

# THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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## SAD and Story Arcs

Sometime during my 50s, I discovered I had SAD.

Not WAS sad, but suffered from SAD, Seasonal Affective Disorder

With the exception of the holidays, I always slumped into a funk during December, January, February. I thought it was just me and my love of the sun, but then I learned it was a recognized syndrome.

From the Mayo Clinic:

“Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that’s related to changes in seasons and begins and ends at about the same times every year. If you’re like most people with SAD, your symptoms start in the fall and continue into the winter months, sapping your energy and making you feel moody.”

A description that I could have written.

There are products and techniques for bringing light into one’s world during these dark days, but ultimately, we just have to succumb to the laws of nature and wait for the planet’s turn.

Holidays or celebrations to bring back the sun have existed in cultures for millennia. The mid-winter celebration that today includes Solstice and Christmas (December 21-25) began in Persia 3,500 years ago and was picked up by the Romans.



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## President's Letter, continued

Mithras, the god of the sun, appeared in 136 BCE and stayed until Christianity arrived.

Does a centuries-long period of celebration, designed to help the sun find its way back to the Northern Hemisphere, help alleviate SAD?

Well, not much for me. I have begun celebrating winter solstice because I know that we'll have more minutes of sunlight daily beginning December 22, and for a devoted sun worshipper, that's important.

What it does do, though, is reinforce the patterns of the universe, and that's important for writers and storytellers. We rely on our collective unconscious to tie us together as human beings with shared experiences and common beliefs.

So much of what we use in our stories—love, fear, anger, hope—are central to being human, and experiencing the cyclical nature of the world helps us explain our world and gives us story arcs.

Next month, I'm going to cheer on the solstice when we begin to have another few minutes of sunlight each day, but I'll also try to relish the cycle of the year and of life that keeps us in balance.

**Sincerely,**

**Michele Drier**

**President, Sisters in Crime NorCal**



# Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

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**Sunday, November 12, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. – please note, not a Saturday**

## ***Fall Author Showcase***

*Books, Inc., 317 Castro Street, Mountain View, CA*  
*Hybrid meeting with Zoom*

It's time again for our twice-yearly Author Showcase, where you can see and hear ten of our fantastic authors read excerpts of their new works. Join us at the recently relocated Books, Inc. in Mountain View or catch us on Zoom.



**Participating authors:**

Ana Brazil  
Josie Brown  
Michele Drier  
Victoria Kazarian  
Claudia Hagadus Long  
Ana Manwaring  
Karen A. Phillips  
Nannette Potter  
Terry Shames  
Lisa Towles

**Date TBD**

## ***Holiday Party***

***Location TBD***



Once again this year, we'll be joining with Mystery Writers of America's NorCal chapter for a festive holiday party full of fun and food.

Stay tuned for all the details.

**Please check our website and your email for updates and more information on our events, and for registration links for all events.**

## In Case You Missed It . . .

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

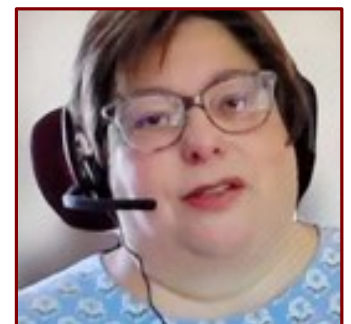
### *August Meeting - How to Write Stunning Sentences, with Nina Schuyler*



Writer and educator Nina Schuyler gave a comprehensive presentation on how to use a variety of sentence structures to make our writing more interesting and more expressive. Depending on the type of sentence used, it can build tension, suspense, excitement, or elegance and create rhythm or flow. The use of a mixture of high-register and low-register (colloquial) words can contribute to character development. The use of conjunctions, alliteration, adjective, adverbs, and subordinate clauses can all enhance and enrich sentences. Throughout the presentation, Nina gave attendees the opportunity to try out various types of sentences and share them with the audience.

### *September Meeting - What to Do Until the Editor Arrives: A Primer of Self-Editing, with Lourdes Venard*

Seasoned journalist, editor, and educator Lourdes Venard provided many tips and recommendations for editing our own writing before sending it to the professional copy editor and/or developmental editor. Her guidance included specifics about the all-important opening and closing chapters, strong wording, action beats, effective description and dialogue, varied sentence structure, showing rather than telling, use of active rather than passive voice, reading aloud, using beta readers, and competent proofreading – all for maximum impact. And she illustrated her suggestions with powerful examples from prominent authors.



# Who Wrote This?

## by Camille Minichino

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It never hurts to start with a definition: According to the National Artificial Intelligence Act of 2020: “The term ‘artificial intelligence’ means a machine-based system that can, for a given set of human-defined objectives, make predictions, recommendations, or decisions influencing real or virtual environments.”

Pretty general, so I’m not worried yet.

This definition from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is more specific, and is where we come in.

(. . .) “AI is the ability of a computer or a robot controlled by a computer to do tasks that are usually done by humans because they require human intelligence and discernment.”

Usually done by humans? Like writing a novel? How about scooping up published stories and using the words elsewhere?

I’ve collected some answers and opinions from the following sources and from my own—uh—intelligence.

