

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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Setting Goals

We're a month gone in the new year. If you made resolutions, how are they coming?

Outside of the usual ones—lose weight, get more exercise, stop eating carbs, stop smoking, stop . . . stop . . . stop—some may be based on your writing, reading, or self-development.

Setting these goals, or making these resolutions, can be counterintuitive. We may set them to encourage us, but if we fall short, they can become albatrosses, reminding us of our shortcomings and failures.

I used to do the “lose twenty pounds” and “jog every morning” resolutions, but then the last job I had outside my house meant driving from Sacramento to Oakland. Ninety miles from my house to my office. This meant I got up before the sun about half the year and no way was I going to jog (or even walk) in the dark. By March 1 every year, the goals had fallen, and I felt guilty

Examining our goals can be good, doing a yearly check on how we've become happier, healthier, maybe more in control of our lives. I have a friend who does a daily and weekly to-do list that has such tasks as dishes, laundry, and dinner, as well as larger work goals. She does this so she has things to cross off every day, giving her a sense of accomplishment.



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President's Letter, continued

Many years ago, I was a single mom, a full-time student, and had a half-time job. I was constantly running in circles until I stopped one night and said, "I'm not doing the dishes."

I did them in the morning while my coffee was brewing and suddenly felt as though I had finished a chore before the day got loony.

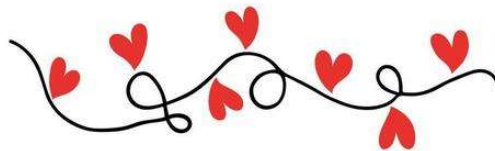
My resolutions, although I don't call them that nor do I make them once a year, are now along the lines of "learn something each week" and "limit myself to two (or three or four or maybe five) new books a week." These can either be bought or borrowed (library or friends).

For learning, I occasionally go to Coursera, an online group of classes originally put together by Stanford. There are now courses from all of the leading universities, and I sign up only for things I'm interested in. I don't take them for credit or a credential so they're free. I learned about the rise of NATO, the beginnings of the EU, Brexit, Hadrian's Wall, international art theft, and now I'm learning about Norse mythology from a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. They're all prerecorded so I watch when I have an hour or so free, with no schedule to try and juggle.

The resolutions aren't world-changing, nor are they anxiety-inducing, and I can't fail. So as this year unfurls, I hope you'll treat yourself kindly and find those goals that make your life happier, more peaceful and fulfilling.

Sincerely,

Michele Drier
President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, February 3, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Annual Meet and Greet

Rockridge Branch Library, 5366 College Ave., Oakland, CA

Hybrid meeting with Zoom

Our February event is your opportunity to mix and mingle with your fellow members, either in person or on Zoom, to talk about what you've been doing and what's coming up for you in the near future. We will also have a workshop led by Maureen Studer, an expert on how to read your work in public. Maureen will offer tips, tricks, demonstration, practice and feedback. She is also discussing the topic in a series of articles in *The Stiletta* (see the latest on page 14 of this issue). **If you're attending in person, please bring a little food or drink to share at the potluck, as well as a couple of paragraphs of your own writing, printed on 8 ½ x 11 paper, double spaced, including dialogue and narration (and something to write with).**

Saturday, March 2, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m.

March Meeting

Zoom Meeting

Join us for an online interview with John DeDakis, an award-winning novelist, writing coach, manuscript editor, former editor on CNN's *The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer*, and author of five mystery-suspense-thriller novels. John will be sharing his expertise in various areas of novel writing, research, and the importance of attending writers' conferences.



Saturday, April 6, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Invasive Species Online Book Launch

Zoom Meeting

Let's celebrate the online launch of *Invasive Species*, Sisters in Crime NorCal's new anthology. Meet the authors and listen to them read snippets from their stories. Our in-person book launch will be held at Left Coast Crime in Seattle in April and will include book signings by the attending authors.

.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 . . .

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.

November Meeting - Fall Author Showcase

At our twice-yearly Author Showcase, we were privileged to have ten of our own authors read excerpts from their most recent works. Due to a technical glitch while recording the meeting, we don't have any photos of our authors in action. But we hope you will look for their books and stories, which are well worth your time. Authors at this event included: *Ana Brazil, Josie Brown, Michele Drier, Victoria Kazarian, Claudia Hagadus Long, Ana Manwaring, Karen A. Phillips, Nannette Potter, Terry Shames, and Lisa Towles.*

December Meeting - Holiday Meeting with MWA NorCal

For the first time since 2019, SinC NorCal and MWA NorCal got together **in person** for holiday festivities. Nibbles, charcuterie, and plates and plates of cookies from members filled a small community room at the Lafayette Library on December 2. NOTE: Recipes for the holiday cookies brought by members can be found on our website at:

<https://www.sincnorcal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Holiday-Cookie-Recipes-2023.pdf>



Our 2024 Executive Committee (Board) Members (and their 2024 Goals)

MICHELE DRIER, President: I was born in Santa Cruz and am a fifth generation Californian. During my career in journalism—as a reporter and editor at daily newspapers, including the *San Jose Mercury-News*—I won awards for producing investigative series. I also spent a couple of decades as Executive Director of non-profit organizations across California serving women’s programs, domestic assault programs, legal services for seniors, and the arts. I retired from Legal Assistance for Seniors in Oakland, an agency that served more than 10,000 seniors in the East Bay. After retirement, I turned to my first love, writing, and am now working on my 18th novel.



