

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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Be an Agent for Change!

I came of age in the 1960s, the era of protest, change, and what we saw as unlimited prospects for a better society.

It was the era of slogans: “Don’t agonize, organize.” “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” “Uppity women, unite.” I still have my Uppity Woman pin, which I bring out when the occasion seems to call for it.

Did it change society? Well, it depends. In many ways, yes, but it also left me, as well as many others of my generation, with a willingness to work for change.

As Toni Morrison so wisely said, “If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

These efforts hold true even to the work we do and the groups we join. We all love to read and write, so organizations such as Sisters in Crime may feel like coming home to our family. But like our families, SinC may not answer all our needs.

You need help or a leg up with your marketing?

You want to learn how to put together a book launch?

You want to tackle writing another genre?

You’re looking for a critique group or some beta readers?

You want to socialize with others like you who can share



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President's Letter, continued

tales from the writing and publishing world?

These are all projects, presentations, and programs that NorCal has put together for our members, and the ideas came from someone saying, "I'd like to see (or hear) about . . ."

Want to be an agent for change? Want to see a program on poisonous frogs in the Amazon? Learn how to do research on census data?

Consider joining the Board of Directors. We'll be adding some Member-at-Large seats in addition to looking for an Events Chair, a Secretary, a Membership Chair, and a Communications Chair. Our chapter is only as strong as the members who participate and lend their enthusiasm and ideas.

We're going to be writing job descriptions and posting them on the website so volunteers can see what they might be getting into, but these aren't hard and fast. Brainstorming and creativity, programs to benefit members, new ways to use social media to sell your books are all areas we would like to tackle.

We're recruiting until the elections in November.

Interested? Want to talk about it? Email any board member (see contact information on the last page of this issue) and ask! Come and join us.

Sincerely,

Michele Drier

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



My Uppity Pin

Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, August 5, 12:00 – 2:00 p.m.

How to Write Stunning Sentences, with Nina Schuyler

Sausalito Library, Edgewater Room, 420 Litho St., Sausalito

Hybrid meeting with Zoom, potluck and mingle for in-person attendees

The style of a sentence – diction, imagery, syntax, rhythm, and sound – isn't frivolous decoration, but content. This workshop will help you master the art of writing sentences that do more than move the story along. We will do in-class writing, so bring your paper and pen. Nina Schuyler's most recent novel, *Afterword*, was published in May 2023. Her non-fiction books, *How to Write Stunning Sentences* and *Stunning Sentences: A Creative Writing Journal*, are Small Press Distribution bestsellers.

If you are attending in person, the doors will open at 11:45. The presentation will begin at 12:30. Please bring a dish for the potluck.

Please check our website and your email for updates and more information on our September and October events, and for registration links for all events:

Saturday, September 9, 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

What to Do Until the Editor Arrives: A Primer on Self-Editing, with Lourdes Venard

Zoom meeting

Lourdes Venard is a journalist, editor, and educator with more than 25 years of editing experience in fiction publishing and journalism. She specializes in mysteries and thrillers, fantasy, science fiction, multicultural literature, and Young Adult. Lourdes is also the lead instructor for the UC San Diego Copyediting Certificate Program.

Saturday, October 7, 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Marketing, Podcasts, and Interviews, with Pam Stack

Zoom meeting

Pam Stack is the host of the Authors on the Air podcast and the owner of Authors on the Air Global Radio Network.

In Case You Missed It . . .

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

May Meeting - Spring Author Showcase

Planned and emceed by SinC NorCal Vice President Glenda Carroll, this spring's Author Showcase featured the following authors, reading from their recent works, plus a drawing for free books.



Cara Black



Cindy Sample



Claudia Long



George Cramer



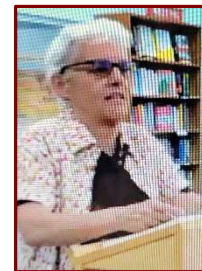
Heather Haven



F Janet Dawson



Katherine Bolger Hyde



Leslie Karst



Nannette Potter



Susan Shea



Thena MacArthur



Vinnie Hansen

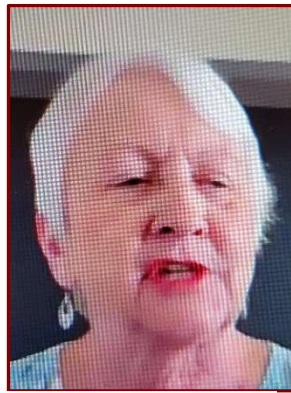
In Case You Missed It . . . continued

June Meeting - A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Crime Scene

Three of our own seasoned members—Heather Haven, Cindy Sample, and Catriona McPherson—along with moderator Michelle Chouinard – discussed the challenges of writing funny in the serious mystery genre. They talked about tools to inject humor, violating the norm or expectation, where in the process humor happens, what to do when the funny doesn't come, incorporating humor into a mystery not meant to be funny, how to pitch a humorous mystery, and much more. The panelists also talked about the authors and their works that influenced their ability to write comedy.



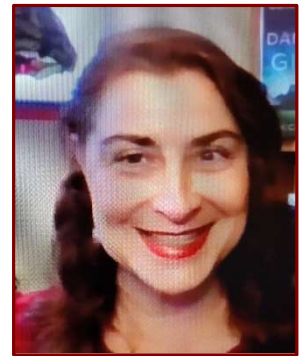
Heather Haven



Cindy Sample



Catriona McPherson



Michelle Chouinard



Invasive Species Anthology: Call for Submissions!

by Michele Drier

Invasive species are those plants or animals that arrive in a habitat and begin to take over from the native species that have lived and thrived there for eons.



In California, we have a host of them, from the eucalyptus trees that smell so refreshing, look lovely with the rain sliding down their bark, and explode like Roman candles in a fire, to the thousands of gold-seekers who arrived between 1848 and 1860, pushing out the natives, digging up the rivers and streams in the Sierra Nevada. And later doing what they euphemistically called “hydraulic mining,” shooting high-powered blasts of water at mountainsides, washing tons of silt down and clogging the Delta.