### **Sources**

1) A *Publishers Weekly* video conference at the end of September, with publishing professionals discussing the effect of AI on editorial, marketing, production, and legal issues, as well as an author panel describing the utility of the technology in the creative process; and

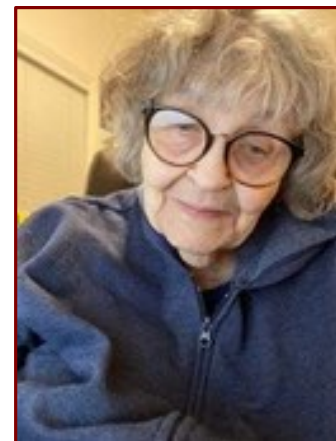
2) A 2023 book, *The Coming Wave: Technology, Power, and the Twenty-first Century’s Greatest Dilemma*, by Mustafa Suleyman, co-founder of AI company DeepMind; and

3) On a slightly lighter note, award-winning astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, interviewed by Stephen Colbert on *The Late Show*, October 2 of this year; plus

4) —burying the lede— the now famous late September *The Atlantic* article offering a searchable database of the 186,000 or so in Books3.

### **Reporting**

1) **The PW Conference:** Markus Dohle, former CEO, now consultant to Penguin-RH, introduced the event with a historical perspective, claiming the digital era as the first inflection point in the publishing industry, and AI as the second.



## Who Wrote This? continued

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“Now is the best time to be in books since the invention of the printing press,” Dohle said, concluding that AI is a huge opportunity that outweighs any potential threats.

To Dohle, AI will make publishing more “readercentric” (an AI spellchecker says that’s not a word, but I defer to Dohle, who seems to believe it is, and, after all, he ran Penguin-RH.) AI will help the reader find the “next great read” in a more sophisticated way, he predicts. AI will connect authors with more readers than ever before.

I’m up for that.

The two presenting authors (Sean Michaels and Gregg Hurwitz) were hopeful about the usefulness of AI as a tool but expressed concern that authors should be able to “get good contracts” and not lose control of the narrative. One suggested AI might be the way to give us more Tom Clancy novels.

2) “**The Coming Wave**”: The book starts with a smooth answer to the question, *What does the coming wave of technology mean for humanity*, written by AI! The rest of the book, written by Suleyman himself, he says, is a blueprint for managing the wave. He maintains that AI is close to passing the Turing Test, in which it becomes impossible for a human conversationalist to tell she was speaking to a machine. Or to tell whether a human wrote the books in my TBR pile? No answer for that one.

3) It was **Neil deGrasse Tyson** who reminded Colbert’s audience that we have been living with AI for a long time—whenever we acknowledge spellcheck or use our vehicle’s GPS system to pull up to a destination bookstore, for example. We take for granted that we have speech-to-text and language translation at our fingertips. AI is our constant companion and tool. (Sometimes when I’m feeling a bit down patriotic-wise, I ask Alexa to give me some Ray Charles: *O beautiful for spacious skies*.)

Of course, the practice of making texts available is not new with AI. Going back to my first releases in the late ‘90s, I have found my novels downloadable through Google and simple searches.

Another site, Academia.edu, routinely offers downloads of articles I wrote as a scientist. Granted, some of them were published as an employee of a national laboratory. Government property? It’s not crystal clear. I’ve stopped scratching my head over notices like the ones that tell me present day researchers have accessed my 1981 “Inspection Methods for Safeguards Systems at Nuclear Facilities.” Last month it was a researcher in Great Yarmouth, UK. I can’t ignore the feeling of satisfaction that my words/sentences/thoughts, whether fiction or nonfiction, have gone far beyond what I intended for them.

## Who Wrote This? continued

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4) *The Atlantic* article: I searched it for all my names and found nine of my books represented, a few from each of three of my series. I'm assuming many Sisters in Crime were also searching and finding their creative work.

Were you flattered as I was? Excited? Here was another use of my words, as if they were texts in a college course, or a book club selection. After all, some human researchers chose my books to include in that database. Perhaps one of those humans was moved to write a good review, tell others how special my prose is. I hoped at least they bought the copies they used in their project.

Books3 is underway using already-borrowed books (some say pirated or stolen) for training its AI language model.

I'm adding my voice to that of author Ian Bogost, who wrote in another issue of *The Atlantic*: "My books were used to train Meta's Generative AI. Good. It can have my next one, too."

The Authors Guild, on the other hand, has a petition in the works, signed by upwards of 15,000 authors. The opening words:

"We, the undersigned, call your attention to the inherent injustice in exploiting our works as part of your AI systems without our consent, credit, or compensation."

I have not signed. As of now, I'm with Bogost, above: "When successful, art exceeds its creator's plans."

How about you?

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.



# An Interview with Deborah J. Ledford

## by Mysti Berry

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Deborah J. Ledford is the award-winning author of two Native American mystery series. Part Eastern Band Cherokee, she is an Agatha Award winner, The Hillerman Sky Award Finalist, and two-time Anthony Award Finalist for Best Audiobook. Past President of the Sisters in Crime Desert Sleuths (AZ) Chapter, Deborah lives in Phoenix, Arizona with her husband and an awesome Ausky.

I interviewed Deborah not just because her newest book is a wonderful read, but because, although she's too modest to say so herself, she has given a lot of her expertise and encouragement to many crime writers.