I’m past president of SinC chapters Capitol Crimes and the Guppies and co-chaired Bouchercon 2020, the world’s oldest and largest convention for mystery writers and fans. My series include the Amy Hobbes Newspaper Mysteries, SNAP: The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles, and the Stained Glass Mysteries. The latest in the Stained Glass Mysteries, *Tapestry of Tears*, was published in 2020. Email me at [micheledrier \(at\) att.net](mailto:micheledrier@att.net) or find me at <https://micheledrier.me/> My 2024 goal is to pull off a great launch for our anthology!

ANA MANWARING, Vice President: I’m the author of the five JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures, suspense/thrillers set in Mexico, but I’m currently working on a political thriller based on true events, due out sometime this year. I continue to run North Bay Poetics, a monthly poetry event. I am a former lifestyle columnist, and my reviews of Siblings’ books can be found at <https://anamanwaring.com/>, as well as information on my editing business, JAM Manuscript Consulting. I teach creative writing in Sonoma, CA. **First, I want to support our president in whatever ways she needs me. As my personal project, I intend to launch our new marketing and promotion program for the benefit of our members.**



MALENA ELJAILY, Treasurer: I am an avid reader of mysteries, memoir, and lately, self-help books. Several of my short plays (one-act, ten-minute and one-minute) have been produced in festivals around the country. I also love to knit, cross-stitch, and sew. I live in beautiful Santa Rosa. **I love serving on the Board of NorCal SinC, mostly because of how wonderful the other people are, so smart, talented, and without a doubt, more organized than I am.**

2024 Executive Committee Members, continued

MICHAL STRUTIN, Secretary: I've spent decades as an editor and writer for national magazines and newspapers. When my husband and I moved to Appalachia, I began writing books on nature, travel, and cultural history. Upon our return to California (kids and grandkids), I switched to historical fiction: *Judging Noa: a Fight for Women's Rights in the Turmoil of the Exodus*. Now I'm writing in my favorite fiction genre: mysteries. My first-in-progress is set in the Late Renaissance. I'm also a climate activist and a native-plants gardener. Pruning helps me plot. <https://michalstrutin.com/> My most obvious goal is to provide the membership with accurate Board meeting notes, but I would also like to help find topics for presentations that would interest our members.



NANNETTE POTTER, Membership: I am the author of *Pierce the Darkness*, a *Blade Broussard Novel*, an international thriller honored as a 2022 Claymore Award finalist. The hot, agriculturally rich landscape of the Central Valley is where I call home, which may explain why I write about fearless characters in exotic locations. I've chosen to take the indie publishing route, where I'm in control of every aspect of publishing and marketing a novel. This has been such a rewarding professional experience! I should have done this years ago. Currently, I'm writing the second book in the series and promoting the first. In addition to writing a novel, I've published short stories and non-fiction articles. My passions are spending time with family, writing, and traveling. As Membership chair, my primary goal is to welcome new and renewing NorCal members. I hope to be one of the Board members who will provide open communication so that each and every person has a voice. It will be my privilege to "meet" all of you online and through in-person meetings. Let's chat, connect, and make sure everyone feels comfortable in our exceptional community!

DÄNNA WILBERG, Events: "The best secrets are the most twisted," Sara Shepard's quote from *Twisted*, best describes my quest to unravel life's mysteries with every keystroke, on every page. My series, *The Red Chair*, *The Grey Door*, and *The Black Dress*, featuring psychotherapist Grace Simms, pose the question, "What do we really know about a person?" My paranormal *Borrowed Time* series, about a woman who acquires a psychic gift after a near-death experience, is filled with gems from my experience producing and hosting my TV show, "Paranormal Connection," for over 15 years. I am published in anthologies worldwide, and my background as an award-winning scriptwriter and filmmaker further adds to the magic of my storytelling. I am one of the firsts to be inducted into the Access Public Broadcasting and TV Hall of Fame, served as a Member at Large on Sacramento's Capitol Crimes Board of Directors for many years, and volunteered at PBS/KVIE for 15 years. I live a grateful life in



2024 Executive Committee Members, continued

Northern California with my husband, children, and grandchildren. Traveling the world and karaoke top my “passion” list, along with music, dancing, cooking, and making short films. My mantra is to reach for the stars! And never stop writing. **My goal is to provide activities that are memorable, informative, and entertaining.**



MARGIE BUNTING, Newsletter: Although I moved from the Bay Area to El Dorado Hills in 2020, I have continued as editor of *The Stiletta* and am now in my ninth year. Retired from an HR management career, I keep busy as a Toastmasters officer, with book and movie review clubs, and game get-togethers, and being a part of my young grandchildren’s lives. Reading remains my favorite pastime. The library and NetGalley are my two biggest sources of books, and I post my reviews on Goodreads, NetGalley, Amazon, and Lesa’s Book Critiques. **This year, I hope to convince more NorCal members to submit articles for the newsletter and to share their literary news and answers to our Question**

of the Quarter.

SUSAN ALICE BICKFORD, Past President: I was born in Boston and grew up in Central New York, the setting for many of my stories. Eventually I migrated to Silicon Valley to work in high tech in a variety of engineering and managerial roles. I write thrillers and suspense stories that are deeply embedded in the rural areas of New York State and New England, featuring resourceful female protagonists. My short stories have appeared in the anthologies *Fish Out of Water*, *Fishy Business*, and *The One That Got Away*. My debut novel, *A Short Time to Die*, was nominated for the 2018 Left Coast Crime Best Debut Novel. My second novel, *Dread of Winter*, was nominated for an Edgar. **I hope to help the leadership team to grow membership and add membership value by leveraging technology solutions, particularly combined with traditional in-person benefits.**



