI. Like it or not, we're moving away at warp speed into a new reality where machine-generated content may become a new norm. But who knows or checks that this content is "real" and factual?

Even Gutenberg had naysayers, people who said that type would put all of the copyists (primarily monks) out of business. And who was to check that what was printed was accurate and true?

Will AI be a successor to Gutenberg or a page out of *1984*?

Have you or will you use this technology?

The jury may be out for a long time on this.

In the meantime, I'm hoping to see you May 20 in Orinda for our Spring Author Showcase . . . still real, live, and in person!

Sincerely,

Michele Drier

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal

Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, May 20, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Spring Author Showcase

Orinda Books, 276 Village Square, Orinda

Hybrid Meeting with Zoom

Don't miss our twice-yearly Author Showcase, featuring readings and fun from the following authors:

Cara Black
George Cramer
Janet Dawson
Vinnie Hansen
Heather Haven
Katherine Bolger Hyde
Leslie Karst
Claudia Long
Thena MacArthur
Nannette Potter
Cindy Sample
Susan Shea



Date and Time: TBD

June Event

Our Events Chair is currently planning our June event – stay tuned and watch the website for more details!

SinC NorCal typically doesn't schedule a July event, but that could change. Again, keep an eye on our website and watch for email updates.

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.

February Meeting - Annual Meet & Greet and Beta Reading the Write Way

Susan Hensley covered topics such as: the definition of a beta reader; why authors need one; how to identify the best beta readers; enlightening, educating and engaging yourself and your readers; asking pertinent questions; and identifying your wishes. Susan advised us to come up with six questions to have beta readers answer, and also pointed out the benefits of alpha readers to catch errors in grammar and punctuation and to identify POV shifts within a scene and the use of passive voice. After a lively Q&A session, we transitioned to a roundtable where talked about what's happening in our lives and/or writing careers.



March Meeting - Cops and Writers and PTSD: Getting It Right



Our own Ellen Kirschman informed us about what authors need to know about how emergency responders (police and firefighters) may suffer from PTSD/PTSI (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder/Injury). She provided valuable information covering: responders' traits, beliefs, vulnerabilities; the difference between fear and anxiety; different types of stress; how the brain handles imminent danger; the negative bias to which responders are prone; PTSI symptoms; the stigma of asking for help; and much more. She also told us about the First Responders Support Network, where she has been on the staff for many years, helping cops and firefighters deal with PTSI.

April Meeting - Contraband and Crooks: Working Dogs in the World of Police, Fire, and SAR

Robert D. (Bob) Calkins, has many years of experience volunteering as a Search and Rescue (SAR) dog handler in Washington State and is the author of the Sierra the Search Dog books for adults and children of all ages. In his presentation, he told us about the 400 hours of training required for these dogs and what it entails. He introduced us to the four dogs he has personally trained and worked with, and described what particularly excites these dogs. We also learned about the kinds of search dogs and what they search for (e.g., people, drugs, bombs, remains, accelerants, phones), finding the right dog for the right job, and which breeds of dogs make the best SAR dogs, and he told us what can possibly go wrong. Bob also treated us to some of his own "war stories."



I'm a (Gulp) Writer

By Camille Minichino

Sometimes I wish I were a plumber. Or an electrician. Or a pastry chef. Then, at least, the next time someone asks, "What do you do?" I'll have a simple answer.

Right now, what I do most is write. But I have trouble saying, "I'm a writer." Sometimes I can manage, "I write mystery novels," because having sold 25 or so books to publishers, I think that's a fair statement.

But "I'm a writer" carries with it a certain presumption, that if you look up "writers" on Wikipedia, you'll find my name between Herman Melville and Margaret Mitchell. Oops.

When I show up for a book signing, I might say, "I'm the author," so the clerk will know what to do with me. But while it's okay to claim that I'm the one billed as the author for this evening, I never say, generally speaking, "I'm AN author," or "I'm A writer."

The first time a reader came up to me at a conference and said, "I like your books," I thought she'd made a mistake. I lifted my badge on its lanyard and said, "I'm Camille Minichino. I don't think—"

"Yes," she said. "And I like your books."

I believe I gulped a "Thanks." A small step, and I haven't gotten much better over many years.

Why such insecurity? Salary might be one thing. I don't get a salary for writing. Now and then I get an advance or a check for royalties, but they wouldn't give me the security, or keep me in the style to which I became accustomed as a full-time company employee.

In fact, some people don't think writing is a business at all. Many of my relatives and nonwriter friends have no idea how a novel comes to be. Or that it's something they should spend their money on. They assume, with each new book, that I'll remember to give them a copy. More than one has been known to say, "Hey, I don't think I ever got a copy of that third book in the second series."

Recently, the receptionist in my doctor's office said, "I hear you have a new book out. I'll take one." As if she's doing me a favor, helping me offload all these copies that just pour into my house for free. I wonder if any of them say to their plumber clients, "Hey, my faucet is leaking. You can come over and fix it."

Another favorite response is, "As soon as I have some time, I'm going to write a book, too."



I'm a (Gulp) Writer, continued

I guess I'm looking for a little more respect (sorry to channel Rodney Dangerfield), though I'm sure no disrespect is meant.

I believe this is how many people think a 350-page manuscript comes into being:

1. Allot an hour or two a day for a month, maybe two if it's holiday season.
2. Make sure there's enough paper in the printer.
3. Open a blank document and start writing, the title and the first page.
4. Continue writing the story for another 349 pages. (It's a lot of typing, but eventually, the pages will be filled.)
5. The end.