Because invasive species can wreak such change, NorCal has titled our next short story anthology *Invasive Species*, to be launched at Left Coast Crime 2024.

Members of SinC NorCal are invited to submit your crime or mystery story involving an invasive species—be it plant, animal or human—set in Northern California. Stories must be 1,500 to 5,000 words in 12-point double-spaced Times New Roman font.

The judges are award-winning authors and mystery notables from across the country, including women and men, writers of color, and LGBTQ+ authors, and the final selections will be edited by Josh Pachter. The selected stories and authors will work with Pachter from mid-November to the end of January, editing, polishing, and making their work shine . . . plus each will receive a \$50 payment.

In addition, Susan Bickford has set up a subgroup in groups.io for writers looking for feedback and criticism on their potential submissions. The link: AnthologyStoryCritiques@SinCNorCal2.groups.io. Subscribe by sending an email to AnthologyStoryCritiques+subscribe@SinCNorCal2.groups.io.

Remember to email your submission to submissions@sincnorcal.org by the deadline, August 15, 2023. Include two attachments: one page with your name, address, payment preference and address, and the second with nothing but your story.

How the Airlines Revived My Writing Career: Two Days at the California Crime Writers Conference

by Laura Boss

At which point the hero of this story decides to leave the comfortable world of virtual connection and push away from her desk, get out of her chair, and attend the California Crime Writers Conference live and in person.

“Why?” the reader asks.

It began, as so many things do, with an email . . .

COVID-19 changed things for all of us. In my case, it pretty much killed my day job, which had involved a LOT of time in airplanes and airports. After only two weeks of shutdown, everyone I knew was climbing the walls—but not me. I confess I was one of those people who relished the chance to stay at home, cooking and sleeping and writing. Once the vaccine came out, my friends shot from their homes like stones from a sling. Not me. It had only taken me 24 hours to embrace my inner-hermit, and I was still happy in my shell. When the faint call to adventure sounded outside my front door, I just dug deeper into my sofa and chose a new show on Netflix. No adventures for me.



But then I received an email. And another. And another. They were from the airlines I had abandoned. I really had flown a lot in the past, and now three airlines were sending me alarming emails informing me my accumulated miles were going to expire. Hundreds of thousands of them.

I told myself I didn't care. But as Brenda Blethyn blathered on in the background, I remembered how hard-earned those miles were. People fight over who gets the mileage in divorce settlements. I understand that impulse. Reluctantly, I thought I should probably do something. It seemed I'd have to get on a plane.

And go where and do what, exactly?

When I wasn't on the sofa, I was sitting at my desk. Losing my job had given me ample time to write, but it had stopped going anywhere. I thought about my completed manuscript sitting in various stages of revision. I needed a self-imposed deadline. I needed inspiration. I needed to get out of the house. I decided to look for a writers' conference set within the timeframe and distances I needed to use up some of my soon-to-expire miles.

How the Airlines Revived My Writing Career, continued

Before the pandemic, I had wanted to go to the California Crime Writers Conference—a joint production of Sisters in Crime/Los Angeles and Mystery Writers of America/SoCal Chapter. It's a conference dedicated to "the craft and the business of crime writing." The last in-person conference was held in 2019, and it was being offered the second weekend in June after a 3-year hiatus. The two guests of honor were Deborah Crombie and Rachel Howzell Hall. So far, so great. And then I saw they included Consultfest—a chance to have the first 2,000 words of my languishing WIP evaluated by a developmental editor. It was exactly what I needed.

I made my plans and set off on a cold, grey Friday morning. For me, travel is a slog. It's jetlag. It's melancholy nights flying across dark oceans to attend a 24-hour meeting. But underneath the gloom of my mood, I felt a kernel of excitement. I parked my car at the San Bruno BART Station, where parking is free on the weekends, and took the train one stop. Taking a deep breath, I put on my mask, adjusted the grip on my wheeled bag, and strode forth onto the highly polished floors of San Francisco International Airport.

So many people! All of them rushing around. Going somewhere. Why? What are they thinking! Why am I here?

In hindsight, I laugh gently at that brief moment of panic. I had no idea what was in store for me. The Delta flight was fine—but let me give you two words that should never be used together: LAX and Uber. As in, "I will pick up an Uber at LAX."

LAX had been a ride-share bun fight at the pickup zones three years ago, but I knew the drill. The pre-COVID drill. This was a whole new world of crazy. Let's just say it took twice as long to get to the Uber pickup point as it took to get from the airport to the Hilton Culver City. It wasn't just me. The first words out of the mouths of every frazzled attendee arriving at check-in were about the ride to the hotel. And then they asked for directions to the bar.

After registering at the conference, I went to my room and unpacked the blue CCWC shoulder bag, complete with meal tickets, a glossy program, and four new books I looked forward to reading. Some of my colleagues from our daily Zoom writing sessions were also attending, and we set up a group text to meet in the lobby for dinner. It was so good to see familiar faces.

How the Airlines Revived My Writing Career, continued

The first event of the conference began that night with an interview with Haris Orkin followed by a competition between the antagonists written by one group of writers against the protagonists written by another. NorCal had a good showing with Vera Chan, Vinnie Hansen, and Ellen Kirschman joining the SoCal Sisters reading scenes with their characters.

Friday night was the warmup as we got used to being in a crowd. Some people were more comfortable wearing masks, but most chose not to. It was tempting to raise a hand before speaking, like trying to get noticed on Zoom to avoid talking over other people, but I resisted the impulse. The ebb and flow of cocktail conversation started coming back to me. I could do this. Don't get me wrong—I do get out of the house and see friends. I go to restaurants and engage. I just haven't been around a crowd of strangers for a long, long, time, and I think getting used to it again felt awkward for many of us there.

Saturday's schedule began with a choice of four concurrent classes: "Online Ad Strategies and Marketing," "Hardboiled Wonderland," "Forensics and the Cutting Edge," and "Tips for Writing a Short Story." That was the structure used for both days: a choice of hour-long classes or workshops covering topics writers would find helpful. I started out with the short story class, thinking ahead to our upcoming anthology and any tips I might get. After the 15-minute break between classes, I moved on to "From Small Press to Self-Published," but I think the majority of the attendees went to "Writing the Sex Scene Without Losing Your Shirt."