MAUREEN STUDER, Member at Large: I am an award-winning actor, director, educator, and playwright. I garnered my awards over the span of four decades of working in the theatre. I graduated from University of California at Riverside with a focus on acting and directing and received my MA from San Francisco State with a focus on theatre history and criticism. During my tenure as an educator, I taught acting, directing, playwriting, and history. I have also performed in or directed over 100 productions. Fifteen years ago, I turned my creative energy toward writing. To date, I have completed six full-length plays, three romance novels, six short plays, and a myriad of short stories and poetry. I have also written one non-fiction book, *Before an Audience: Tips and Tricks to Reading Your Writing in Public*, and I have presented the topic at various authors meetings and three conferences. **My goal will be to take over the Speakers Bureau and work with local community organizations and our authors for public speaking.**



2024 Executive Committee Members, continued



GLEND A CARROLL, Member at Large: I am the author of the Trisha Carson mysteries, *Dead Code*, *Drop Dead Red*, and *Dead in the Water*. The fourth in the series, *Better Off Dead*, is finally with my editor. They are set in the San Francisco Bay Area, including Marin, the East Bay State Parks and, of course, San Francisco. My books have a swimming undercurrent. I can always find a dead body floating around somewhere. Personally, I have raced in more than 150 open water swimming events in Northern California, as well as Hawaii and Perth, Australia. I completed a swim from Alcatraz to San Francisco in 2021. I was a long-time sports columnist for the *Marin Independent Journal* and have written for numerous publications, including *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Defenders of Wildlife*, *Sailing*, *Yacht Racing*, *Swimmer*, and *Ford Times*. I tutor first generation high school students in English. I live in San Rafael, CA with my dog, McCovey. **I love highlighting the talent of our membership from the authors publishing their first books to the veteran bestseller. I want to do more of that..**

M.M. (MICHELLE) CHOUINARD, Member at Large: I am the *USA Today* and *Publishers Weekly* bestselling author of the Detective Jo Fournier series, the standalone *The Vacation*, and the upcoming amateur sleuth series, *The Serial-Killer Guide to San Francisco*. I have a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Stanford University and was one of UC Merced's founding faculty members. I enjoy caffeine in all forms, amateur genealogy, baking, and anything to do with Halloween or the zombie apocalypse. I have three cats, a dog, and a husband who technically keeps me from being a crazy cat lady. **My goal is to create more opportunities for our members to improve their craft and share their work.**



DAISY BATEMAN, Member at Large: I am a writer and fan of mysteries who lives in Alameda, California, with my husband and dog. As Stacie Grey, I am the author of *She Left*, a standalone thriller coming in May 2024 from Poisoned Pen/Sourcebooks. Under my own name, I have had two cozy mysteries in the Marketplace Mysteries series published. In what passes for normal life, I work in biotech research. I mostly post to Instagram and Threads, and occasionally write a newsletter. Website: <https://staciegrey.com> **My goal as a member of the Board is to help make the chapter a useful resource and a hub of connection for all of our members.**

The Importance of Cover Art and Title in Attracting Readers | by John Schembra

As authors, we are repeatedly reminded of what is needed to convince a reader to buy our book(s). Most often it is the premise that if you don't capture their interest in the first few pages (or chapter, depending on who is saying it), you will lose them as a buyer and, perhaps, future reader.

We struggle to write the perfect beginning, often revising or rewriting it several times until we are satisfied with it. I would like to think we are successful more often than not, but sometimes it isn't as good as we think. Thank goodness for editors! We would be lost without them!

If we concentrate too much on that task, we can easily overlook the other two aspects of attracting readers. Those two have to be eye-catching and intriguing, enough so that they encourage the potential reader to want to look more closely.

I'm not talking about the back-cover blurb. Yes, it is important, but I, personally, have never relied on ten lines of text to sway me enough to buy the book.

I'm talking about titles and cover art.

I have been an avid reader all my life, and before I ever thought of becoming a writer, I would spend an inordinate amount of time at a bookstore perusing the shelves, searching for books to read.

What I first looked for was an eye-catching cover, one that had an inkling of the main premise of the story. If it was attractive enough to cause me to continue looking, the next thing I would appraise was the title. It, too, had to be intriguing. If it was, that combination of cover and title would result in a closer look, and often, a sale. Sometimes, I would read the back-cover blurb, too.

I am lucky to have such an understanding publisher who knows how much I like to have input on the cover art and title. After all, my books are MY books.

By the time I finish writing a novel, I have a clear idea for the cover. I subscribe to Shutterfly, a royalty-free image site with thousands of free photos, drawings, and other images that I look through for the right picture, or graphic.

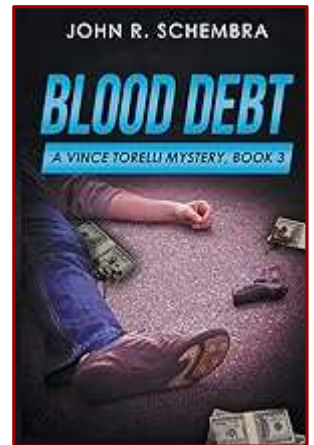


The Importance of Cover Art and Title, continued

For example, the cover I envisioned for my book *Blood Debt* had a body lying on the ground with a gun nearby and several bundles of bloodstained money strewn about, suggesting the killing of someone carried with it a blood debt owed to the killer.



For *An Echo of Lies*, my demonic possession book, I envisioned a smoky, tenuous image in a hellish background. In this case, I couldn't find an appropriate image, so I sent the cover artist a description. The resulting cover he submitted was perfect. It fit exactly with what I had imagined.



I have had varying degrees of input on the cover art of all my books, usually able to find the perfect image, and with the skill of the artist, I am very pleased and satisfied with them.

I must give kudos here to the artist who did the cover of my first book, *M.P., A Novel of Vietnam*. It is the story of a young military policeman who is sent to Vietnam and the things he faces during that terrible year. It is a work of fiction, based in part on some of my experiences there as an MP in 1970. It is special, not only because it was my first book, but the artist was my son.