I know this because I've often been asked, "What page are you on?" as I'm writing a novel.

The day I received a doctorate in physics, there was great fanfare. Academics love pageantry! Robes, trumpets, velvet hats with tassels, and a grand, symbolic climbing of the Gothic stairs to the lofty platform where our professors sat.

After that, I had no trouble, saying, "I'm a physicist."

I think that's what writers need. We need a ceremony with that first book. Not just a little party with tchotchkes and cookies, but a full-fledged initiation, robes flowing, *Trumpet Voluntary* blaring.

On the other hand, one "stranger" saying, "I like your books," makes up for a lot!



P.S.: I'm not as ungenerous as I sound above. I donate books all the time to libraries, schools, veterans' organizations, conference auctions. I've often made a miniature scene to raffle off.

Say, why don't I do that now?

Let me know if you're interested in something like the chair in the image shown and I'll pile two or three of your favorite books on it and send to you, while supplies last! Go to my website at my last name dot com and email me from there.

Camille Minichino is a retired physicist turned writer. She's the past President of Sisters in Crime NorCal, the author of 28 mysteries in five series, and has also published articles and short stories. She teaches science and writing in and around the Bay Area.

Musings from a Debut Mystery Writer

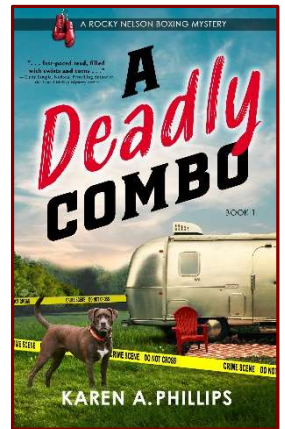
by Karen A. Phillips



I always find it interesting to learn where authors get ideas for their stories.

The inspiration for my debut mystery novel, *A Deadly Combo*, came when I attended my first vintage Trailerfest at a winery. There were about fifteen trailers of all shapes, sizes, and colors. The owners invited us to come inside and see the work they had done restoring their trailer to its former glory. I had so much fun at this event that the idea came to me: What a great place to discover a dead body! The result was *A Deadly Combo*.

But I needed a protagonist. I decided to create a character who was similar to me, because I thought that would be easier than creating a person from scratch. Of course, developing a character is not easy, no matter how you approach it. But I had to start somewhere, and the character of Raquel (aka Rocky) is someone I believe readers will care for in *A Deadly Combo* and root for her to solve the crime.



Soon after I began the novel, I started taking boxing lessons. I quickly found that having my protagonist be a boxer was a unique approach for an amateur sleuth. I have been taking boxing lessons



for many years now, starting when I was in my late fifties, and I am now sixty-two. Boxing is a great way to stay in shape. Also, I can write first-hand how it feels when you put the gloves on and spar with someone. My boxing coach, Mike Guy (pictured with me back in 2020 before I stopped dying my hair – LOL), answered any questions I had about the sport and was the inspiration for the boxing trainer in *A Deadly Combo*.

The craft of writing is not easy. But if you take one step at a time, one page at a time, one scene at a time, you will finish your novel. It took me years to finish *A Deadly Combo*, but all that time I was learning the craft. The novel went through many drafts, reviewed by many beta readers, two passes with a developmental editor, and a proofreader. I want to encourage all new writers who might only have the spark of an idea for a story or have a story unfinished – if I can do it, then so can you.

Musings from a Debut Mystery Writer, continued

Karen A. Phillips lives in northern California and writes humorous, fun, action-packed mysteries. She has several short stories published in various anthologies. Her characters are engaging and fearless. *A Deadly Combo* is her first full-length novel. In real life, Karen takes boxing lessons but would hesitate if she had to punch anyone in the face. Let's face it, Karen wouldn't last one round in the ring. Karen is a proud member of Sisters in Crime and Willamette Writers. Visit her at www.KarenAPhillips.com.

SinC NorCal Promotion Cooperative

Welcome, Siblings! In an ongoing effort to help our members with promotions, the Board is opening a Facebook/Social Media page for authors to promote their books, contest wins, publishing offers, news, and other noteworthy accomplishments. This is a free promotional tool for members of Sisters in Crime NorCal.

Additionally, the site will periodically post information and articles about book promotional tools available to authors on the internet. Authors are encouraged to respond or add their ideas and favorite promotional tools. Sharing the workload makes lighter work for us all.

There is power in numbers.

The advantages:

We all share an audience of like-minded readers. It's probable that readers who are following you might also like to follow other authors who write crime fiction. Using this technique of cross-posting promotional materials, we can cast a wider net over a larger audience. It's a win-win.

How it works:

You post information about your book release, your current status on the Amazon Chart, the contests you've entered or won on the Promotion Cooperative page under Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok. When you do so, you are responsible for promoting other authors' work on your author site.

It works if we all work it! We want this opportunity to run on the honor system, but if you are not reposting other authors, you might get a tap on the shoulder from an administrator, reminding you that we all need to fully participate if the exchange is to be a success.

You are invited to click on the following link, then click Join to participate in this Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1248244496110309>

Is Crime Fiction a Tent Big Enough . . . for Your Spouse?

by Mysti Berry

Back in the day, I had a writer friend, let's call her Blanca. My friend was sharp and funny and full of great ideas, but she had this one rule that always puzzled me: her husband wasn't allowed anywhere near any of her writing friends or activities. He wasn't allowed to go to conferences, to meet or hang out with any of us. I thought maybe she was embarrassed by him somehow, but when we did finally meet, he was an attractive young man with a decent sense of humor and a lot of respect for writers and women, not to mention women writers like his wife.