I first met her a dozen years ago at a Left Coast Crime event. I was new to the crime writing community and feeling a little lost. Deborah started chatting with me and before I knew it, I felt like I belonged. She has given so much to Sisters in Crime and the crime writing community, and I knew she'd have a lot to teach us all about writing and being published. So even though she isn't a literal member of our chapter, let me introduce an excellent writer and SinC stalwart.

**Mysti:** Thank you for speaking with me today about your new book, *Redemption*, which launched September 1, and about your crime fiction career.

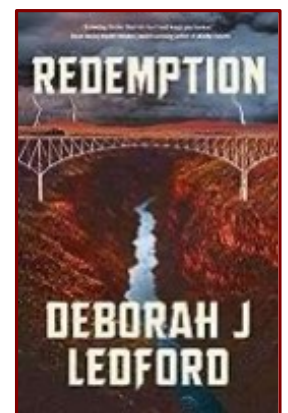
**Deborah:** I appreciate the opportunity, Mysti! Sisters in Crime has been very good to me from my first SinC Desert Sleuths meeting.

**Q:** What attracted you to crime fiction in particular?

**A:** Although my first love was literary fiction, I've been fascinated by the mystery/thriller genre since I was a young kid watching TV. Rod Serling is my hero to this day. Delving into the psychology of what makes people tick and (particularly) their bad behavior has always fascinated me.

**Q:** Can you tell us a little about your newest book, *Redemption*, Eve "Lightning Dance" Duran Book 1, why you wrote it and how it is different from your Smoky Mountain Inquest series.

**A:** My protagonist is Eva "Lightning Dance" Duran, a full-blooded Taos Pueblo, and the only female Native deputy on the Taos County Sheriff's Department, searching for the best friend whom no one but she and the woman's son believe





## Deborah J. Ledford Interview, continued

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is missing. Eva is the conduit between the people of her tribe and the world outside the reservation boundary. The tagline is: “She’s the storm they never saw coming.” So true! For the series, my intent is to present a capable Native woman who follows the rules of the law, and yet often sets off on her own path to solve the crimes on and sometimes off the reservation.

**Q:** What is it like, writing with a team (agent and publishing company) and external deadlines?

**A:** It has been an absolute dream working with my Thomas & Mercer team. From my agent to the T&M acquiring editor, followed by a developmental editor, copyeditor, and several cold readers, I can’t even remember who else had eyes on the manuscript before publication. My words don’t always adhere to *Chicago Manual of Style* standards (for instance, within dialogue, I will insert a comma for the beat—to illustrate the pauses typical of how Natives traditionally speak). But my team has been very open to keeping just about everything as I originally intended. Plus, catching those occasional annoying dropped words and potentially embarrassing timeline/character mishaps is truly appreciated.

**Q:** What inspired you to write *Redemption*? What are your hopes and fears for this book?

**A:** My fear was if I would even be able to write the manuscript. Cancer surgery and chemotherapy followed by radiation tossed a wrench in my life, and it had been literally six years since I had written a single creative word. My hope is that readers will be open to learning about a tribe that may be new to them. And to realize our differing cultures are actually similar to our own. We all love our family and personal clan and friends that can be closer than blood. It’s how we treat each other as a whole that unites us.

**Q:** There's been a lot of talk about AI writing books instead of people. What's your take on all the fear and excitement about it?

**A:** I can’t even speak about this without my head exploding. I fear the end of all things creative. No compensation for artists. No need for writers because AI will have the ability to “write” anything requested by naive and/or malicious consumers.

**Q:** Every writer's path to success is different. Did you have any unusually lucky breaks or tough breaks on your journey?

**A:** Well, patience has been key. Every part of this journey has taken me exactly where I am today. Many stumbles and pitfalls and absolute weirdness have attempted to pull me off my path. But I must say, I’m stronger for the foibles. Each and every piece has been helping me complete the puzzle—especially when I couldn’t even see the picture on the box.

## Deborah J. Ledford Interview, continued

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**Q:** You've had at least a decade of experience editing short stories for the Sisters in Crime Desert Sleuths chapter, and other editing experience. Is it hard to turn off your inner editor when you write? Anything you'd like to share about the process of working with a developmental or line editor (from the perspective of the editor and/or the writer)?

**A:** Oh yes, as I'm sure you know, it is very difficult turning off the editor's brain. Even pleasure reading can be frustrating, and occasionally a book will be flung across the room. Writing short stories is the absolute best way to practice the craft. Limited characters and locations and a tight timeframe test the writer to excel in a short word count, which will help train you to be precise. An editor can either make or break your words. It is crucial to keep an open mind and truly listen to what is being offered. Editors want your work to shine, but they are your words, your work—it is up to you to objectively consider the advice and make the changes.

**Q:** Who are you reading now? Do you read different genres than you write? Why?

**A:** I'm currently reading all of the books nominated for crime fiction awards so I can vote impartially. I make a point of not reading anything crime fiction related while I'm composing the first draft of a manuscript because I don't want to risk subconsciously slipping into another writer's voice.

**Q:** What was it like the day you got your author copies from T&M? Do you have rituals or habits around celebrating the signposts of success?

**A:** I tell all of my mentees to celebrate every victory. They can be few and far between, so pop a cork, enjoy an amazing meal, share the goodness with your friends and family. For me, hubby hears the news first. He's my biggest fan and supporter, and I always wait to open treasure boxes until we can share the experience together.