Next was a keynote luncheon with Rachel Howzell Hall. I'd just finished *These Toxic Things: A Thriller* and can highly recommend it. Rachel went to the dais, took the microphone, and . . . all the fire alarms went off. An electronic voice blared over the loudspeaker, repeatedly telling us to exit the building while the waitstaff told us to stay seated because it was a false alarm. Rachel remained poised, and we stayed in our seats after a moment's uncertainty. When the alarms finally stopped, Rachel was able to talk about her personal path to a writing career and her process. The woman is an inspiration—she gets up at 4:30 in the morning to write for two hours while it's quiet. She shared her experience as a woman writer of color and advice on creating authentic voice and scenes when writing characters who are not like you.

Rachel was followed by another selection of classes and workshops and then a keynote workshop with Deborah Crombie—"Researching your Novel Across the Pond." Deborah, who is American, (well, Texan) sets her novels in the UK, and you'd never guess she wasn't British when

How the Airlines Revived My Writing Career, continued

you read her books. This time, no alarms were set off when she told us of her personal journey of becoming a writer and her love of the UK.

The NorCal team regrouped for dinner, a larger party this time. There was a lot of conversation about AI and what it might mean for writers going forward, and then it was off to watch the documentary *Women of Mystery*.

Inspired by the film, I went up to my room and reread the 2,000 words I'd sent for tomorrow's Consultfest session with Helga Schier, Ph.D., Editorial Director of CamCat Books. So caught up in what I was learning and the fun I was having, I'd forgotten my primary reason for choosing this conference. I reread my submission. *What if she hated it?*

My Sunday began appropriately with a session of "Humorous Ways to Die." From that I went to "Authentic Characters, Different Ethnicities," moderated by our own Vera Chan. Vera was a star, keeping the topic moving and giving all the panelists equal microphone time. Unfortunately, I had to sneak out early as my own personal moment of reckoning was approaching. I had an appointment with an editor.

It was very quiet in the carpeted hallways of the conference center when the sessions were in progress. I knew everyone else was sitting behind the closed doors lining the corridor while I walked alone with a different purpose. I could sense them breathing. There was a certain sense of doom, like I was on my way to the principal's office.

Four editors were spaced far apart at tables placed under heat lamps on the terrace, visible through the glass walls of the break-out area. I clutched my nametag lanyard and took a seat next to a man fussing with his collar as he waited for his own turn with one of the other evaluators. We nodded at each other and resumed staring into the distance.

When it was my turn, I was greeted by a volunteer and taken outside to meet Helga, who was wearing black leather and the absolute best spiderweb tights I've ever seen. Helga took out my pages and let me have it: helpful information! It was a critique, so it was critical, but that was just what I needed, just what I had asked for. I wanted to know how I could make my opening pages better, and she gave me great ideas. I knew I needed the advice of someone who hadn't read these pages 100 times. She gave me ideas for comps. She loved the twist. It was constructive. I couldn't wait to get home to start making changes.

How the Airlines Revived My Writing Career, continued

I had so much on my mind that I barely remember lunch – this time Deborah Crombie held the keynote spot, giving us more stories about her life and career. After lunch I went to “Skeleton of a Mystery,” where we had a quick-fire workshop and together created a story complete with victim, murderer, suspects, and motives in less than an hour.

The final keynote workshop was with Rachel Howzell Hall. She shared practical tips this time, such as including things that can’t be Googled – like little secrets about your settings that only a local would know – and using colored markers to code setting, action, dialogue, exposition, and feeling during a rewrite to easily see the balance of your scenes.

Then it was a rush to the airport (thankfully the return was much easier) and a glass of wine with Ellen Kirschman and Susan Bickford at a Wolfgang Puck outlet before we boarded our separate planes.

I wasn’t as anxious on my United flight or in the airport as I traversed through SFO on my way home. Maybe I could make another trip soon. I still have to do something with miles on American Airlines. I’m thinking of Boston in November for New England Crime Bake. It would be another useful, self-imposed deadline, and they have a whole section for aspiring authors to meet editors and agents. I would be forced to finish my first manuscript – or to at least let it go and pick up the pace on the second manuscript I’ve already started, and the third, also started. It’s something to think about.

As I write this, I think the biggest and most important takeaway from that weekend was that life is getting back to normal. That, and how grateful I am for the time I was able to spend with other members of Sisters in Crime. Yes, there were workshops and well-known writers, a bookstore, an auction, and yoga on the lawn. But it was conversations during the gaps between sessions, and the shared meals we enjoyed, that made the conference special for me. The time to make deeper connections with other people who spend hours a day staring at a blank screen while trying to come up with something to say is priceless. And doing this in person – even if it involves getting on a plane – is what made the California Crime Writers Conference truly worthwhile to me. It comes around every two years. I hope to see you there in 2025.

Laura Boss is a design consultant specializing in destination spas and wellness communities. She is currently working on her first mystery novel following an addiction she took up to pass the time on long-haul flights while running her projects worldwide. She loves staying at home in San Francisco, playing mahjong and taking care of other people’s pets.

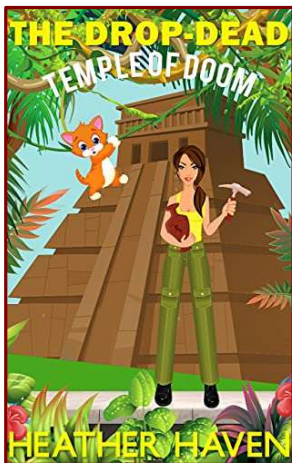
Bewitched, Bothered, and Befuddled Am I

by Heather Haven

I've done it again. I began a new novel on a subject about which I know absolutely nothing. Zip. Nada. Did I not learn my lesson from the last Alvarez Family Mystery, *The Drop-Dead Temple of Doom*? Apparently not. But that's a writer for ya. Or at least, that's me for ya. I get an idea, embrace it, love it, it becomes mine, and I'm off and away.