It always struck me as odd.

I spent about a decade as “the artist’s wife” at Comic Con. Polite disinterest was the most common response from all but my husband Dale’s friends who also happened to be his fans. I didn’t mind, being a flaming introvert. Appearing to be nearly invisible at an event with 180,000 other people was a relief. In addition, visual artists, graphic artists, cartoonists, and animators all create magic on a page or movie screen, so it seemed reasonable to me that a mere writer like me would be less than fascinating.

Eventually I gave up going to Comic Con—the crowds were too thick, and Dale had little time for anything but working the booth (and occasionally hobnobbing with Famous People and Film Producers, but I’ll let him tell those stories). For a time, my husband was content to let me go off to Bouchercon, Left Coast Crime (LCC), ThrillerFest, and other conferences while he attended Comic Con and a few other comics-based events.

But at some point, he started tagging along to my events. “I’m proud to be your arm candy,” he would say.

Did I mention that Dale is an extrovert?

At conferences, he’d tell everyone that he was Mr. Mysti or that he was “just Cartoon Boy.” As the writer-artist-editor-publisher of a comic book series and the artist on a book back in the 1980s that moved a lot of units, baby, Dale soon found his way onto the comics panel at my conference events.

Is Crime Fiction a Tent Big Enough . . . for your Spouse? continued

One day, Dale and Gary Phillips subjected themselves to ritual humiliation and verbal hijinks courtesy of the moderator Juliet Blackwell at Monterey LCC, and the audience was delighted. Another time, Dale and Craig Buck talked about noir and the audience was enthralled. Then someone, maybe it was me, pointed out Dale's current series, *Tales of the Moonlight Cutter*, had a crime at the core of most of the issues.

Before long, Dale wasn't Mr. Mysti anymore. He published the first graphic stories in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, illustrated *The Bebop Barbarians* for Gary, and has become a fixture at "Bar Con" at LCC and Bouchercon most years.

I couldn't be happier. Honestly!

Even on days when I'm frustrated by my own lack of progress publishing a novel, I'm genuinely pleased that Dale has discovered just how welcoming and fun the crime writing community is. It takes nothing away from me to see Dale become better known among my crime writing peers, because a rising tide really does float all boats.

I suppose if he's nominated for an Edgar before I am, I might need a little counseling to keep from being snarky and resentful. But until then, I'm happy to work the days at conferences and leave the evenings to my night-owl extrovert of a husband, who is also my number one fan.

My friend Blanca? She ended up divorcing the handsome guy and moving out of state.

What do you think? Are writing conferences a time to escape home and hearth? Do couples harsh your buzz at the opening night ceremonies? Or could this whole husband-and-wife writing team thing catch on?

Mysti Berry is the editor of *Low Down Dirty Vote*, three short story anthologies which have raised \$25K for voting rights work. She has been published in *EQMM*, *AHMM*, and many regional SinC anthologies, and her article about social media was published in the MWA handbook, *How to Write a Mystery*. Her next short story is due out mid-2023, and she is working on her first historical mystery novel set in 1938 Hilo, Hawaii, where her mother was born.

Social Justice Crime Fiction: The Best Genre You've Never Heard About

by June Gillam



What do Audre Lorde, Sara Paretsky, Charles Dickens, Jodi Picoult, Tana French, and Upton Sinclair have in common?

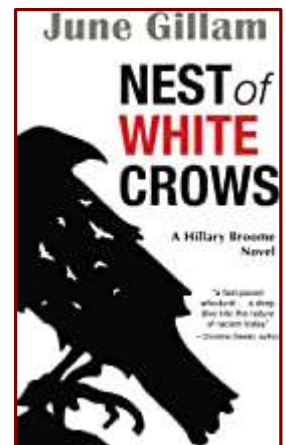
You can find them all in a Google search for social justice books. I queried ChatGPT for social justice authors, and it gave me some of those names. Although, as a retired professor, I verified the list it provided and added a few names of authors that do social justice right.

Social justice novels explore systemic social problems such as gender inequality, racism, immigrant issues, Indigenous issues, LGBTQ+ issues, and poverty. By reading social justice fiction the reader is immersed in the perspective of a marginalized individual or group, and that can create empathy and understanding in the reader.

Back in 1906, Upton Sinclair, novelist and social crusader, pioneered a form of investigative journalism that his contemporaries derided as “muckraking.” *The Jungle*, his best-known novel, was an exposé of the appalling and unsanitary conditions in the meat-packing industry, which led to new federal food safety laws. In the 19th century, Charles Dickens challenged Victorian aristocracy and elites by writing about workhouses, slums and other social problems of his day.

The social justice crime fiction genre grew out of those early social justice novels. As Sheena Kamal, author of *No Going Back*, wrote on CrimeReads.com: “Some of the most exciting work today is done in this space. No other kind of fiction examines social and environmental justice issues in the same way. It may be my background in political science, or just the way I’m made up, but I’m very much drawn to crime novels that examine a particular social issue and try to serve justice in some kind of way – or at least attempt to deepen the reader’s understanding of that issue.”

One of my inspirations for *Nest of White Crows* was Jodi Picoult's novel, *Small Great Things*. It's the story of an African American labor and delivery nurse and the racism she experiences while caring for a white supremacist couple's newborn son. The novel has 44,686 reviews on Amazon, which says a lot about Picoult's storytelling and about the power of social justice fiction. *Small Great Things* motivated me toward deepening the social justice angles in my own crime fiction novels. I was delighted when a reader, unknown to me, left this on



Social Justice Crime Fiction, continued

Amazon: “. . . captivating and thought-provoking, especially for fans of crime fiction with a social justice twist. Fans of books like *Small Great Things* by Jodi Picoult and *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson will find this read particularly interesting and entertaining.”

