

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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MAY 2024

Conferences and Conventions

The 2024 conference season kicked off April 10 in Seattle with Left Coast Crime.

Next up comes Malice Domestic, Killer Nashville, then the granddaddy, Bouchercon. It's August 28 to September 1 in Nashville as well.

I've been active in the mystery convention/conference scene since my first Bouchercon in 2012 in San Francisco.

In 2020, I was the co-chair for Bouchercon in Sacramento, a con that got sidelined by Covid and went virtual at the last minute. I served on the Bouchercon board for seven years, just one of many volunteers who give their time and expertise to make these conferences and conventions such a resource to the mystery writers' community.

Although I've been very involved with Bouchercon, my heart is with Left Coast Crime. It's closer (and less expensive), smaller, and more accessible.

And this year, a lot of you, our members, thought so, too. In addition to the launch of our anthology, *Invasive Species*, at a cocktail party at the STK Restaurant, SinC NorCal was well represented on panels, both as panelists and moderators. Included were (in order of appearance) Vera Chan, Ana Manwaring, Leslie Karst, Yves Fey, Margaret Lucke, Laurie King, Heather Haven, Terry Shepherd, Dänna Wilberg, Gigi



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President's Letter, continued

Pandian, Karen A. Phillips, Cara Black, Mysti Berry, George Cramer, Stacie Grey (Daisy Bateman), Susan Shea, Glenda Carroll, Michelle Chouinard, Ellen Kirschman, Susan McCormick, and Vinnie Hansen. Oh, and me.

Other members celebrating the written word were Susan Bickford, Brian Shea, Bruce Johnson, and Michal Strutin, and previous member Terry Shames, as well as many MWA NorCal members.

Along with book talk, there were plenty of chances to wine, dine, and catch up with others in our community. Besides the Thursday evening book launch, we gathered with Capitol Crimes for a Friday night dinner and get-together, and the awards banquet Saturday night was a highlight of good food, good company, and lots of applause.

NorCal Event Chair Dänna Wilberg and I hosted a table with a Paris theme (my WIP is set in France), and our guests included Susan Bickford, Michal Strutin, Cheryl Head (chair of the Bouchercon board), debut writer Maria Barrs Kemp, independent filmmaker Mamie Calvert, and marketers extraordinaire Terry Shepherd and Dan White.

There has been a lot of chat on various groups including the Guppies about the good, the bad, and the difference between conferences and conventions. The prevailing wisdom is that conventions are fan based with lots of readers, and conferences are craft based, focusing more on writers. I think there's something for everyone in all of these gatherings, and many of us came home charged up to tackle projects.

If you've never attended one, I urge you to take a look, find one that fits your interests, needs, and wallets, and go. You'll probably be tired and overloaded but will come home with new friends, ideas, and enthusiasm for reading and writing.

Sincerely,

Michele Drier
President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, May 4, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Spring Author Showcase

Book Passage

51 Tamal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera, CA

Hybrid meeting with Zoom

It's time once again for our twice-yearly Author Showcase, when our chapter members with recently published books or stories will read excerpts from their work for our pleasure. Authors scheduled to speak are the following:

Rachele Baker	Heather Haven
Susan Alice Bickford	T.E. MacArthur
Rhys Bowen	Jen Prosser
Josie Brown	Susan C. Shea
George Cramer	Dänna Wilberg

Saturday, June 4, 1:00 – 3:00, p.m.

Get Smart: Understanding Artificial Intelligence

Zoom meeting

AI is here to stay. Now what? Confused about the basics? What kinds of tools are out there? How could you be using it . . . and should you? Join us as our panelists share their expertise and help authors navigate these technical and ethical challenges. **Vera Chan** is a veteran lifestyle/ A&E editor and reporter who has worked at the intersection of journalism and technology at the world's biggest tech companies. She is also a writer of short stories and nonfiction. In more than four decades of working in computer technology, **William Bruce Johnson** published a dozen nonfiction books that helped thousands of software developers build the websites that people complain about. Pivoting to writing thrillers, he published his first short story in our *Invasive Species* anthology and is querying his first novel. **Reece Hirsch** is the Thriller Award-nominated author of six thrillers that draw upon his experience as a privacy attorney. He is co-head of the privacy and security practice of an international law firm and frequently advises clients and speaks about AI issues.