It's only when I plop myself down at the keyboard and have no idea how to start the first sentence that I realize I am in deep doo-doo. That's what happened with *Drop-Dead*. My fingers hovered over the keyboard waiting for words to come to me. They didn't. I had no idea what a Guatemalan jungle was like. I didn't know the first thing about archaeology. And, truth be told, an ancient Mayan could have risen from the dead, bitten me on the knee, and I wouldn't have had the first clue as to who, what, or why. I left my office and dove headfirst into a martini, the first of many. Ernest Hemingway may have said, "Write drunk, edit sober," but you gotta know SOMETHING about a subject before you can write about it.



Sure, I have to do a little research for all my novels, but I'd pushed the limits on this. A Guatemalan jungle? Even though I was born and raised in South Florida and have been to Parrot Jungle, that's not the same. Archaeology? Simply because I'd streamed *Lost Cities with Albert Lin* didn't mean I knew the first thing about digging anything up other than weeds. And the ancient Mayans? Ditto, ditto, and ditto.

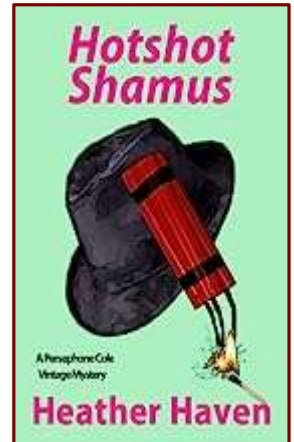
But I had a fire in the belly. I wanted to tap into the real-life story of a young woman who is an Indiana Jones of today. I'll call her Indiana Josie. She tromps around the jungles of Guatemala uncovering all kinds of wondrous things. And thanks to the development of LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging), the exploration of ancient Mayan cultures has exploded. This is truly the golden age of discovery for this remarkable culture.

So began a crash course in not one, not two, but three subjects. As the world was in lockdown from Covid then, even if I'd wanted to fly to the jungles of Guatemala for firsthand experience, I couldn't have. Instead, I bled Indiana Josie dry of any knowledge she could give me. I watched

Bewitched, Bothered, and Befuddled, continued

every documentary on archaeology, not merely as a spectator, but as a student. I read anything I could find on the ancient Mayan culture, gasping at pictures of their paintings, jewelry, and tombs. I marveled at what they had created, believing as many do, that they rival the Egyptians in many ways. Eight months later, while not an expert on any of these subjects, I was able to sit down at the computer and write.

After completing the latest novel in my other series, *Hotshot Shamus*, book 4 of the Persephone Cole Vintage Mysteries, I now return to the Alvarez series, with *Bewitched, Bothered, and Beheaded* as the next project. For whatever reason, I decided to write about a magic trick gone wrong, a dead magician, and the protagonist, Lee Alvarez, as the chief suspect. Belly fire returning. No antacids working.



Of course, I find I am in deep doo-doo again. I know nothing about the subject, nothing about magicians or their tricks. Leave it to me to have misadventure with a guillotine front and center, basically starting the story off. Naturally, I can't write a word until I investigate this. So, it's off to the library for several dozen books on the subject. And I recently contacted David Copperfield for an interview. Start at the top, right? Maybe he'll give me a few tips. If not, I'll work my way down. I hear there's a magician, Melvin the Magnificent, performing in a San Jose parking lot. Maybe he'll talk to me.

Meanwhile, I need to face it. I just never learn.

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

From Memoir to Suspense: My Unexpected Journey by Heidi Eliason

I never meant to write a memoir. Although I realized I wanted to write from the time I was in high school and penned a suspenseful short story that earned me a coveted “A” in my creative writing class, writing a memoir was never on my radar.

I was interested in mystery and suspense stories from a young age. A book of Alfred Hitchcock stories belonging to my older siblings fascinated me. I even wrote a knock-off of one of Hitchcock’s stories that earned me a ribbon in a second-grade writing contest. (Even at that young age it seemed undeserved, since it wasn’t an original idea.)



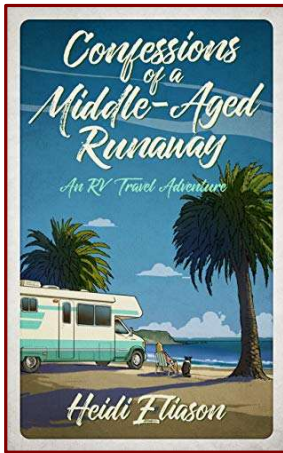
After a brief stint reading romance novels as a teenager, I indulged my love of mysteries by plowing through one after another as a young adult. I often dreamed of being a writer and eventually made a career out of writing training courses and manuals. Not the author's life I dreamed of.

Why I Wrote a Memoir

When I was forty-five and in the throes of a midlife and existential crisis, I decided my life needed a major shake-up. I had survived eighteen years of single parenthood and found myself afflicted with a severe case of wanderlust, so I took a giant leap. I sold my house, quit my job, bought a motorhome, and hit the road with my dog for five years. Although I had only planned to take one year off the hamster wheel, when the end of that first year approached, I discovered I wasn’t ready to return to the “real world.” I loved the luxurious freedom, fun-loving friends, and fresh sights and experiences too much to stop. I found work that would allow me to continue my nomad lifestyle for another four years.

It wasn’t the smartest financial decision to quit my job during my prime wage-earning years, give up my benefits, and live off some of the proceeds from the sale of my house. But, oh, was it ever worth it! I was transformed from an unhappy, stressed out, and insecure empty nester to a fun-loving, friendly, and more confident woman who loved life.

From Memoir to Suspense, continued



Years later, my writing group members encouraged me to turn my four-page submissions into a memoir. While I was traveling, many people told me I was living their dream, so I thought it might be helpful to share my experience. This ultimately resulted in the publication of *Confessions of a Middle-Aged Runaway: An RV Travel Adventure* in 2019.