Although most writers and authors receive praise at times—an experience that is always meaningful to those of us who create alone at a keyboard—receiving a review of this nature meant everything to me. There’s a market for social justice novels and I, for one, will continue to integrate this focus into my crime fiction.

Novelist and poet June Comarsh Gillam is a native of Sacramento, California, born to a Bohemian father and Irish/Welsh mother. A ten-year member of Sisters in Crime and a founding member of San Joaquin Valley Writers, the 22nd branch of the California Writers Club, June was honored with a Jack London Award in 2017 and served on the editorial team for the 2019 CWC Review. Author of the Hillary Broome Novels, June writes crime fiction after developing an obsession to understand what makes ordinary people mad enough to kill. Each of her villains explores the shadow side of being human, what happens when an ordinary person feels crushed by life, a condition that continues to intrigue her.



**. . . to our newest members (joining SinC NorCal from
January 1 through March 31, 2023)**

Jenn Hooker
Gillian Johnson
Linda Louie
Violet Moore

Karen Phillips
John Schembra
Nanette Potter

A Tribute to Rita Lakin (1930-2023) by Camille Minichino

What was I thinking?

That I could say something about my dear friend Rita Lakin that hadn't already been written and shared these last weeks since her death? How she was "The Only Woman in the Room," writing and producing well-known television series, movies, and plays for decades in LA? How she then brought out her marvelous Gladdy Gold mysteries? Chances are you've enjoyed Rita's work if you happened upon one of her 470 produced scripts, or one of her Movies of the Week, or read her *Getting Old is . . .* series.



I can only add what she meant to me, and to so many of us in the writing community, how much we all miss her. Rita and I were in the same critique group for several years. I remember how she would sit quietly, concentrating, while we fiddled with each other's elements of plot or character or the Oxford comma. When she finally spoke up, she would ask a question that I at least had never thought of. *Why did she become a nurse in the first place? Why didn't he call X instead of Y? Why this; why that?* (Thanks, Rita, now I have to go back to square one!)

But Rita was always positively helpful. She could come up with a turn of phrase to fix any inconsistency or flaw in your story. In other words, she never asked a question without helping you answer. If she couldn't come up with a sentence for you, she'd give you one of her own. And when she called you *darling*, you knew she meant it, even though you might have been the twentieth in line for the word that day.

Here's an excerpt from Rita's first blog ever, as she called it, from May 7, 2010, describing her many stops and starts on the way to a writing career:

I was an artist for about fifteen minutes. The only proof of that pudding is a still life I drew of a frying pan and an egg. Well, at least I kept the frying pan.

That was my friend. Smart. Funny. Generous. But there I go, repeating what's already been said as I feared I would do.

Bye for now, Rita Lakin.

Cosplaying Your Author Superhero: Author Branding by T.E. MacArthur

If you are just starting out as an author or feeling like it is time to refresh your brand, I say, just do it. Now is the best time. Heck, you don't even need to have your first book published. Why? Because the brand is all about you, the Author Superhero, not the book. Here are some of the first (or new) steps to consider when going for that new brand smell.



- It's all about YOU, baby! That's right – don't brand your book, brand the author. Why? Because you are going to always sell you. Unless planning otherwise, there will be more than one book in your future, but only one marketable *you*. Regardless of the book you're pushing, that bookstore, association, literary festival, or convention is going to be asking you to be *Author Superhero you*.
- If you write in more than one genre and feel the need to create two author brands, okay. There are times when this is necessary – say, you write horror and happy children's books about pet care. Yeah, you might want to keep those in different silos. Just follow the steps below for each and remember to keep them separate so that you don't scare little Johnny, who's hoping to learn about kittens but gets ghouls in the pet cemetery at the library today.
- Write down all the **adjectives you would like your audience to associate with you**. This is the image you want to convey, and having this list will help you write your author bio later. *Approachable. Joyful. Humorous. Knowledgeable. Down-home. Classic. Romantic. Outspoken. Spiritual.* Write down all the words you want, but in the end, pick four to eight. Bruce Wayne narrowed his list to *bats, scary, terrifying, untouchable* – hence the Batman.
- Another thing you can do is consider other authors, TV/movie characters, historical figures, media stars, etc. and look at what sets them apart from others. Now that I am writing paranormal subjects, I looked at Agent Dana Scully from *The X-Files*. If she'd written a book and was now selling at a literary fest, what would that be like? Don't copy whole cloth; pick things that you believe will work for you naturally.

Now you are about to learn how to cosplay (adult costume playing) your Author Superhero brand.