The importance of the cover art cannot be understated, and most certainly, as an eye-catching graphic, the cover can cause a potential buyer to look closer at the book.

But that is only half the story. Next comes the title. In my opinion, it, too, plays a large part in attracting readers.

As with the cover, the title should give a hint of what the story is about. As an example, my fifth book is titled *Sin Eater*, though I didn't come up with that myself. I actually heard it mentioned in a movie I was watching. It intrigued me and I couldn't get it out of my head, so I looked it up. I found out a Sin Eater was a real person who ministered to the dying in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Much like a priest administering last rites, the Sin Eater would perform a ritual over a dying person and would symbolically take on the burden of that person's sins, cleansing his soul and clearing his path to heaven. What better than to make him a mentally disturbed serial killer?

The title should work in conjunction with the cover art, making the whole picture an irresistibly attractive lure to a potential buyer. As with *Sin Eater*, I wanted a creepy, scary person, dressed in 19th century garb, on the cover, I found three photos that suited the purpose; a creepy-looking facial photo,

The Importance of Cover Art and Title, continued

the clothing, and a cane and small bag, much like a doctor's satchel. I sent them off to the cover artist, he worked his magic, and I had the cover with the title I wanted.

As many of you have learned in your journey to becoming an author, as have I, there is a lot more to writing a book than putting words to paper. If you expect to turn out a product you want people to buy, you need a complete package – a title that is intriguing, cover art that is eye-catching, and a great first chapter.

For me, it gives me a sense of accomplishment to be able to participate with the cover and title that I feel would be lacking without that participation.

Thanks for taking the time to read this. Please take a look at my webpage for more info: <https://jschembra.com/> Six of my books have the first chapter posted there, along with a couple of short stories. It is being updated at this time.

Best wishes to all for a happy, healthy 2024, and best wishes to all in your writing endeavors.



John Schembra is an award-winning author of eight books – one military (Vietnam War), five Vince Torelli mystery thrillers, and two supernatural thrillers. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife of 52 years. Besides being a Vietnam veteran (Military Police Corps), John is a retired police officer with nearly 30 years of service. After retiring from the police department, he became the lead EVOG (Emergency Vehicle Operations Course) instructor for the Contra Costa Sheriff's police academy, instructing both academy cadet and advance officer courses all over the state. After 15 years he retired, again, and now devotes his time to his family, traveling, reading, and writing. He is currently hard at work on his ninth book, *The Night Caller*, the first in the Louisa (Louie) Princeton mystery series. You can learn more at his website (currently being updated), www.jschembra.com

The 8 Parts of Speech and Me

by Heather Haven

I am married to a retired English teacher. Which is a good thing on a lot of levels. Not only is he a sweetheart, but he takes out the trash and loads the dishwasher. Okay, not the way I would load it, but I need to let that go. Moving on, hubby is my go-to guy for all the parts of speech, which sometimes I don't know. It's not for want of trying. I do try. It's just that it gets away from me. Maybe I'm so busy writing the words that I don't always know why I compile them the way I do. When I write a sentence, it either feels right or it doesn't. If it doesn't, I move everything around until it does.



Now, I do know a noun when I fall over it. A person, place, or thing. **Tom** is a noun. Good old **Tom**. I also know a verb. Whatever **Tom** is doing is a verb. **Tom runs**. Because I'm doing so well, we will move on to an adverb. **Tom runs swiftly**. Noun, verb, adverb. It helps that most adverbs end in "ly." I like that. Also, I have just described Tom's running ability. Adjective to follow. **Tubby Tom runs swiftly**. We have just described Tom. Although, how he can run swiftly being tubby is questionable. I'm tubby and can't. Of course, I sit on my derriere all day writing parts of speech. It's a wonder I can move at all.

But back to the parts of speech. While I am fairly clear on the four above, the remaining sometimes throw me. For instance, a preposition. Those are the teeny, little words, often no more than one to three letters long, such as "in," "at," "on," "of," and "to." Remember good old **Tom**? Well, he's stopped running and now he's arrived at his destination, the friendly neighborhood bar. But is **Tom** in the bar or at the bar? Got me. I don't always know and usually fudge it. Then when I reread it, I either keep it the way it is or change it to what feels better. And good grief, here's another side of prepositions, the timeframe stuff, such as "since," "for," "by," "during," "from...to," "from . . . until," "with," and "within." Well, **Tom** is going to stay at the bar **until** his wife comes to pick him up because he's had it with running.

Conjunctions. These include "and," "but," "nor," "for," "or," "yet," and "so." Conjunctions allow me to make my run-on sentences. You know, the ones that never end. But I am a piker. The longest sentence award goes to: Jonathan Coe's *The Rotter's Club*, a 13,955-word sentence. You can bet Mr. Coe used a lot of the above to accomplish that. I am not including **Tom** in any of this because he is tired from his run, imbibing, and listening to his wife tell him off about his imbibing, and he wants to take a well-deserved nap. Conjunctions. You gotta love 'em.

Pronouns. I used to get these until the current move to make every "she" and "he" "her" and "him" into "they" and "them." I understand and appreciate it all in theory, but I still don't know how to speak it. When you're talking about one person doing something or going somewhere, having to

The 8 Parts of Speech and Me, continued

use the plural form is hard for me to do. Where is **Tom** going? **They** are going to the bar. Okay, I'm working on it.

Interjections. Wow! I do that a lot. Golly, gee, do I. For instance: Fer cryin' out loud! **Tom**, put down that bottle. You've had enough.