Why I Switched from Memoir to Suspense

Many of the people who read *Confessions* told me they were hoping for a sequel. I tried to accommodate them by writing another memoir, but I couldn't produce a good story arc. Memoirs require a good story arc, too. Apparently, I wasn't ready to write another memoir. Next, I tried writing another nonfiction book, but that didn't work either.

I wanted to write fiction instead – the genre I loved to read, suspense. Writing suspense fiction allows for more creativity than memoir. Pesky, real-life events do not constrain fiction writers – they can let their imaginations run wild. I enjoyed writing my memoir, even if the facts of my past fenced me in, but I was ready to let my imagination fly.

After a few missteps, I chose my current work, loosely based on an experience I had – with lots of drama added. Although suspense is a vastly different genre than memoir, I'm hoping my readers will be drawn to it because it has some of the same elements as my memoir. There is a female protagonist traveling the country in a motorhome who is trying to escape her past. She encounters suspicious circumstances and finds herself caught up in a cat-and-mouse game, but it's unclear which part she'll play.

Which Was More Challenging: Memoir or Fiction

Writing a memoir was difficult because I wanted to make sure I got things right, and our memories can be so fickle. It was also challenging to expose myself and admit to my faults and mistakes. It seemed so much easier to write fiction because I could just make everything up. But the fear of getting the details correct remains.

Writing a suspense novel with twists and turns, authentic emotion, and realistic dialogue – all while surprising the reader – is not as easy as it seemed. I've wandered off into the weeds a couple of

From Memoir to Suspense, continued

times and have had to backtrack. How I envy the authors that churn out a book or two every year! I'm not a fast writer, and I have to keep reminding myself that crossing the finish line is what's important to me, not the speed with which I get there. That attitude might not get me an agent or publisher, but I'm fine with being an indie author. I don't want to produce a book every six or twelve months at this point in my life. I want to enjoy the process.

Creating a relatable book is difficult, regardless of the genre. Jumping from memoir to a suspense novel may seem like an enormous leap, but it feels like the right direction at this stage of my life. I can see my suspense story evolving into a series if I get it right. And who knows? Maybe someday I'll write another memoir. The evolution of a writer is not always a straight line. The magic lies in the telling of a good story, no matter the genre.

Heidi Eliason is an internationally published author and editor. Her past work includes writing for an RV adventure company and producing more than fifty RV travel articles for an online news source. *Confessions of a Middle-Aged Runaway* is her first book. It has been translated into Korean and was a 2022 Readers' Favorite Nonfiction Travel Award Finalist. Heidi is currently a board member of the California Writers Club Mt. Diablo Chapter and lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her musician husband and gentle giant dog. Find out more and read author interviews at HeidiEliason.com.



CrimeFest Bristol (UK) Recap

by Cara Black



I flew into Bristol in mid-May from Paris on EasyJet—takes only an hour! After three years I was excited to return and attend CrimeFest, a crime writing and fan convention, and to be with our UK “tribe.” Adrian Muller, who lived in the Bay Area, and Donna Moore, whom many know from Bouchercon, put this on and it’s a marvel. Four days of panels, talks, interviews, and even a Eurovision screening in the ballroom.

Lovely to see pals Mark Billingham and Elly Griffiths, who were featured guests, and enjoy the camaraderie.

There was definitely pub time with new authors I met!



The CrimeFest conference, “where the pen is bloodier than the sword,” is held in a hotel in the historic part of Bristol near the Warren Street market, a tiny street chocked with food stalls and jammed at lunch—food from everywhere.

My panel on “Dark Times: Crime Fiction Set in and around WWII” was moderated by Luke McCallin, with Mark Ellis, Chris Lloyd and Ovidia Yu, and was full. Who knew so many were into WWII? I loved hearing from Mark Ellis, a Bristol-based author who writes about the city in the war. Please check out their books. Meeting other local authors who write what we’d call domestic suspense set in and around Bristol is also a big plus to me. I discovered so many new authors, bought books, and filled up my bag. In addition, I enjoyed hanging out with my old blogmates from *Murder is Everywhere*: Stan Trollip, Zoë Sharp, Ovidia Yu, and Caro Ramsey.



I moderated the panel “The Ones You Least Expect: Keeping the Reader Guessing” with featured guest Elly Griffiths, as well as MJ Lee, Gilly Macmillan and CL Taylor, who were new to me and whose books I inhaled. All the panels were in a higgledy-piggledy



arrangement of rooms and ballrooms and worked so well. After all, the hotel is a century or two old, and Brits are used to accommodating the old and new.

CrimeFest Bristol Recap, continued

PS: I trekked to the nearest Marks and Spencer for sandwiches—yes, they are that good—and it's what I've missed since Brexit closed the M+S in Paris. I played hooky and went to a matinee performance of *Sense and Sensibility* . . . an amazing musical take on Jane Austen at the Bristol Old Vic.

I love CrimeFest and highly recommend!



Cara Black, an espresso drinker, writes the *NY Times* bestselling *Aimée Leduc* mysteries set in Paris and two WWII thrillers. She lives in San Francisco and joins the Sisters in Crime write-ins whenever she can!



**. . . to our newest members
(joining SinC NorCal from April 1 through June 30, 2023)**

Jody BrettKelly
Vicki DeArmon
Kate Leahy
Gail Mead
Kit Sanders
Melanie Spiller

Are Some Words Funnier Than Others?

At our June meeting, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Crime Scene," panelist Heather Haven showed us a list she had found with words that can make your humorous writing even funnier. She has it posted on the bulletin board in the room where she writes so it's handy when she needs it.

Some of you requested that list, which can be found online at: <https://ifunny.co/picture/has-anyone-else-any-of-these-words-from-the-past-5f4vVNR88>

Here is the list. You're welcome!

Some of the best words ever!