Author Branding, continued

- Define your Author Cosplay (aka visual, interactive) brand. But before you whip out your lightsaber and Jedi robes for a Barnes & Noble reading, make sure to pick your cosplay based on **your authentic self**, not on something you are not and cannot sustain.
- Don't present yourself as a medical expert if you are not. But if you are a down-home kind of person and you want to play that into your brand, go for it.
- Create a statement about **what you want**: *I want my readers to relive their adventurous childhood through my book. I want to show men that they don't need to live with the demands of toxic masculinity. I want to scare the pants off my readers.* Having a statement helps get you in the mood for picking personal imagery.
- Create a statement about **what you write**: *I write paranormal mysteries that scare the bejesus off my readers. I write historical romances with a twist.*
- **Pick three colors** you want to use for your author brand. These don't have to be on your book covers, but design sites such as Canva will help you set up a clean, easy logo, and you can incorporate your three colors. Mine are black, gray, and red.
- Cosplayers at science fiction conventions wear costumes. Superheroes wear costumes. Businesspeople wear corporate costumes every day. You can, too. **Pick out a reading/selling/ presenting outfit** that reflects your author brand. For example, I have a black coat I wear with a white blouse, pants, boots, and something red (a rose?) My hair is auburn in a medium length bob. Scully-like. Professional, competent, solid. Consider that you might not want to wear a gingham check prairie dress to a goth bookstore to read from your latest dark fantasy. Match your Author Superhero cosplay costume to the genre/readership you write to.

You've got some basics now. Time to put your superpowers into action.

- **Create a website**, even if that book isn't out yet. Use the webhost's templates to set up a site with your brand colors and a style that matches your descriptive adjectives. Almost every webhost will offer you a chance to purchase a domain name. If you can, do it. Keep it simple. Mine is TEMacarthur.com.
- Book Brush, Canva, and Vistaprint all do **business cards**. There are other sites, too. Have some business cards made up. Use your style, colors, and new domain name.

Author Branding, continued

- **Set up a Facebook group.** Not a page. Pages are tricky with Facebook—they require payment for every post to be sent to all those following your page; otherwise, only 10% will automatically see your posts in their feed. Group posts are seen by everyone who joins the group. If you are unsure about the header for your group, Canva has a design template for Facebook headers.
- If you have published, **polish your elevator speech.** Now that you are an Author Superhero with a brand, people are going to start asking you questions. But it is perfectly fine not to share your agent's or publisher's phone number, you are not obligated to read that unsolicited manuscript, and your cousin Joey needs to hire an editor just like you did.

Cosplaying an Author Superhero is fun and, thankfully, does not need to be as expensive as a Sci-Fi cosplay. I think you will enjoy it, and it will pay off in the end.

Here are some great books and videos on the subject that I recommend:

Author Branding, Rayne Hall, ISBN 978-1797563435, 2019

Brand the Author (Not the Book), Karen A. Chase, ISBN 978-1733752848, 2022

Your Author Brand, Melissa Rowe, Kindle only, ASIN B0BD2WWY53, 2022

YouTube:

How to Build an ICONIC Author Brand...and Attract Your Ideal Readers!, Abbie Emmons, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCuDx1p7Ia4>

Branding for Authors with Kristine Kathryn Rusch, The Creative Penn, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkkC29aE6u0>

T.E. MacArthur is an author, artist, historian, amateur cat whisperer, and parapsychologist wannabe, living in the San Francisco Bay Area. She wrote the Steampunk series, *The Volcano Lady* and *The Gaslight Adventures of Tom Turner*, as well as the noir-punk mystery *Lou Tanner, P.I.: A Place of Fog and Murder*. She has also written for several local and specialized publications and anthologies and was an accidental sports reporter for *Reuters News*. Her storytelling changed direction recently to embrace the paranormal, her lifelong obsession, with her newest novel, *The Skin Thief*, set in the Four Corners region of Colorado, not far from where she grew up. You can find her on Facebook, TikTok, or at www.TEMacArthur.com.

A Book Review of Cormac McCarthy's *The Passenger* by Kenneth Gwin

Lingering mysteries without answers intrigue me. So, what happens when a literary heavy hitter writes a mystery he never solves? I don't know if you've read much of Cormac McCarthy's work, but it tends toward the dark. From *The Road* I found this quote: *There is no God and we are his prophets*. This foreshadows everything.



The Passenger continues with the perfect setup for a mystery: a hunter discovers the body of a young woman hanging from a tree in the frozen dead of winter. Skip a chapter and we find a salvage diver hired (by whom?—it never says) to investigate the perfectly intact wreckage of a charter jet sitting peacefully in forty feet of water off the coast of New Orleans. There are no signs of damage to the plane. The crew and passengers are all strapped in their seats. But one of the passengers is missing with no indication of how he escaped. The pilot's flight bag is missing, and the black box is nowhere to be found. It's a mystery.

Half the book is written from the point of view of the young woman before . . . you know . . . she hangs herself in that tree. She had issues.

Why are you here by yourself?... the doctor asked.

I'm not by myself. I'm schizophrenic.

The other half of the book (running in parallel) is about the older brother (the salvage diver) who has serious questions about the plane that nobody wants to talk about. Soon he's hounded by The Men in Black, unnamed government officials, the IRS— who knows? Why? It's a mystery. There are no easy answers here.

The following is a peek into the darkness running throughout the everyday life of characters in *The Passenger*:

The fry cook set their plates on the table with the cheeseburgers and took a bottle of mustard and one of ketchup from either armpit and salt and pepper from the rear pocket of his rancid jeans. What else? he said.

I think we're covered.

A Review of *The Passenger*, continued

Oiler looked at the plastic jar of mustard and then reached for it and opened his cheeseburger and squirted the mustard. In for a dollar, he said.

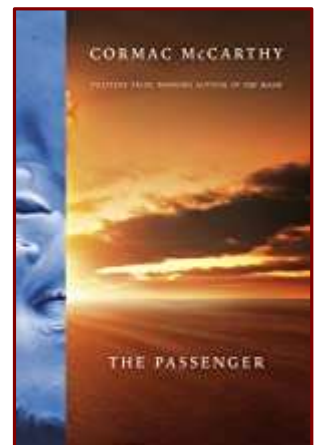
You can't get a decent cheeseburger in a clean restaurant. Once they start sweeping the floor and washing the dishes with soap it's pretty much over.