Then we have past participles, predicates, and stuff like that. That's when I need retired English professor hubby standing over my shoulder. Preferably with a martini in his hand. **Tom** and I have a few things in common.

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 <https://heatherhavenstories.com/>



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

DJ Adamson
Catherine Bator
Kathleen Bryant
Jenn Hooker
Joy Atrops Kimura

Reading Your Work Before an Audience

Part 2: Preshow Preparation

by Maureen Studer

Are you one of those authors who's enthusiastic about reading your writing in public, but not quite sure exactly how to do it? Or maybe you are uncomfortable reading your writing in public? This article is Part 2 of my series about tips and tricks to prepare for the presentation.



Remember the adage, success is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration? With reading your work, it's 90% **preparation!** In the last issue we talked about selecting the material to read. Now we're going to look at several different methods for preparing to read your writing. Some key elements to consider revolve around practice, timing, vocal exercises, and what to wear.

Timing

Be sure to ask in advance how much time you will have to read. The last thing you want to do is get pulled off the stage with the hook. Know how much time you are allotted and stick to it; otherwise, it throws everyone else off their time and can become a hot mess very quickly.

What Are You thinking?

Your frame of mind on the day of the reading makes a difference. It's not typically something the audience will acknowledge, but when you are happy about reading your writing that day, the audience is likely to respond positively.

If you are super nervous about reading in public, then make sure to practice ten deep breaths before you rehearse. Each time. Each and every time. This might sound like a waste of time in our busy lives, but what you practice is what you will perform. When your frame of mind is calm in rehearsal, then it is likely you will have the same experience when you perform. Besides, it doesn't take long--less than a minute for a few deep breaths.

If you need more breathing to feel calm, then go ahead and do more. Or sit calmly until you are no longer nervous.

Reading Your Work: Preshow Preparation, continued

Vocal Warmups.

Why would we need these? Simple, it helps you to get your voice ready. It's the same thing for athletes, dancers, and run-of-the-mill joggers. Flexing your vocal muscles will help you to enunciate clearly and project more easily, and it can help prevent you from getting tongue-tied.

Tongue Twisters

Say them loud, say them proud, say them quiet, say them slow, low and growling. Say them however you like, but just be sure to say them, aloud!

Sally sells seashells by the seashore.

Red Leather - Yellow Leather

White Wicker Rocker

If a dog chews shoes, whose shoes does he choose?

He threw three free throws.

You get the idea. If these bore you, there are plenty more online to get your engine racing.

Another benefit of practicing tongue twisters is to help your voice carry all the way to the back of the room. It strengthens your volume because you've exercised the muscles creating more power in your voice. Projection is your friend in front of an audience, always.

Visualization

If you are inclined toward visualization and you find it beneficial, then include it in your preshow preparation. You can do it anywhere, and it can ease your tension around speaking in public. Visualize the audience in front of you, welcoming you, appreciating you, or laughing at your jokes. Just getting used to the idea of talking with people in front of an audience can help make the reality less daunting.

Music

Seriously, music?

What on earth does music have to do with my reading, you might ask. I promise it's important.

Reading Your Work: Preshow Preparation, continued

Listening to upbeat music can help you to feel enthusiastic and energetic before the presentation. The audience will follow your lead. If you feel energetic from listening to John Philip Sousa marching band music, then in some way the audience will feel it, too. The performer always sets the mood, so bring your best. The best way to test this is to practice without music and with music, and see if you notice a difference.

You can do your deep breathing, practice tongue twisters, and listen to energizing music in a matter of fifteen to thirty minutes. It's not necessary to make a career out of these exercises, but they are certain to help in ways that may not be noticeable to you, but the audience will notice.

Dress for Success

Wear clothes that make you feel good about yourself and suit the event. Choose colors that look good on you. If you're wearing something that feels good, it will come across to the audience.

If your clothes are uncomfortable, if you look peaked in green, or you're spending time tugging at your blouse, the audience will pay more attention to your discomfort and less attention to your reading. Think about how you feel in the clothes you are choosing and be ready to change your mind if it's not quite right.

Shoes, shoes, and shoes! Seriously, shoes are incredibly important, and I'm going to tell you why. The shoes I wear in rehearsal are the same shoes or similar shoes to those I will wear during the performance. If you know any actors, ask them about the shoes they wear in rehearsal and it's likely you will get the same answer. We all move differently in different shoes. High heels, boots, running shoes, bedroom slippers – they all cause us to move differently.

Consider shoes as the platform of your presentation. The goal in rehearsing in specific shoes is to get used to the shoes and to keep both feet firmly planted on the ground. You don't want to shift your weight back and forth, balance on one heel, or pace the stage. Stay put but not stiff. You don't want your nervous movement to draw the audience's attention away from your words, as the most important thing is your words. You want your excerpt to stand out to the listener, not to come in second behind your jitters.

When choosing your shoes, remember a few key things. Make sure they are comfortable for standing. I don't recommend new shoes unless you have time to break them in. They should be appropriate to your attire. And most importantly, they should be shoes in which you can plant your feet firmly on the floor. You absolutely want to stand square on both feet and put all your energy into your reading.

Reading Your Work: Preshow Preparation, continued

Costumed Readings

A word or two about costume readings. Seeing your favorite author dressed in a costume the lead character would wear is fabulous; audiences often love it. Some authors who dress for the occasion as a character or in a costume of the time period can excite an audience and inspire them to listen a little closer to your words. It's wonderful fun.

If you're not fully committed to wearing a costume, think twice before you wear it. If you don't feel comfortable standing out in a crowd, it could affect your reading. Wearing a full-blown Cinderella or Sinbad costume you're not comfortable wearing could make you look like a whacked out trick-or-treater, and soon you'll have a sweaty brow and rapid eye movement. Don't go there. It's not pretty. Don't let anything come between you and the power of your words. Remember, these are your carefully chosen words, so don't let anything prevent the audience from hearing them.