**Q:** What's your favorite aspect of the craft? Anything you really hate about writing?

**A:** I love when the pieces start fitting together. When I write, something I don't even know will be instrumental or helpful as chapters evolve. The boom moment when you realize the plot is advancing (seemingly on its own). The subconscious is a wonderful thing—do your best not to ignore what is literally being gifted to you—be sure to jot down or type out even little ideas. You never know which snippets will turn into gold.

**Q:** What haven't I asked that you're dying to share?

**A:** Book 2 of the Eva "Lightning Dance" Duran series has now been handed off to my editor. *Havoc* will be released in August 2024 and is already available for pre-order.

## Deborah J. Ledford Interview, continued

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**Q:** What's next?

**A:** A break. Whew! Deadlines can be killer, so the plan is to take a little time off and recharge so I can start wrapping my brain around the next book to write. I have been invited to appear on a couple of panels at the Tucson Festival of Books. Also, my must-attend conference, ThrillerFest, is always a great excuse to visit NYC.

Mysti Berry is the editor and publisher of *Low Down Dirty Vote*, three volumes of short stories created to raise money for voting rights work. All volumes contain stories by award-winning writers, and \$25K has been raised across all three volumes. Mysti has been published in *EQMM*, *AHMM*, and many regional SinC anthologies, as well as an article 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.



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

Catherine Bonnar  
Amy Cluck  
Jodi Johnson  
Juliette Kelley  
Audrey Lee  
Ritu Mukerji  
Brian Shea  
Elena Smith  
Margaret Thomas  
Pam Van Allen

# Reading Your Work Before an Audience: Selecting the Material

## by Maureen Studer

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Congratulations! You've been asked by SinC NorCal, the library, the bookstore, or the local winery to come and read an excerpt of your latest novel for an audience. Wahoo, all those months of sitting in your writing cubby, nose to the grindstone, shoulder to the wheel, head down, focus, focus, focus! Finally, a moment to breathe and share your hard-earned novel aloud. And maybe you'll get to sell a few books. A little cash in hand never hurts anyone. Here are a few tips about selecting the material to honor your audience.

- What do you want the audience to feel when they are listening to you read?
  - If you can engage the audience emotionally, they are likely to listen closely.
  - Your audience wants to feel charmed, curious, scared, or even intrigued.
- What do you want them to know about your novel?
  - Is it important to know what your protagonist does for a living? Or how old they are? The color of their skin?
  - Is the plot more important? The location of the story? Or the year?
  - You decide, and these decisions will be your guide to selecting the material.

### The Opening Section

In short, start with action. Think about it, would you rather hear about the plane full of FBI agents landing in your neighbor's yard? Or the weather? Action-action-action is how you want to open the reading. Give your audience something to visualize and they will follow in their mind's eye. I work with a readers' theatre company, and it's not uncommon that what the audience enjoys most are the parts that can be visualized. We know this because after the show, audience members blurt out, "I could just see that guy doing XYZ."

### Rules to Break

You do not have to start with the first sentence on page one. It's a common misconception that the audience needs to hear the first page. Not necessarily so. If it's apropos to your reading, then please do so. But I encourage you to think of other places in the book that might be equally as, or more exciting, than the first page.

## Selecting the Material, continued

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If you decide to start your reading in the middle of the book, keep in mind, you're engaging the audience in a different way. It can make for a greater sense of curiosity about how the protagonist came to be in the predicament you're reading about .

### The Middle Section

As seamlessly as possible, move directly into the plot, the quest, the mystery, or a bit about the adventure the audience is about to enjoy. You can take a little time with this part of the reading. The middle section should be the longest part of your reading. For example, if you have five minutes to read at the bookstore, the first forty-five seconds to a minute should be on the opening action. The next three or three-and-a-half minutes should be spent on the middle section. The last minute to thirty seconds should be spent on the finale.

The bulk of your time should be in this section. Make sure it's interesting, provocative, and/or funny. You can move into inner monologue, description, setting, active narration. any number of things that will capture the audience's attention.

Give the audience one important plot point about your novel. This is a great place to reveal a secret, not the big kahuna secret—save that for after they purchase the book. But a little something intriguing is always engaging. If you are writing comedy, this is where you want to slip in a good laugh. Audiences love to laugh.

Is there an important relationship you want the audience to know about? We will want some details about the characters and their burgeoning relationship. Possibly include the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist.

If your novel has a mission, a journey, or an over-reaching goal, this would be a good place to share it.

This part of the reading should reveal information important to the plot, something suspenseful, and remember it's about the story, story, story.

But, I caution, don't give away too much. Have you ever watched a movie trailer and you were given so much information you didn't need to see the movie? Don't let it happen to you.

Whatever you decide to share with the audience, make sure it blends well with the opening, maintains the audience's interest, and leads gracefully to the finale .

## Selecting the Material, continued

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### The Finale

This is where you seal the deal. This is where you hook your audience with pure, unadulterated curiosity. It's all wonderfully simple and completely unexpected. End with a cliff hanger, a question, or a promise. Something to leave the audience wanting more. Squelch your desire to answer any of the aforementioned. There is an adage in show business: "Leave them wanting more." I'm here to tell you it's not just an adage, it's a truism.

### Additional Considerations

Characters – one, two, or three?

Carefully consider the number of characters you want to juggle in a live reading. If you feel confident performing character voices, then have fun. It can be an absolute blast. If you are not confident with character voices, stick to one or two at most. Remember, you're selecting the material, so you don't need to read any dialog at all. (I'll cover more information about reading a variety of characters in a subsequent article.)