Oiler nodded and sat chewing. Well, these sumbitches are pretty damned good, so there you go.

Best cheeseburger I ever ate was at the lunch counter at Comer's Pool Hall on Gay Street in Knoxville, Tennessee. You couldn't get the grease off your fingers with gasoline . . .

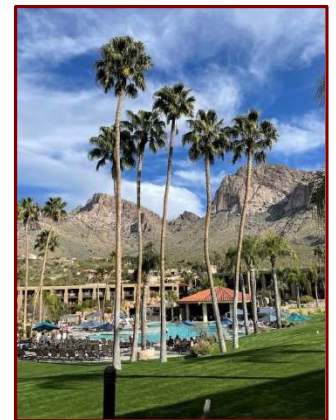
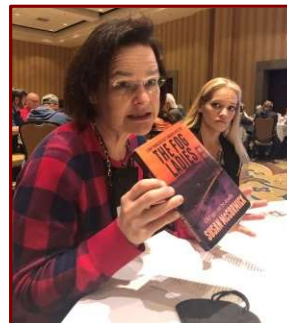
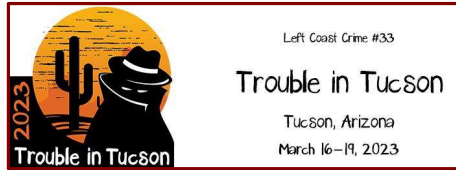
This book is difficult and complex and not for the impatient or faint of heart. If you are looking for a pleasant read by the fire, this isn't it. If you are waiting for the tidy reveal at the end, there isn't one. If you are looking for a story that will leave you thinking about life, the past, loss and sorrow, and the uncertain world around you, this is the book for you. This is a major work by a major writer digging into the questions of our times and the greater mysteries behind the news that are never solved.

I won't forget this book tomorrow, even if it doesn't solve a thing. It's haunting. I'm haunted by it still.



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

Images of Left Coast Crime 2023



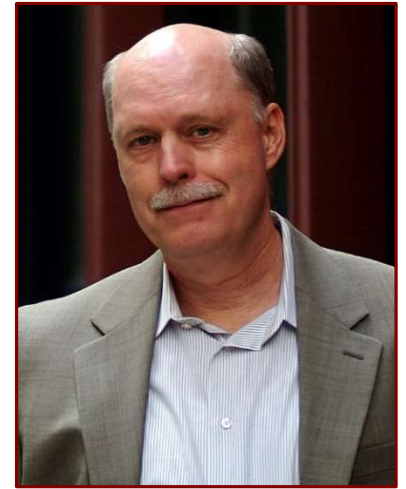
Images of Left Coast Crime, continued



Member Profile: Stephen M. Murphy

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

With a long career as an attorney and judge to inspire him, Stephen M. Murphy is the author of a 3-book legal thriller series (with the fourth in progress) set in New England and featuring a criminal defense attorney, in addition to other law-related books.



Stiletta: You are originally from Boston but currently live in the San Francisco Bay Area. What precipitated your move from the East Coast to the West, and when?

Stephen M. Murphy: I moved to San Francisco in 1978 to attend law school at the University of San Francisco. After law school, I moved to New Hampshire to work as a law clerk in the superior court for one year. Then I returned to San Francisco and began practicing as an attorney.

Stiletta: Have you been an attorney during your entire career? What type of law have you practiced?

SMM: I practiced plaintiffs' employment and personal injury law for 34 years before becoming a judge on the San Francisco Superior Court, where I have worked for the past six years.

Stiletta: Is there a particular accomplishment during your legal career that you consider the most satisfying?

SMM: In 2006 I represented an employee of the County of Sonoma who suffered from agoraphobia, which is the fear of strangers. For 25 years, the County accommodated his disability by allowing him to engage with the public by phone. Inexplicably, the County decided to end the accommodation and require him to see the public face to face. As a result, he suffered a nervous breakdown. The jury awarded him \$6.5 million, one of the largest employment verdicts in Sonoma County history. The verdict even caught the attention of Fox News, and I appeared on John Kasich's show to defend the verdict.

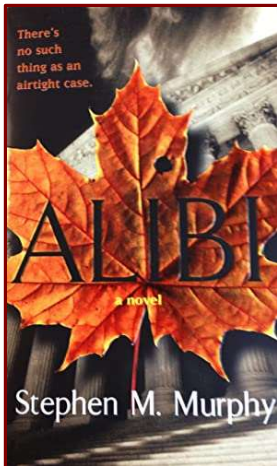
Stiletta: As an attorney, did you feel particularly qualified to write legal thrillers? How did you get started?

SMM: Being an attorney definitely made it easier to write legal thrillers. I understand what happens in the courtroom and behind the scenes. I got started writing after interviewing several lawyer authors, in particular Scott Turow, for a local bar association magazine. I figured if he could practice law and still write, then so could I. It turned out to be a lot harder than I'd imagined. For one thing,

Member Profile: Stephen M. Murphy, continued

he had an MFA from Stanford and was a writer before he became an attorney. While I knew the nuances of practicing law, I knew nothing about writing fiction.

Stiletta: Please tell us about your journey to write and publish your first Dutch Francis novel, and how you would describe your protagonist.



SMM: It took about ten years to write *Alibi* and nearly that long to get it published. I had a hard time finding an agent until a friend introduced me to Susan Kelly of the William Pell Agency. She managed to sell the book to Penguin as a paperback original, and it was published in 2005.