If you are excited thinking about costumes, experiment. Practice for your friends. Try it out. It might be the right thing to make your reading a little more special. (It's like dressing up for a date, and it makes your audience feel a little special if they know you went to all the trouble, just for them.)

The same rules about clothing apply. Costumes should fit well and be well suited to you.

Is there an alternative to fully dressing as the character? Yes! If you don't want to go all out but want to do something clever, I have one word for you: accessories. Scarves, jewelry, vests, pocket watches, holsters, hats, and finery go a long way in communicating to your audience that you are doing something special for them, without having to hire a dresser or go to a lot of expense. Doesn't everyone like something special every once in a while?

You've got it now. These are a few tips and tricks for making your journey toward feeling more comfortable about reading your writing in public. I hope you found something useful. Next time, I'll talk about scoring the script. What exactly do you do with all those words?

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: G. M. Malliet

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

G.M. Malliet (she answers to “Gin”) is a seasoned writer with an Agatha Award and two mystery series based in England, as well as a number of short stories. She lives in northern Virginia with her husband.



Stiletta: I read that you grew up in a military family, which typically means frequent moves. What were your favorite places to live during your childhood, and are they reflected in your writing or characters?

G.M. Malliet: My favorite place was Okinawa, where I attended high school for just under three years. I never quite recovered from being moved in the middle of my junior year to a big, sprawling school in southern California, where I never fit in. (I was miserable. This is probably how writers are born.)

Okinawa in those days had a flavor of *The Tempest*, of being cut off from the world. It was tremendously good fun to be young there. The Department of Defense also had some of the best teachers in the world.

Stiletta: What did you study at Oxford and Cambridge University?

GMM: Because I was interested in memory and learning, I got an M.Phil. from Cambridge in the psychology of education. I did further study at the Sociology Department of Oxford. Judging by my mystery books, most of which are set in the UK, I never quite left. I simply loved being in those beautiful, austere places surrounded by some of the best minds in the world.

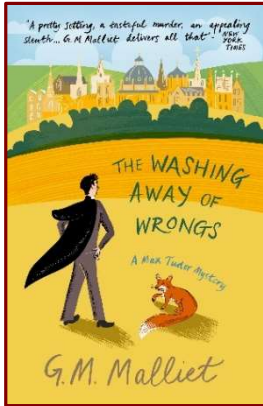
Stiletta: Tell us about your career before becoming a published mystery writer. Was it writing-oriented?

GMM: I wrote advertising and promotional copy for major and minor organizations. Not out of desire or talent, but because those were the jobs I was offered. The job I most enjoyed was writing brochures for PBS. It offered a perfect blend of research and writing. My work for Thomson Reuters was not as fun, but the place was full of back-stabbing intrigue that later found its way into my books. At the time, I was secretly writing fiction in my “spare” time, usually very early in the mornings.

Member Profile: G. M. Malliet, continued

Stiletta: Why did you start writing fiction?

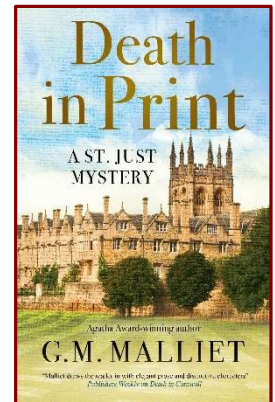
GMM: I always wrote fiction but didn't quite know where I was going with it. I did win or place in a few competitions. Then I applied for a Malice Domestic Grant. The rest, as they say, is history. I was officially a crime writer from then on.



Stiletta: You write the DCI St. Just Mysteries and Rev. Max Tudor Mysteries, both set in England. Please tell us about the protagonists in these series.

GMM: Both series have male protagonists who are preternaturally good, kind, smart, loving, good-looking, and honest. Yes, I can tell them apart! Despite their similarities, they are quite different characters in my mind. Max is an Anglican priest with a Wiccan wife and a young son living in the imaginary village of Nether Monkslip; St.

Just is a police detective—a widower who is currently engaged to marry a professor of criminology at Cambridge. His repeated attempts to marry her are always interrupted by a crime.



Stiletta: In both of these mystery series, you took a break before publishing the most recent entries. What made you return to those series with new stories? And are more books planned in these popular series?

GMM: There was interest from two publishers for more Max Tudor and St. Just. I don't want to say my decision whether to discontinue or recontinue the series was financial (it was not), but after a break, I found more stories for both characters were starting to bubble to the surface. It is always wise to heed that creative bubble.

Stiletta: Your first DCI St. Just mystery garnered the Agatha Award for Best First Novel, and you have received many other award nominations. Is there one accolade that is your favorite?

GMM: I suppose *Mystery Scene's* calling my second St. Just book "delicious" was the accolade that kept me going.

Stiletta: You have also been honored for your short stories in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and *The Strand*. What makes short stories fun or challenging to write, as opposed to books?

GMM: I honestly thought I was done writing short stories because they are so difficult and time-consuming to write, and I had all these novels on the go. Now I find myself writing three short stories at once—two of them historicals. A fourth story will appear in 2024 in the anthology *Midsummer*

Member Profile: G. M. Malliet, continued

Mysteries, edited by Martin Edwards.

You will notice that I have no set career plan, but that is the beauty of writing. You largely get to write what you most want to write.

Stiletta: You recently attended the Iceland Noir Convention in Reykjavik in November, where you interviewed Louise Penny. Can you share some of the highlights of that convention with our members?

GMM: Apart from finally learning how to spell Reykjavik, you mean?