If reading your writing aloud seems like a vulnerable experience, you are not alone. It is difficult for a lot of people. These are your words, thoughts, characters, and ideas that you've honed, puzzled over, and carefully chosen. If the material is close to the bone, it's normal to feel a little exposed when you're reading your carefully chosen words in public. If that is the case for you, I suggest more rehearsal rather than less. Read your material to a writer friend who is more likely to tell you if the material you've chosen is engaging. Sometimes family and friends just love us too much to be honest.

When considering the material, be sure to read it aloud with a timer, stopwatch, or friend on the clock. If you read it silently to yourself, it's likely you'll get the timing wrong. People read silently at a rate of 250 to 350 words per minute. People read aloud at a rate of 135 to 175 words per minute. A vast difference. Time the selection to make sure it's accurate.

Look for *Scoring the Script*, the next in Maureen's series about reading your material to an audience in public, in the next issue of *The Stiletta*.

Maureen Studer has bachelor's and master's degrees in theatre arts, and has had over four decades of teaching, performing, directing, and writing. She has written three romance novels and half a dozen full-length plays, won numerous short play contests, and is currently working on her first true crime play. This article is based on an excerpt from her non-fiction, *Before an Audience: Tips and Tricks to Reading Your Writing in Public*. She is now in search of an agent to help sell the book.

# Member Profile: Cherie O'Boyle

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



A Professor Emerita of Psychology at California State University in San Marcos, Cherie O'Boyle is the award-winning author of nine novels in two mystery series, one suspenseful standalone, and a textbook on the history and philosophy of science and psychology.

**Stiletta:** Tell us about your early career as a general building contractor. What led you to that kind of work?

**Cherie O'Boyle:** I love a puzzle. Almost any puzzle. Logic, words, building a house, trying to comprehend human behavior. It's all a puzzle to me, and it's no mystery why I love mysteries.

I began working as a carpenter only after a long series of more menial and less lucrative attempts to support myself and my family. Keeping body and soul together necessitated taking any form of employment.

One early job was driving a dump truck and giant front loader (no, this is not a washing machine) at Crown Beach in Alameda. Every night, tons of seaweed would wash up across from the expensive condos lining the beach. By dawn the seaweed would reek. The mess would have to be pushed back into the bay without sinking the front loader and myself into the soft sand at the water's edge. I'd have to get the seaweed out far enough to catch the current so it would float on down to Alviso, where the less affluent people live(d).

Along in there somewhere, I finished my bachelor's degree in psychology. As many of you know, that degree and \$1.85 will get you a Starbucks coffee. I continued in construction.

Wait, you say, how can building a house be a puzzle? Here's how: You arrive at the empty job site. A pile of lumber sits in one corner and a couple of ditch diggers lean on their shovels nearby, waiting for directions. You unroll a fat stack of blueprints onto the hood of your truck and, voila! A puzzle.

**Stiletta:** After receiving your Ph.D., you became a professor (later Professor Emerita) of Psychology at California State University at San Marcos. In that position, did you publish psychology-related non-fiction?

**CO:** Along about the late 1980s, I made the decision to return to university for a doctoral degree. My body was injured and worn out, but I figured my brain was still intact. And in any case, what could be a bigger puzzle than human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors? Four years later, I left the University of Oregon (Eugene) with a Ph.D. in developmental neurophysiology. That's experimental psychology

## Member Profile: Cherie O'Boyle, continued

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with baby brains, for those of you who made wiser choices. With the help of “the old-girls-network,” I secured a tenure-track faculty position at California State University, San Marcos.

Yes, that career did require publishing psychology-related non-fiction. You know the old saw: publish or perish. First, I had to learn a whole new language. Science writing bears little relationship to English composition.

Included among those writings is *History of Psychology: A Cultural Perspective*, traditionally published by an academic press. The book is still my all-time bestseller.

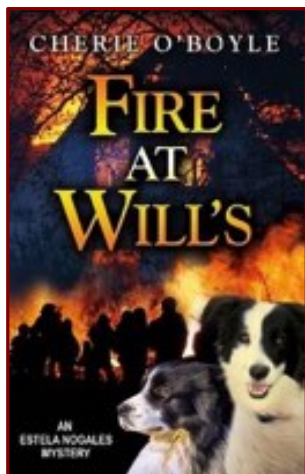
**Stiletta:** What motivated you to write mysteries, and how did you get started?

**CO:** After retirement, I spent two years in a cohousing community. Some of my neighbors there became among the closest and dearest friends I've ever had. Others, not so much.

Thus began my attempt at writing a murder mystery. How tempting to make that evil villain in your life into the fictional victim of a heartless but fictional homicide. And those others you weren't wild about can be among the suspects. So that's how *Fire at Will's* came to be. I got started writing mysteries as catharsis after that upsetting and enlightening living experience. I had no intention of writing anything I would publish.

**Stiletta:** You have written six novels in the Estela Nogales series. Tell us about the fictional town where the books are set and about your protagonist.

**CO** The less said about the not-so-fictional town of Arroyo Loco, the better. I'm only lucky my friends there still like me.



**Stiletta:** Book covers on the Estela Nogales series are fabulous. How did you find and secure the artist(s) for your book covers?