Gallivant * Britches * Codger * Rigmarole
Hoodwink * Ragamuffin * Fiddle-faddle
Humbug * Skullduggery * Jalopy * Kibosh
Bejeebers * Fliberty-jibbit * Hullabaloo
Bamboozled * Flabbergasted * Brouhaha
Discombobulated * Lollygag * Malarkey
Cattywampus * Nincompoop * Skedaddle
Shenanigans * Flummoxed * Pumpernickle
Berserk * Periwinkle * Thingamyjig * Whatsit
Confuzzled * Kerfuffle * Poppycock * Bogus
Balderdash * Fuddy-duddy * Thunderation
Whosemegadget * Skewwiff * Lambasted
Flim-flam * Whatchamacallit * Concoction
Doohicky * Gobsmacked * Thingamebob
Camaraderie * Nucklehead * Wishywashy
Fiddlesticks * Caterwauling * Rigmarole
Tomfoolery * Bodacious * Fiddle-dee-dee
Willy-nilly * Decrepid * Persnickety * Egads
Audacity * Baloney * Kerfuffle * Numb-skull

compiled by adgrayvisions

Member Profile: Heather Chavez

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

A former journalist, Heather Chavez lives in Santa Rosa and is the author of three thrillers with female protagonists.

Stiletta: You graduated from UC Berkeley’s English literature program. What type of career did you envision at that time?

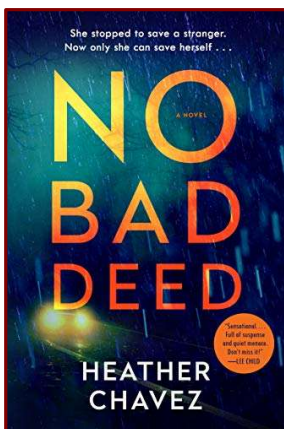
Heather Chavez: I always knew I wanted to be a writer, but the publishing industry being as competitive as it is, I also always knew I needed a Plan B. I considered careers in both journalism and communications, and that’s where I ultimately ended up.

Stiletta: Tell us about your work as a newspaper journalist. What newspaper(s) and what types of reporting did you do?



HC: I was a reporter at the *Lake County Record Bee* in my twenties. Because it was a smaller daily newspaper, I did a little bit of everything. I wrote a series on domestic violence, but also reported on lighter topics like a woman who went parasailing for her 90th birthday. I tended to write human interest stories, although I also covered politics and the police, including reporting on a major wildfire and an armed standoff. When you’re working at a small newspaper, you need to be flexible. And efficient. I also worked as a copy editor and page designer for the *Press Democrat* in Santa Rosa, where I also contributed to TV and mystery blogs.

Stiletta: How did your experience as a journalist inform your later fiction writing?



HC: Writing under deadline helped a lot, but one of the most important skills I developed was learning how to edit. Being a copy editor taught me how to sacrifice sentences, and often whole chapters, in the best interest of the story.

Stiletta: You have had three standalone thrillers published, the third just recently in late June. What drew you to the thriller genre?

HC: Since discovering my first Dean Koontz novel when I was 11, I’ve been drawn to dark, twisty stories. As a former journalist, I’ve also long been curious about why people do horrible things to people they claim to care about. The “why” of it all has interested me as much as the “what if.” Thrillers allow us places we aren’t normally allowed access, whether that be behind a neighbor’s door or inside the mind of a pregnant assassin. Writing has always been cathartic for me, too—a way of navigating the

Member Profile: Heather Chavez, continued

complicated, sometimes terrifying, often confusing world we live in.

Stiletta: What was the most challenging part of becoming a published author?

HC: Everyone's journey is different, of course, but for me, the biggest challenge was believing in myself. I had been writing "practice" novels for decades before I decided to query in 2018. Like many other authors, I would put writing last, or dismiss it as a hobby, even after the first book deal.

Stiletta: All three of your thrillers feature women as the protagonist. Tell us about the kinds of women you like to write about.

HC: A lot of the thrillers I read growing up featured ordinary men being tested in extraordinary ways, and I wanted to write the same stories from a female perspective. I enjoy exploring how these characters navigate their complicated lives and find their strength (whether that be emotional, mental, or physical) in a way that's unique and authentic to them. For example, Julia the botanist/single mom isn't going to solve a problem the same way as hired killer Ren.

Stiletta: Your first two books are written in the first person, your third in the third person. What made you decide to change to a different point of view?



HC: I enjoy writing both and choose POV and structure based on what feels right for the story. Because my third book is dual POV, third person felt the most natural, though I've also seen multi-character stories artfully executed in first person. Maybe I'll try that myself someday if it's a good fit for the story.

Stiletta: Are you a plotter, a pantsier, or both?

HC: Definitely a plotter. I need a roadmap to know where I'm going. Not that I don't veer off course. In the book I'm writing now, for instance, the antagonist reveal ended up going in a completely different direction once I got to know the characters better. Still, many of the mileposts along the way remain true to my original outline.

Stiletta: Are you still working full-time in public affairs? How do you balance that work with your novel writing?

HC: Funny, you should ask. After working full-time since the age of 18, even when I was attending college full-time, I recently quit my day job. Though I balanced both for years, I decided to finally

Member Profile: Heather Chavez, continued

take the leap. I'm curious what it will be like to not have to feel the pressure of filling every moment—to not have to try to give 100 percent to two competing pursuits. (Parents of young children who write—I've been there, it's damn hard, and you deserve large trophies filled with chocolate.)

Stiletta: Please tell us about your preferred writing environment and routine.

HC: Since I'm newly among the self-employed, my routine is evolving. I'm definitely a morning writer so, up until this month, I started writing at about 6:00 a.m. on weekdays before work and then around 8:00 a.m. on weekends until I ran out of gas. (On deadline, though, all hope of sticking to a routine goes out the window. Then, I've pulled many all-nighters.) As for my environment, I need an organized workspace. If the house is messy, for instance, I can't have line of sight to the dirty dishes in the sink or the laundry that needs to be folded. I'm easily distracted that way.

Stiletta: What authors have influenced you the most in your writing of thrillers?

HC: This is the kind of question that's so hard to answer because I'm always discovering authors who inspire me with their work (Wendy Walker, Jane Harper, Michael Koryta, Jennifer Hillier, Samantha Downing, and Megan Collins among them). Some of my earliest influences, though, are Dean Koontz, Lisa Gardner, Jeffrey Deaver, Harlan Coben, and Lisa Unger.