If you can call it a highlight, I can best refer you to the Iceland Noir website, which lists all the dozens of well-known authors who presented there. Dan Brown! Ragnar Jonasson! I was very pleased to be among them. What struck me most about Iceland was how much everyone just loved books. I mean, seriously loved books, wanted to talk about their favorite books, were in awe of anyone who could write and publish a book, and where did I get my ideas? It may have something to do with the long, dark winters, but these people are serious readers.

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

GMM: The benefits are incalculable, and all are based on relationships. Many times I've needed advice or a referral to an agent or attorney or a million other things, and I've turned to a Sister or Mister in Crime. I belong to about six chapters (yes, you can; it's different with MWA) and joined most of them during the pandemic. The Zoom meetings and tutorials probably helped me keep my sanity, and again—the relationships were and remain priceless.

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

GMM: I don't think I come across as approachable, but really, I am. If you see me at a conference, please introduce yourself. I'll be thrilled.

G. M. Malliet was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

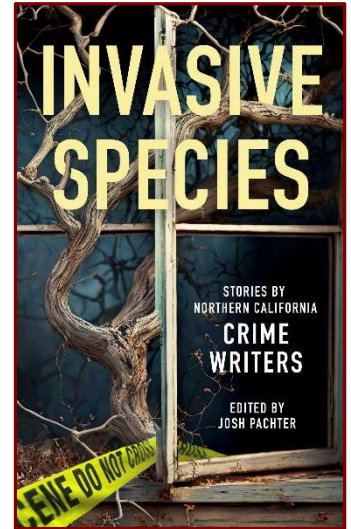
Anthology Update: *Invasive Species* is on its Way!

Sisters in Crime NorCal's President, Michele Drier, announces that the SinC NorCal 2024 short story anthology, *Invasive Species*, is on track to be launched at Left Coast Crime in Seattle in April. A soft launch, with authors reading a selection from their story, will be our April 6 membership presentation.

The call for submissions was open until September 15 and, though we didn't get the fifty or sixty submissions anticipated, we did have a good selection.

Stories were sent (blind) to judges Kevin Tipple, Cheryl Hand, and Tracy Clark, who read, ranked, and returned the fifteen stories chosen. These were then sent to editor Josh Pachter, who worked with each of the authors and completed his editing by December 15.

A cover has been designed (see above), and a formatter is working on putting together the final file.



In alphabetical order, the authors are:

Mary Adler, "The Hunt"
Daisy Bateman (writing as Stacie Grey), "The Predator"
Susan Alice Bickford, "Saved"
Laura Boss, "Feral: A Love Story"
Vinnie Hansen, "Coming Attractions"
William Bruce Johnson, "Déjà Vu"
Ellen Kirschman, "The Untold Upside of an Infestation of Termites"
Margaret Lucke, "Open House"
Susan McCormick, "I Will Take Care of It"
Karen Phillips, "Found Art"
Brian Shea, "The Cavalry on Wings"
Linda Townsdin, "Hyde and Seek"
Carol Verburg (writing as Chandler Christie), "Too Many Santas"
Alanna Weaver, "Burn Piles"
Dänna Wilberg, "A"

Rounding out the volume is a bonus story from Josh Pachter, "Peace on Tenth Street." His 2023 novel, *Death Threat*, is a finalist for a Lefty Award for Best Debut Mystery Novel at Left Coast Crime 2024.

Congratulations to all our authors!

Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

Tragedy in Tahoe: Rylie Sunderland Mysteries Book #1, Rachele Baker's debut cozy mystery, was released on August 29, 2023, by Fleur de Soleil Books.

Vinnie Hansen's short story, "96 Tears," was published in an anthology released in December by Mesti Media: *(I Just) Died In Your Arms, Crime Fiction Inspired by One-Hit Wonders*," edited by Jay Hartman.

Vinnie Hansen's short story, "Hemingway's Ghost," was published in an anthology released in December by Good Read Publishers: *Santa Cruz Ghost Stories*, edited by Nancy Lynn Jarvis.

A Midnight Puzzle by Gigi Pandian, book #3 in the Secret Staircase Mystery series, will be released on March 19 by Minotaur Books. The paperback edition of book #2, *The Raven Thief*, will be published on February 20.

Perilous Waters: A Jessie Madison Mystery by Terry Shames will be published by Severn House on April 2.

The Housewife Assassin's Underwater Assets, book #24 in the Housewife Assassin Series by Josie Brown, will be published on May 24 by Signal Press.

What We'll Burn Last, a new standalone by Heather Chavez, will be published on July 23 by Mulholland Books.

Murder at La Villette, book #21 in the Aimée Leduc Investigation Book series, will be published on March 5 by Soho Crime.

Molten Death: An Orchid Island Mystery by Leslie Karst will be published on April 2 by Severn House. In this brand new series, retired caterer Valerie Corbin and her wife, Kristen, while on a trip to the Big Island of Hawai'i, swap surfing lessons for sleuthing lessons when a hike to an active volcano lava flow turns deadly.

Murder and the Missing Dog, book #2 in the Chateau in Burgundy Mystery series by Susan C. Shea, will be published on March 5 by Severn House.

G. M. Malliet has a new short story, "Fear of Missing Out," in Martin Edwards' *Midsomer Mysteries*. The collection will appear July 9.

Member News, continued

New and Upcoming Releases, continued

Deep Beneath Us, a suspenseful standalone set in Scotland by Catriona McPherson, will be released by Severn House on June 4.

Laura Jensen Walker is excited to announce that a paperback version of her Agatha Award-nominated cozy mystery debut, *Murder Most Sweet*, will be released by the Harlequin Book Club in late March.