**CO** Fast forward to my eventual return to Sacramento, where I learned about something called Sisters in Crime. Seeking a cover for *Fire at Will's*, I went to a meeting of Capitol Crimes. Talk about falling in with a bad crowd! I met lots of women mystery writers who encouraged me to publish. *Fire at Will's* turned into a six-book series. To my surprise, that series won writing awards and still sells well. Even better, it receives enthusiastic and complimentary reviews from people whose opinions I respect, including other authors.

At that meeting I also met a graphic artist who designs covers, Karen Phillips. I hired her on the spot. Karen has done the covers on all my books. They



## Member Profile: Cherie O'Boyle, continued

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feature photographs of my own (now gone) border collies, who are characters in each story.

**Stiletta:** What followed that series?

**CO:** Sometimes I set challenging puzzles for myself just to see if I can do it. Once I built a whole set of kitchen cabinets with a Skilsaw, tore out my kitchen, and installed them.

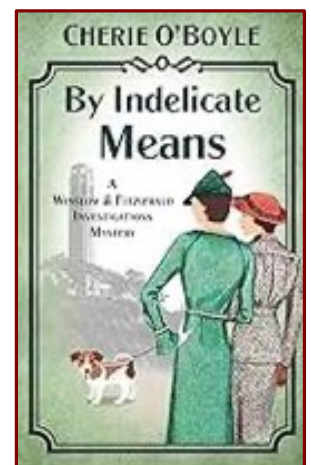
After succeeding with my first series, I wanted to seek traditional publication. I chose a suspenseful dog story, featuring my border collie Shiner. Shiner and I had earned ribbons in sheepherding and flyball. We also trained to do search and rescue, although I backed off just before we would have been required to drop from a helicopter in flight. *On Scent* was a real puzzle to research and write. After two years of work, I sent my query off to an agent who represents dog stories.

I did not hear back from her. You know how this works: authors have no idea if their precious query got lost in the mail or is just being ignored. I could rant about the disrespect this system shows authors. This is not how it works in the equally busy world of academic publishing, but I digress. *On Scent* was a finalist for the 2020 award for fiction from the Dog Writers of America.

A year and a half later, I received a reply from that first agent. The software she uses to handle queries decided she was already too busy and didn't send her my query for over a year. By then I'd reluctantly put *On Scent* out myself. She was heartbroken. I was devastated. Artificial Intelligence, what could possibly go wrong? *On Scent* will always be my favorite story.

**Stiletta:** Your second series is the Winslow & Fitzgerald Investigations, numbering two so far, most recently *An Unforeseen Motive* (July 2023). What can you tell us about the series, and will there be more?

**CO:** Breaking news: there already is a third, *By Indelicate Means*. I call these stories my pandemic project. When an author spends hours every day mostly in the company of fictional characters, it only makes sense to create characters with whom one enjoys spending time. My beloved great-aunt sprang to mind, so the sleuths in my new series are based on her and her lifelong friend, referred to by our family as her "traveling companion." These mysteries take place in the lively City of San Francisco during the years between world wars. There are a couple of photographs of my great-aunt in the third book, including one with me as an emaciated eight year-old.



## Member Profile: Cherie O'Boyle, continued

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*Stiletta:* Your books are self-published. What advice would you give to authors who may be thinking about self-publishing their books?

*CO:* For me today, self-publishing does not feel like a choice. Traditional publishers are not in the business of promoting quality writing. They are in the business of making money. They publish what they think will prove profitable. The stories I tell are different, even unusual, and definitely out of the mainstream. After my own experiences, I am glad that many self-publishing authors are finally getting some of the respect they deserve.

Two bits of advice to authors considering self-publishing. First, it helps to go in with low expectations and a thick skin. Second, be thoughtful about which conferences you attend. There are more educational and friendlier conferences geared to new authors and self-publishers. My favorite is Chanticleer's Author Conference (<https://www.chantireviews.com/chanticleer-conference/>). Spend your money at those conferences where you'll feel supported and encouraged. There are also awards competitions, judged blindly, based solely on the quality of your writing.

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

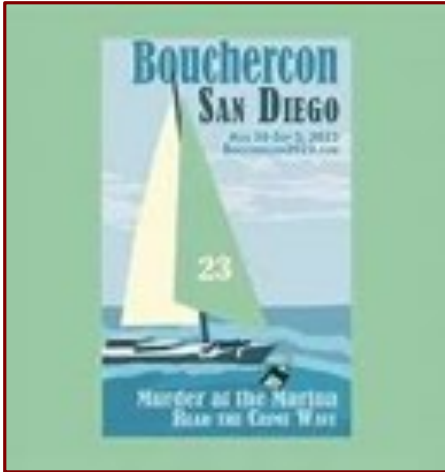
*CO:* I will admit, I have not taken enough advantage of the benefits offered by Sisters in Crime at the national level. I did meet my most helpful and professional editor, Lourdes Venard, through SinC. I've met many supportive and intelligent women at chapter meetings. That's where I met Cindy Sample, who was and continues to be the most encouraging and knowledgeable marketing and writing advisor, as well as a wonderful shoulder to cry on when needed. Cindy is a prime example of how one can be a successful best-selling author and still be a non-competitive mentor to new writers.