Dutch Francis is based on a criminal defense attorney I watched try a high-profile murder case in Manchester, New Hampshire when I was a law clerk. He is a former corporate lawyer who left the rat race in Boston to practice a more humane kind of law in Manchester. He is competent, confident but not cocky, with a wry sense of humor.

Stiletta: Your Dutch Francis series now numbers three. How has Dutch developed as a character over the course of the series to date, and how similar is Dutch to you?

SMM: Dutch has become a bit less idealistic because of his experience with various cases. Normally a serious and ethical lawyer, in *Abiding Conviction* he walked on the edge of legality in trying to find his kidnapped wife. He's similar in that we share a love of the law; he's different in that I never worked for a corporate law firm or tried a criminal case.

Stiletta: Do you particularly enjoy writing a series (and can you tease book number four), and do you want to try a standalone?

SMM: I do enjoy writing a series and exploring different issues with Dutch's cases. Book number four is set during the pandemic after the George Floyd murder and explores issues of race.

I have written a standalone about a judge in San Francisco whose estranged father is accused of murder. After investigating, the judge realizes his father may be innocent, but his only son may be guilty. I am currently querying agents.

Stiletta: You have also written a book featuring interviews with many of the heavy-hitter legal mystery writers. Who were your favorite interview subjects and how did you recruit them for your book?

Member Profile: Stephen M. Murphy, continued

SMM: I enjoyed interviewing all the lawyer authors in the book, but a pair of Boston authors stand out: George Higgins and Barry Reed. Higgins was quite forceful in describing his philosophy of writing (“dialogue is character and character is plot”) and was an engaging interview. Reed is the author of *The Verdict* and other books. He graduated from my college, Holy Cross, and we hit it off, often lunching together when I visited Boston.

It was actually quite easy to arrange the interviews through the publishers/publicity departments. The interviews first appeared in the local bar association magazine, so the authors were happy with the free publicity.

Stiletta: I’m intrigued by the title of another of your books: *What if Holden Caulfield Went to Law School?* Please explain.

SMM: The short story in the book is told from the point of view of a young lawyer interviewing for his first job with a law firm. He is very much like Holden Caulfield in that he hates phonies: “Lawyers are strange birds. They think God purposely made the world a mess just so lawyers could fix it up. . . The only reason I went to law school in the first place was because I didn’t want all these lawyers walking around thinking they were smarter than me.”

The book also contains author interviews, including California authors such as Sheldon Siegel and John Lescroart.

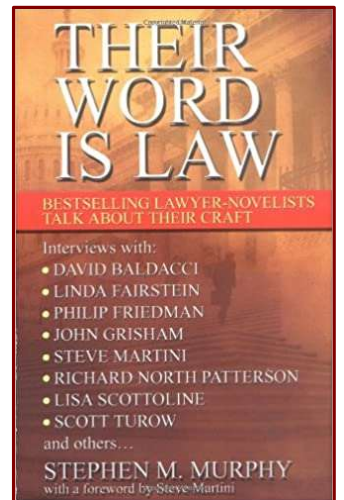
Stiletta: Do you write full-time now? What surroundings and conditions do you find most conducive to your writing?

SMM: No, I work full-time as a judge. Recently I transferred from criminal court to probate.

I write at home on weekends mostly, and occasionally during the week. Before the pandemic, I wrote at a café called Simple Pleasures in San Francisco’s Richmond District. I spent several hours there every Thursday night, which is how I managed to write the first three Dutch Francis books.

Stiletta: What benefits have you received from your membership in Sisters in Crime?

SMM: Sisters in Crime has been terrific. I enjoy the newsletter and listserv, and I particularly enjoyed speaking at the November Author Showcase at Books, Inc., where I met many members. I’ve also attended many seminars and have found them informative and quite useful.



Member Profile: Stephen M. Murphy, continued

Stiletta: What haven't I asked that you would like your follow members to know about you?

SMM: My publishing career has run the gamut from big publisher (Penguin) for my first Dutch Francis book, *Alibi*, to small publisher for my third (Oceanview), *Abiding Conviction*. Of course, there are pluses and minuses with each. I'm happy to share my experiences with any members who are interested.

Stephen M. Murphy was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

A Deadly Combo by debut mystery author Karen A. Phillips, book #1 of the Rocky Nelson Boxing Mysteries, was released on March 1 by River Rock Press.

All That is Hidden, Rhys Bowen's new Molly Murphy book (#19), written with her daughter, Clare Broyles, was released on March 14 by Minotaur Books.

A Preposterous Alibi by Cherie O'Boyle, the first in her new Winslow and Fitzgerald Investigations historical mystery series, will be published on May 1. The book was a finalist in the 2022 Best Historical Claymore Award (for unpublished manuscripts) at Killer Nashville.

The Skin Thief, a paranormal mystery thriller by T.E. [Thena] MacArthur, was released on March 20.

Death in Print by G. M. Malliet, book #5 in the St. Just mystery series, will be released on August 1 by Severn House.

Faye Snowden's short story "The Obsession of Abel Tangier" has been selected for inclusion in *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2023*. The story was originally published in *Low Down Dirty Vote III*, edited by Mysti Berry.

Thonie Hevron announces that Rough Edges Press has re-edited and republished her book *My Force or Fear* on April 4 with a stunning new cover, and released the second in the Meredith Ryan Mystery series, *Intent to Hold*, with a new cover on April 25.