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.

February Meeting – *Meet & Greet and Reading Your Work in Public Workshop*

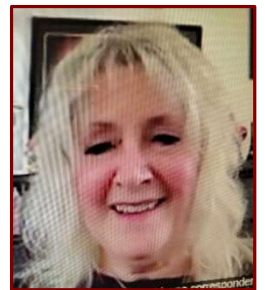


At our hybrid Meet & Greet, attendees had the opportunity to mix and mingle with fellow members and (at the in-person event) enjoy a potluck together. Maureen Studer led an interactive workshop where she provided valuable guidance for authors who read their work in public. She illustrated her points with a demo, exercises for participants, and the opportunity to read an excerpt of their work and receive on-the-spot coaching. Be sure to read Part 3 of Maureen's series, *Reading Your Work for an Audience: Scoring Your Work*, on [page 10](#) of this issue of *The Stiletta*.

March Meeting – *An Interview with John DeDakis*



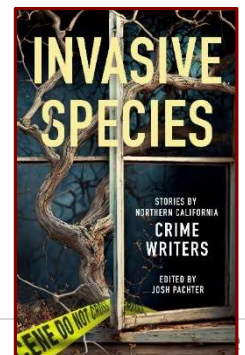
Events Chair Dänna Wilberg interviewed multi-hyphenate John DeDakis about his long career as a journalist, educator, writing coach, manuscript editor, and podcast host. John spent 25 years at CNN as a senior copy editor for *The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer* and is a former White House correspondent. He teaches courses in how to write a novel, including such topics as organization, buffing and polishing, rewriting, and narrating from a different gender. John encourages his



students to participate in writing exercises, such as a 10-minute interview of one of their characters. He also advises them to avoid overlong chapters, too much backstory early in their novel, and too many semicolons, dialogue tags, and adverbs. John is the author of the award-winning Lark Chadwick Mystery series, the sixth of which will be published this summer. And he says he is a "rank amateur" jazz and rock drummer, who learned to play by watching Ringo Starr. There are so many valuable nuggets in John's interview – if you were unable to attend the meeting, you can catch up by watching the interview on our website.

April Meeting – *Invasive Species Soft Anthology Launch*

To celebrate the launch of our newest anthology, *Invasive Species*, we were treated to excerpts of the 15 included stories, read by the authors. The official launch was held at Left Coast Crime in Seattle in April and included book signings by the attending authors.

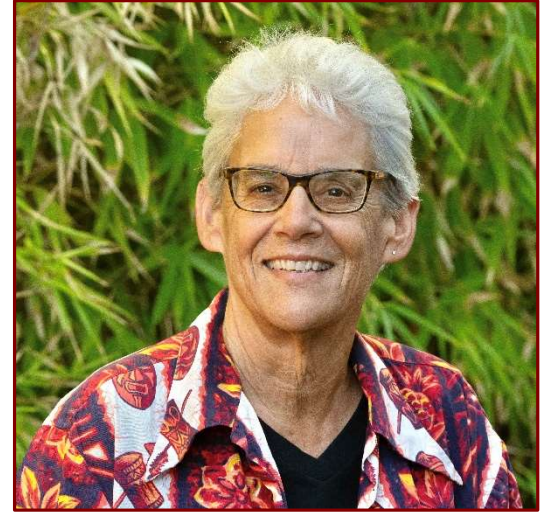


How a Santa Cruz Gal Came to Set a Mystery on the “Orchid Isle”

by Leslie Karst

I’ll let you in on a little secret . My new Orchid Isle Mystery started out as one of my Sally Solari mysteries – the second in that series, in fact. After twenty-five years making an annual trip to the Big Island, I’d recently started living half-time in Hilo, Hawai’i, and was itching to write a story set on my beloved “Orchid Isle.”