Good luck to all of us trying to solve this writing puzzle, and thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

Cherie O'Boyle was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

# Memories of Bouchercon 2023

## Recognize anyone?



# Memories of Bouchercon 2023. Continued

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## Member News

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### *New and Upcoming Releases*

*The Fog Ladies: Date with Death* by Susan McCormick, book #4 in the San Francisco Cozy Murder Mysteries, was released on October 2 by The Wild Rose Press, Inc.

*Dying for a Decoration* by Cindy Sample, book #9 in the Laurel McKay Humorous Mystery series, will be released on November 15, just in time for the holidays.

*Murder by Degrees*, Ritu Mukerji's debut novel, was released on October 17 by Simon & Schuster.

Ellen Kirschman is excited to report that she has just signed with Open Road Media to publish her next Dot Meyerhoff books and republish books #1-4 in the series.

The first three books in Cherie O'Boyle's Winslow & Fitzgerald Investigations Mysteries were launched in recent months: *A Preposterous Alibi* in May, *An Unforeseen Motive* in August, and *By Indelicate Means* in October.

*The Alchemist of Monsters and Mayhem* by Gigi Pandian, book #7 in her award-winning Accidental Alchemist Mystery Series, was published on October 10.

Elena Smith's non-fiction piece, "The One Percent Cat," appeared in the Fall 2023 issue of *Animals in Mysteries*.

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, was released on September 28 by Little, Brown. Her 5<sup>th</sup> DCI St. Just book, *Death in Print*, launched August 1 from Severn House. She will be promoting her new book on a panel for cozy mysteries at IcelandNoir.com in November.

Chris Dreith's latest short story, "The Road to Limerick," has been selected to be published in the Mystery Patrons (formerly from Malice Domestic) Anthology, *Mystery Most International*, through Level Best Books. Her four quirky characters were first published in the hilarious story, "Old Soles," published in the Bouchercon 2020 Anthology, *California Schemin'*. This time they find Irish roads, Guinness, and dead bodies. Slainte!

## Member News, continued

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### *New and Upcoming Releases, continued*

Learn what happens during the rainy wee hours of October 3, 1849, before Edgar Allen Poe was found, dazed and delirious, near Ryan's Tavern in Baltimore. "Killing Poe," a new story by Vinnie Hansen, is in *Playing Authors*, a gorgeous anthology from Old Iron Press.

In late September, Susan C. Shea republished her three Dani O'Rourke Mysteries in a hybrid project, after getting the rights back following several iterations by traditional publishers. The trade paper and ebook versions are available through Amazon. The second book in her A Château in Burgundy mystery series (through Severn House) is *Murder and the Missing Dog*, coming out in March 2024.

"X Marks the Spot," a short story by Ana Brazil, appears in the historical fiction anthology *Beneath a Midwinter Moon*, releasing November 1 from Paper Lantern Writers.

Ana Brazil's *The Red-Hot Blues Chanteuse*, a Viola Vermillion Vaudeville Mystery set in San Francisco, was released on October 17.

### *Public Appearances*

The launch party for Cindy Sample's new book, *Dying for a Decoration*, will be held on Saturday, December 9 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. at Face in a Book, 4359 Town Center Blvd., El Dorado Hills, CA.

Catriona McPherson will be at Avid Reader in Davis, CA on December 5 to celebrate the launch of *Hop Scot*, book #6 in the Last Ditch Motel series, where Lexy and Co. go to Scotland for Christmas (and corpses). Wine and seasonal snacks will be served.

### *Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!*

Catriona McPherson won the Anthony Award for Best Humorous Mystery for *Scot in a Trap*.

*Hold* by Amy S. Peele, third in her Medical Mystery series, won first place for Mystery in the Independent Book Awards and a Bronze Medal at the 2023 Global Book Awards in the Detective category. *Match*, the second in the series, won Honorable Mention for Fiction at the 2023 Paris Book Festival.

*The Secret in the Wall* by Ann Parker won the 2023 Will Rogers Gold Medallion for Western Mysteries.

## Member News, continued



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### *Miscellaneous*

Diana Chambers reports that this summer, Sourcebooks bought her novel, whose title is *The Secret War of Julia Child*. In what she cites as an odd connection with this issue's Question of the Quarter, she first started thinking about this story around 2015 – as a series, in fact.

Vinnie Hansen has just signed a two-book contract with Level Best Books. LBB will reissue her suspense novel, *One Gun*, and her new suspense novel, *Crime Writer*, will come out in summer 2025.

Daisy Bateman's upcoming thriller, *She Left* (written as Stacie Grey) will be offered as a Goodreads giveaway. Readers can add it to their "want to read" list and be reminded when the giveaway goes live.