Laura Jensen Walker is even more excited announce her debut historical, *Death of a Flying Nightingale*, and to shine a spotlight on an overlooked group of real women heroes from WWII—the Flying Nightingales. Laura had the great privilege of interviewing the last remaining Nightingale, who recently died at the age of 107. *Death of a Flying Nightingale* will release in early September from Level Best Books.

Public Appearances

Ana Brazil, along with three other Paper Lantern authors, will share *Book Launch Tactics and Tips* at The History Quill's Third Annual Convention on Zoom on Sunday, February 4. For more information: <https://thehistoryquill.com/convention-2024/>

Ann Parker will appear on a panel with Camille Minichino, James L'Etoile, and Simon Wood at The Alta Mira Historical House, 561 Lafayette Ave. in San Leandro, CA on Monday, February 19 (President's Day), from noon to 2:00 p.m. PST.

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

SinC NorCal members are well represented in the nominees for Lefty Awards, to be announced at the Left Coast Crime convention in Seattle in April. For Best Humorous Mystery Novel: Leslie Karst for *A Sense of Murder*, Catriona McPherson for *Hop Scot*, Cindy Sample for *Dying for a Decoration*. For Best Historical Mystery Novel: Cara Black for *Night Flight to Paris*. For Best Mystery Novel: Gigi Pandian for *The Raven Thief*.

Ritu Mukerji's *Murder by Degrees* has been nominated for an Edgar Award in the First Novel by an American Author category.

Question of the Quarter



As a writer, are you feeling threatened by Artificial Intelligence (AI)? Why or why not?

I am not feeling threatened by AI, not yet. In December I attended an online seminar presented by the Treasure Coast SinC chapter (Florida). The speaker was Neil Plakcy, and the topic was AI. (You can see it on his YouTube channel--two parts titled AI for Writers.) I learned that there are several AI platforms in addition to Chat GPT, some specifically helpful to writers. I went to SudoWrite, signed up for a free trial, entered (easily) all I knew about my WIP (just beginning), and poof! SudoWrite outlined the whole book for me, chapter by chapter, with character descriptions, etc. The writing was bad (trite), but the plotting gave me several helpful ideas. Since plotting is my bugaboo, I appreciated how SudoWrite got me thinking in a more productive way. So I used it; it didn't use me. No question I will write this book. The experience was similar to kicking plot ideas around with a writer friend. I'm keeping my writer friends, just adding a new one. *Ellen Kirschman*

I was initially threatened by AI, but then my son-in-law, a diehard techie who owns a server company, ran an AI command to write one of my paranormal romance books. At first glance, the outline was good, plot lines clear, characters acting reliably. Then I read it more closely. It was garden-variety formula. The plot pulled from every other vampire book ever, the characters were cardboard, and the pacing was "this happened" and "this happened" and then "this happened." There was no nuance, little to no motivation, certainly no research into the history of either the plot or the setting, which I always include. Because I'm a pantsner and don't always know how I'm going to get from point A to point B, I think my voice and style (not always complete sentences, use of comma splices) won't be easy to replicate. Even I don't know how my narrative will work out until I write it! My books may not have mass appeal because they're somewhat unpredictable, but this might mean that they're also not good candidates for AI-generated versions. Maybe I accidentally saved myself from the new technology. *Michele Drier*

No, I don't feel threatened by AI. Each of us has our own unique imagination and point of view. I don't feel threatened by other writers either, although they may inspire me. *Priscilla Royal*

I'm not. I'm annoyed by the unethical practices used to train the litbots, and certainly the law needs to catch up, but radio, telly, film, videogames, and social media failed to kill the book. I'm betting on us again! *Catriona McPherson*

As a writer, I'm not threatened by artificial intelligence. I mean, the cat's out of the bag. I remember when our workplace transitioned from paper to the Internet. Close to 25% of our staff retired so they wouldn't need to learn how to use the World Wide Web. Artificial intelligence is here to stay, and as a writer, I'm grateful to *Grammarly* and *ProWritingAid* (both of which use AI in their software programs). Rather than strain against AI, I'm asking myself, "How can I use this to make my work easier without crossing any ethical boundaries?" In my opinion, regulation is necessary, and that's why organizations such as Sisters in Crime are so vital to our writing community. *Nannette Potter*

Question of the Quarter, continued

As a writer, I guess I am in a “wait and see” mode with regards to AI. As is often pointed out, many of us already use some variations of AI in our daily lives (“Hey, Siri”), just not the “super-charged” newer variety that churns out entire works of fiction (or non-fiction, although the non-fic stuff is definitely not trustworthy, as it is prone to making up bibliographic sources for AI-generated research papers and so on). I suppose my attitude at this point is it’s fun to tinker with, but for serious use, I’d “approach with caution.” (Note: This off-the-cuff answer was generated without any AI enhancements.) 😊 *Ann Parker*

I’m not feeling threatened by AI, yet. At present, I’m writing historical mysteries and I’m also a research librarian. I like going down rabbit holes to find the kind of little-known details that I hope will add ah-ha moments to my story. Will machines be able to find the kind of details that enrich a story? And how will a machine that doesn’t have emotional “intelligence” know when to layer in subtle nuances of emotion between characters, raising or lowering the emotional heat accurately? Most challenging for AI might be humor. Humor is hard for humans to write well. Timing is all. Often, when I’m writing, a spark of humor flies up, unbidden, spontaneous. How would a machine be able to invoke that kind of spontaneity? If AI can manage emotion and humor, we’re in trouble!
Michal Strutin



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 **Danna Wilberg**, Events (dannawilberg (at) gmail.com), with meeting and venue suggestions and **Margie Bunting**, Newsletter (mbunting (at) sbcglobal.net), with newsletter article suggestions and submissions.

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