Stiletta: What's next for you—are you working on a new novel?

HC: I'm in edits for a book set during wildfire season in Northern California. Three women—all with secrets and conflicting agendas—in a race against a wildfire.

Stiletta: How have you benefited by being a member of Sisters in Crime?

HC: I wrote my first book without a community. With this group and others like it, I feel like I've finally found one.

Heather Chavez was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

A Sense for Murder by Leslie Karst, Book #6 in the Sally Solari Mystery series, will be released on August 1 by Severn House

Hotshot Shamus by Heather Haven, book #4 in The Persephone Cole Vintage Mysteries, was released on May 7.

Saints and Skeletons: A Memoir of Living in Mexico, Ana Manwaring's memoir about her experiences in Mexico, was released on June 21 by Indies United Publishing House.

Before She Finds Me by Heather Chavez was released on June 27 by Mulholland Books.

Without Due Caution by Thonie Hevron, book #5 in the Meredith Ryan Mystery series, was released on June 27 by Rough Edges Press.

Elena Smith's short story, "Darker," was published in the Winter 2023 issue of *Punk Noir* magazine (published in February).

JoAnn Smith Ainsworth created audiobooks for her award-winning paranormal suspense series set in WWII, wherein the U.S. Government recruits psychics to hunt down Nazi spies. Becky Parker narrated the audiobooks.

G.M. Malliet's *The Washing Away of Wrongs*, Max Tudor Mystery #8, will be released on September 28 by Little, Brown. Her 5th DCI St. Just book, *Death in Print*, launches August 1 from Severn House.

Cherie O'Boyle is releasing *An Unforeseen Motive*, the second in her Winston & Fitzgerald Investigations East Bay historical mysteries, on August 1. She invites readers to come along on this adventure to see if they can discover the motive before Evelyn and Flora sleuth it out.

Guilt Strikes at Granger's Store by Terry Shames, 10th in the Samuel Craddock series, will be released October 3 by Severn House.

Public Appearances

Ellen Kirschman will be at Bouchercon moderating a panel titled "Ride Along: Law Enforcement in Fiction." As a psychologist, the person no cop wants to see, she promises mischief afoot. Ellen will also join the panel "Senior Sleuths: Never Too Old for a Mystery." Whether this means never too old to write one, read one, or make one is to be determined.

Member News, continued

Vinnie Hansen has been invited by Bookshop Santa Cruz to be “in conversation” with *NY Times* bestselling author Karen M. McManus on Tuesday, August 3 at 7:00 p.m.

Rhys Bowen will be signing copies of her new book *The Paris Assignment*. at Book Passage in Corte Madera on August 19 at 1:00 p.m. It will be a busy August for Rhys, with the book launch on August 8 and various Zoom interviews, in addition to the Book Passage event.

Terry Shames will have a “meet and greet the author” event on Thursday, August 17 from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. at Mrs. Dalloway’s in Berkeley. She’d love to see some of SinC members there, as she misses her Bay Area friends “SO much.”

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Finalists for Anthony Awards for 2023 include the following SinC NorCal members: Catriona McPherson (*In Place of Fear*, Best Historical; *Scot in a Trap*, Best Humorous); Mysti Berry (*Low Down Dirty Vote Volume 3: The Color of My Vote*, Best Anthology). Winners will be announced at Bouchercon in September.

Ann Parker was awarded the 2023 Spur Award from the Western Writers of America for Best Traditional Novel for *The Secret in the Wall: A Silver Rush Mystery*.

Thonie Hevron was a first-place winner for best unpublished fiction in the Public Safety Writers Conference contest.

Catriona McPherson’s book, *In Place of Fear*, and Ann Parker’s book, *The Secret in the Wall*, have been nominated for the Sue Feder Memorial Macavity Award for Best Historical Mystery by the *Mystery Readers Journal*. Macavity Awards will be presented at the San Diego Bouchercon in late August.

SinC NorCal is well represented in the list of finalists for 2023 Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Awards for the Best Books of 2022: Cindy Sample for Best Comedy, *Birthdays Are Murder*; Vinnie Hansen for Best Mainstream/Commercial, *One Gun*; Ann Parker for Best Mystery, *The Secret in the Wall*. Winners in each category and overall winner will be announced at the awards banquet on August 19 in Nashville, TN.

Susan McCormick’s manuscript, *The Room at the End of the Hall*, is a finalist for Killer Nashville’s Claymore Award for Best Suspense. Susan is now looking for a publishing home.

Member News, continued

Training To Be Delivered

Margaret Lucke will be teaching “Writing Genre Fiction” this fall for UC Berkeley Extension: 10 Wednesday evenings, September 11 to November 15, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. PDT. Learn techniques essential to all fiction while examining the characteristics, conventions, and reader expectations associated with each particular genre – including mysteries and thrillers, of course, as well as science fiction, fantasy, romance, and more. Via Zoom, so you can attend from anywhere. Find out more and register:

<https://extension.berkeley.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=41083>

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.

Leslie Karst is excited to announce that she has just signed a two-book contract with Severn House for a new series – the Orchid Isle Mysteries – set in Hawai‘i, where she lives half time. In the first, *Molten Death* (which releases in April), retired caterer Valerie Corbin and her wife Kristen swap surfing for sleuthing on their first vacation to the Big Island of Hawai‘i, when a hike to an active lava flow turns deadly.



Question of the Quarter



What is your favorite thing that you have written (book, story, poem, play, fan fiction, flash fiction, grocery list, etc.)--published or unpublished--and why?