## Question of the Quarter

**Do you prefer to write – or read – series books or standalones? Why?**

I like both series and standalones. Authors can complete a story arc in one book, while some storylines require more than one book due to complexity, timeline, etc. *Priscilla Royal*

I like to follow a series when (1) I really like the characters and (2) the author continues the series with the same high quality. I have read some work where the intro book was great but the author never hit the same level in their following works. I have started to read a series where – in book 1 – I really wasn't that interested in the main character(s). I have also read series where I am invested through several books, then the author seems to go sideways, as if thinking too much about what people want to read rather than constructing a good plot. Other than that, I have no preference. A good book is a good book. *Elena Smith*

I'm a reader who seeks out series. I want to return to a character I care about and the fictional world I've been immersed in. I want things to work out for Kate Atkinson's Jackson Brodie. I want Louise Penny to keep the world of Inspector Gamache and Three Pines safe. Would my view of England in the last century be the same if Poirot, Mrs. Marple, and Sherlock Holmes had only been featured in one book each? Probably not. When I repeatedly visit cities or rural communities with Easy Rawlins, Dave Robicheaux, Cork O'Connor and Jim Chee I'm exposed to places and points of view that are new to me. Without getting on a plane and crossing an ocean (or two), I get to experience life and new cultures through the eyes of Dr. Siri Paiboun, Ari Thór, Aurileo Zen, Inspector Chen, and Perveen Mistry, to name a few. Tana French has us follow Dublin as a series, using a host of characters that take the front or back seat in each novel as needed to tell the story. What's not to like?

If any of you remember the Mystery Bookstore on 24th Street in San Francisco, they had a full-height display with the first books of recent series from all over the world featured prominently and switched out regularly. It was my go-to shelf. If I liked the first book, I'd carry on to books 2, 3 and 4. Because they carried used books as well as new, I could walk out of the store with my arms full of dusty and dog-eared paperbacks written by Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, Dashiell Hammett, and countless other authors, knowing I had happy months of bingeing ahead of me. It was a sad day when they closed in 2011.

There's a thrill to putting down a good book knowing there is a sequel in the works. Starting a series is like meeting a person for the first time, and knowing we'll become friends. *Laura Boss*

I prefer to read mystery series. In well-written ones (the others are abandoned quickly), reading the books is like visiting with friends. For several months recently, I spent hours every day with a loved one in the hospital. While he slept, or went for treatments, I reread several series I love, among them Elly Griffiths' Ruth Galloway series, David Handler's Berger and Mitr y Mysteries, and David Gatward's DCI Harry Grimm Crime Thrillers. Thank goodness for them and for all the writers who give us a means of escaping to a better place when the world is too much with us. *Mary Adler*



## Question of the Quarter, continued

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I prefer at this point in my career to stick with the tried and true, which means writing a series. I feel that I'm writing in response to readers who like seeing an "old friend" again and don't really want any experiments from me. As to reading, I mostly prefer standalones to trying to keep up with a series. **G.M. Malliet**

Series vs stand-alone. It really doesn't matter to me, but one problem with a series is that if you start with Book One, you have to wait a year, typically, for further books. It is so much fun to find an existing series and start at the beginning and have the pleasure of reading multiple books in a row. I recently read a non-mystery standalone, *Miss Benson's Beetle*, and loved it. There are no other books with these characters, but I did read another book by the same author, Rachel Joyce, *The Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, and the writing style is so similar that I enjoyed this book just as much. The same goes for many authors, thinking particularly of Liane Moriarty. However, it is not always true. I love Alexander McCall Smith's No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series, and thankfully there are well over twenty books thus far. However, I actually don't enjoy his many other series. Go figure. **Susan McCormick**

I prefer standalone books and shows unless it's a primary detective I'm reading, like the Ann Cleeves series with Vera Stanhope as the primary detective. Each story is unique, but it includes the same detective. Also, I love Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, and again each novel is a different mystery.

I don't prefer series because I'm not very good at holding on to the many details between books, and series have bunches of details to remember from one book to the next. Where characters are born, the town, family members and so forth. Also, I don't like it when the same thing is explained in each book to help the audience remember the details.

I've written one 3-book series, and that helped me to realize that I don't care for a series. **Maureen Studer**

So much of my preferences depend on the character(s). For engaging characters, I read/write series and like them. Writing a character-driven series is fun because it allows one to delve into the person's motivations, interests, psychology, and desires, hopefully changing and growing in each book. I have three series, and the characters in all of them, both protags and secondary, are women in the 35-45 age range, characters I know and understand.

I also have a standalone which is more plot-driven and another one in the plotting stages, although my 18<sup>th</sup> book is the third in the Stained Glass series, with Roz Duke as the protag.

Reading standalones is satisfying, though. I'm currently reading *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*, and I don't think the characters would hold up in a series. **Michele Drier**

## Question of the Quarter, continued

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I have always wanted to write a series, but somehow keep ending up in standalones. I love exploring new worlds, and my life has been infinitely expanded by all the characters and places I've inhabited.

*Diana Chambers*

I read both series and standalones because they both offer different things to the reader besides a good story. When you read a series, you meet familiar characters again. There is growth of the characters, their relationships have subtle changes, and there is a sense that in some small part, you know how things are going to go. Usually, in a series you are reading a book you know you are going to enjoy.

In a standalone, you're meeting everyone for the first time. There is the unknown factor. Everything is fresh and new, exciting, unexpected. And you may love it or hate it, but that's okay. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. *Heather Haven*

I've only written series, although I have a standalone WIP that I hope to complete in NaNoWriMo this year. I love series for one practical and one personal reason. The longer you write a series, the better you know your characters and can anticipate where they want to take you as a writer and what you can continue to learn and reflect about them. The personal reason is that I like my characters and am always itching to know what they've been up to since the last time I visited them! *Susan C. Shea*

There's a lovely homecoming family reunion feel about writing a new entry in a series, and reading them gives the same warm feeling, no matter what stab and splatter is happening on the page. But the stakes are higher in a standalone, arguably, because anyone can croak at any time. I love both!

*Catriona McPherson*



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