Public Appearances

Ellen Kirschman will be talking to the California Writers Club, South Bay Chapter, about Cops and PTSD on Saturday, May 13 at 10:00 a.m. in the Headan-Inman Historical House Museum at 1509 Warburton St. in Santa Clara. More information will be available at <https://southbaywriters.com>.

Ellen Kirschman will be at the California Writers Conference from June 9 to 11. Her talk on Cops and PTSD will be on Sunday, June 11, at 9:30 a.m.

Member News, continued

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Rhys Bowen's Royal Spyness series is on Penguin Random House's list of the best female detectives written by women, announced during Women's History Month (March).

On April 28, Terry Shames was inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters, an honor society established in 1936 to celebrate Texas literature and recognize distinctive literary achievement.

Faye Snowden's book, *A Killing Rain*, has been named a finalist for this year's Indies Book of the Year Award in the thriller and suspense category. The same book has been longlisted for the 2023 CWA Gold Dagger.

G.M. Malliet's story "Something Blue" is a 2023 Derringer Award finalist in the Long Story category. Derringer Awards are sponsored by The Short Fiction Mystery Society.

Lisa Towles' thriller *Ninety-Five* is a finalist in the 2022 Chanticleer International Book Awards CLUE Award for Suspense and Thriller Mysteries.

Miscellaneous

Terry Shames is happy to announce that she has signed a two-book contract with Severn House. *Perilous Waters* is a new series featuring a dive instructor in the Bahamas whose courage and skill in busting a notorious crime ring leads to a spot on the FBI dive team. *The Curious Death of Maddy Benson* will be the 11th book of the Samuel Craddock series.



Question of the Quarter



What makes a movie/TV adaptation of a book or book series successful or unsuccessful? Is there one you would particularly recommend?

The most important thing for me in a film adaptation of a book or series is that the characters are interpreted faithfully. A great example of this is the Poirot series with David Suchet. He embodied Poirot so effectively that a character that was a bit flat, even caricatured, on the page came to life as a believable and lovable person. An example of failure in this respect is the new *Three Pines* series. They got Gamache pretty well but completely failed to render the residents of the village. In fact, they reversed the appearance and personalities of two of them, Olivier and Gabri, which to me is unforgivable. **Katherine Bolger Hyde**

I think a good movie especially—so short!—comes from a scriptwriter unafraid to chop out entire subplots and whole characters, rather than leave snippets and cameos. It's a win-win: a well-made film and a wealth of extras for a viewer who comes to the book by that route. One case where I loved both the book and the film is *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith. It's not crime fiction but there's a nifty mystery at its heart. **Catriona McPherson**

TV/movie is a different medium. It is visual, action oriented, and demands you react as the writer requires. Reading a book, you create your own interpretation of background and character based on hints in the book. As a result, seeing someone else's visuals can be disconcerting, unless your own opinion hasn't formed. The Vera series (Ann Cleeves) is one of my favorites. My vague idea of Vera was compatible with Brenda Blethyn so "my Vera" is now Blethyn. I liked the Shetland series, too. Well done. But Vera is my favorite. **Priscilla Royal**

I feel strongly that the best adaptations rely heavily on the expertise of the screenwriter. The worst adaptation I've ever seen is *Bonfire of the Vanities*, and my favorite adaptation is *Cider House Rules*. I believe it's no accident that John Irving, who wrote the book, was also the screenwriter for the movie. **Sharon St. George**

If the production respects the story and remains true to its intent, it's often a success. When they decide to use the title or fame of the author and go off on a tangent having nothing to do with what the writer was trying to say, these ventures are often failures. I think Agatha Christie is the best example of both sides of this question, as her work is done endlessly. When they respect the work, the result is usually marvelous. For instance, Joan Hickson as Miss Marple. When they don't, it's pretty dismal. I'm thinking of Tony Randall's Poirot in *The Alphabet Murders*. Yikes. **Heather Haven**

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? and the movie *Blade Runner* share some DNA. Unlikely as it seems, what was once a sci-fi story of a desperate future was transformed into one of the greatest film noir movies ever made. The stories described in the book and movie are quite different, but all the elements of modern crime and mystery are portrayed in both. There is a dark, festering city dominated by giant corporations, treachery, greed, and technology that has run out of control. In

Question of the Quarter, continued

this polluted wasteland, artificial animals are seen as status symbols, while artificial people have become a deadly threat. In both versions, we have the flawed hero dealing with murder, love, and a woman he's not sure he can trust. Two thumbs up to both. More thumbs up for the movie. ***Kenneth Gwin***

The most successful adaptation I've seen recently is *Magpie Murders*, based on the novels by Anthony Horowitz. This series succeeded not only by being beautifully produced and acted, but by making the very complex plot more accessible than it was in the books. ***G.M. Malliet***

I think adherence to storyline/plot elements is critical for a TV adaptation to be well received by the book's reading audience. *Three Pines*, which cast Alfred Molina as Gamache, did a great job with this alignment. But a secondary job of a TV/movie adaptation could be to direct viewers to the book if they hadn't read it to begin with and indoctrinate them as long-term fans of the author. And again, story-parity is critical for the movie to retain credibility with the fanbase, because it shows respect for the author and their original vision.

I thought the recent *Dark Winds* adaptation of Tony Hillerman's book, *The Dark Wind*, brought the storyline to a whole new level of "memorable" by laying bare for us the emotional baggage of loss and betrayal in a landscape too flat to hide from your own truths. Zahn McClarnon and Kiowa Gordon nailed it as Leaphorn and Chee. ***Lisa Towles***



All about YOU!

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