My favorite short story is one I wrote about eight years ago. It's called "Corliss" and also contains my favorite protagonist, of the same name. I love stories about young people who are at a turning point in their lives and either stumble upon or choose the right way. Corliss does a little bit of both with charm and humor. I even entitled the book containing my collection of short stories after her – *Corliss and Other Short Stories*. You could say I'm smitten. **Heather Haven**

You're asking me to choose between seven books, four short stories, countless blogs, some essays, an opinion piece, and dozens of unpublished poems written during my twenties. My favorite? A revenge essay I wrote about the challenges of a woman buying a new car in a world created by men. **Ellen Kirschman**

I went back to college as a returning student with a small daughter, which was an interesting period in my life. I took a class in creative writing from one of the luminaries in the English Department. He'd taught Raymond Carver (whom I met) and later won an Endowment for the Arts fellowship for a book of his short stories. In his class, one short story I wrote, which he praised, told the story of a woman on the verge of madness. I've never done anything with that story but would like someday to expand it. Going back and rereading it now, more than 40 years later, I think it has bones but needs fleshing out. **Michele Drier**

I do have a favorite book, *The Child Garden*, which I wrote after coming back to California, leaving my family in Scotland to continue grieving over the sudden death of my oldest sister. I've never felt so alone. Gloria Harkness, the book's protagonist, held my hand through a tough season, and I truly feel as if she helped me while I wrote her story. But also, to end on a different note, the first time I thought of writing "SAY NO TO EVERYTHING" in block caps over all the pages of my diary when I had a deadline looming – that was an inspired bit of writing! **Catriona McPherson**

I have the first five chapters written of the "great American dysfunctional family" novel. It's the most creative work I've ever done, or so my critique group says. The story is told in three voices – the matriarch with dementia, the second daughter talking to her therapist, and the first daughter, who is dead. When I read her chapters, I laugh out loud. Of course, much of the story is autobiographical, and the main theme is forgiveness and redemption. Except for the mean older sister – hahaha! **Ana Manwaring**

I'm torn. The successful proposal for a \$500K grant to create the world's first sophisticated, scientific website about our human origins (won a WEBBIE!) or my first French village mystery, which told a story based on two close friends. Some Amazon reviewers said the latter was too slow, but I intended it to be a portrait of people and place that included a mystery, and the pace worked for my storytelling goal. **Susan C. Shea**

Question of the Quarter, continued

My response comes from almost 70 years ago. When I was in fifth grade, we were supposed to write an essay on some historical event. For some bizarre reason, I wrote one on Lee's surrender at Appomattox from the point of view of Lee's horse, Traveler. Not sure my teacher at the time knew what to do with this, but at least he didn't give me an F. *Priscilla Royal*

The favorite thing that I have written is a Mother's Day piece I wrote about my mother, Margie Souza, more than four decades ago. I was inspired to write it when she told me, not long after my father died, that she couldn't find a purpose for herself since after his death. Living in a house much larger than she needed, she said she felt she was just taking up space that could be better used by someone else. I wrote the piece anonymously, listing all the ways she was still contributing to the lives of her three grown children, her five grandchildren, and the friends and neighbors who had been a part of her life for so many years. I submitted it to the daily newspaper in her hometown, asking that my name not be identified as the writer, and that her name not be mentioned. I wanted it to be a Mother's Day piece for any mother who might be experiencing what mine was going through in her grief and loneliness. The paper published the piece just as I had asked. It was the first time I had ever been published, and even without a byline (other than "anonymous"), I was thrilled to see my writing in print, and best of all, to have honored my mother. She, of course, knew as soon as she read it that I had written it for her. *Sharon St. George*

A first publication is so, so special. Mine was a picture book, *Granny Can't Remember Me*, an uplifting, lighthearted story for families with Alzheimer's disease, with a few helpful tips at the back. My favorite lines are, "Granny can't remember me. She doesn't know my name. She can't remember I like soccer and rockets and dogs, and that I don't like raisins. I lost my tooth. I scraped my knee. I kicked a goal. But Granny doesn't know." Seeing the finished product after years of working on this important project, and with beautiful pictures no less – that was my favorite. Each subsequent book – *The Fog Ladies* series, my middle grade and up medical fantasy, *The Antidote*, my new suspense – brings pleasure and excitement, but nothing like the first. *Susan McCormick*

My favorite writing is my latest femme-noir thriller, *1 Last Betrayal*. Why? Oh, this may be silly, but after it was published, my hubby said, "This is your best writing yet!" I've had lots of feedback and reviews, plus fabulous blurbs, but hearing that from my husband really was the best. And I loved writing it. I just lost myself in creating this one. I hope I can do the same with my fourth thriller. *Valerie J. Brooks*

Isn't this a bit like asking us to choose a favorite child? So here's my elliptical, somewhat evasive response. I majored in English with an emphasis in creative writing, and my first impulse was to write literary fiction. (And I was actually short-listed for the Iowa School of Letters Award for Short Fiction.) However, when I tried to write a novel, I realized that I didn't have a clue how to plot. Mysteries, my

Question of the Quarter, continued

go-to fun reading, offered the structure I needed. Writing crime fiction is how I learned to plot. I am happiest with my work when the two forces meet, when the story snaps along and yet allows for beautiful prose. I believe I've accomplished this in some of my short stories and in *One Gun*, my most recent novel. *Vinnie Hansen*

As a non-author, I don't have any published or unpublished works to remember as favorites. But I am particularly fond of a Toastmasters speech I wrote called "Understanding 'Jabberwocky'." That was a favorite poem of my father's—he used to quote from the first stanza frequently: "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe; All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe." I researched and analyzed the poem, explaining to the audience the definitions of the seemingly nonsense words Lewis Carroll invented, and it gave me the opportunity to act it out, "galumphing" with my "vorpal sword" onstage. I even recited one of the stanzas in French (see, my French major was useful after all!). *Margie Bunting*

I'm most proud of my sixth book, *An Unsettling Crime for Samuel Craddock*, prequel to the series. It was about police corruption and brutality. It was based on a real case, and when I researched the case to make sure I did enough to fictionalize it, I discovered that the man convicted of the original crime had just been exonerated by the Innocence Project, the case reopened, and the real criminals arrested. Fascinating. *Terry Shames*



All about YOU!

Make the most of your membership. Your Executive Committee members are working hard to present the most interesting, educational, useful and entertaining programs to our members. We invite your participation regarding ideas for speakers, events, and potential meeting locations, as well as articles for *The Stiletta*, our quarterly newsletter.

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

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