I had yet to sell the first Sally Solari book, *Dying for a Taste*, but everyone who knew anything about the publishing business encouraged me to immediately begin writing a sequel, as one of the first things my potential editor would ask would be: Is it part of a series?



I’d gotten through maybe a quarter of the manuscript when I finally landed that elusive publishing deal, and it turned out those people had been right – the publisher wanted to sign me for a two-book contract. “Great!” I said. “And I’ve already started the second one.”

When they heard that it was set in Hawai’i, however, they balked. “No,” I was told. “We want all the books in the series to be set in Santa Cruz, California, where the first one is set. Cozy readers don’t want to be following a protagonist around the world. They want to stay in the same small town with the same familiar cast of characters.”

I’m not sure I agree with this limited view of cozy readers, but I was a newbie author and not about to argue the point with my publisher. So I set that manuscript aside and wrote *A Measure of Murder* instead, which – like all six of the Sally books – takes place in Santa Cruz, where I live when I’m not in Hilo.

But the unfinished story stayed with me. And the longer I lived on the Big Island, the more I yearned to set a mystery in that captivating – almost magical – locale.

So what is it that makes the island so special? For me, it’s the presence of two active volcanoes (three, if you count Hualālai, which looms over the tourist town of Kailua-Kona and last erupted in 1801 – just yesterday in geologic terms). This ongoing volcanic activity has shaped not only the island’s geology, flora, and fauna, but also the culture of the intrepid Polynesians who made the long voyage from the South Pacific to the archipelago by outrigger canoe some eight hundred years ago.

Setting a Mystery on the Orchid Isle, continued

Living in a place where at any moment the land can tremble and shake and where molten rock can spew from the depths of the earth and come rushing down the mountain towards your village will have an enormous impact on how you view life. Dances, chants, and intonations to Pele with her streaming hair of fire become all important in an attempt to appease the volcano goddess and implore respect to Pele by leaving her offerings of gin and woven leis of *ti* intertwined with *‘ōhi’a lehua* blossoms along the rim of Kilauea crater.

And when Pele did just that—sent a river of lava down through the communities of Leilani Estates and Kapoho back in 2018, I knew it was time to return to my discarded story and bring it back to life. I had to share my awe and love for this geologically dynamic, culturally diverse, and stupendously beautiful island and tell a tale of secrets and mystery, friendship and food, and hot molten lava.

Thus were born Valerie Corbin and her wife, Kristen. They’re visiting Hawai’i from Los Angeles, and it’s Valerie’s first time in the Aloha State. I decided to make *Molten Death* a fish-out-of-water story for two reasons. First, it’s not my place to tell the story of someone who was born and raised on the Big Island; and second, by making Valerie a *malihini*—a newcomer—I was able to incorporate many of the observations and emotions I experienced the first time I came to Hawai’i.

At first, she’s sorely disappointed. *This is not what Hawai’i’s supposed to be like*, Valerie fumes after she and Kristen spend their second soggy day in Hilo. But then Kristen’s friend, tattooed local boy Isaac, takes them on a tour of sights most tourists don’t get a chance to see, including a hike out to the active lava flow, where Valerie alone witnesses a human leg being covered over by molten lava. (Just so you know--this part never happened to me!)

But when it becomes clear that both Kristen and Isaac believe she merely imagined the experience, Valerie sets out to both prove her sanity and solve the mystery of the body in the lava. And in the process, she comes to understand what it is that is so very special and magical about the “Orchid Isle.”



Leslie Karst is the author of the Orchid Isle Mystery, *Molten Death*, of the Lefty Award-nominated Sally Solari series, and of *Justice is Served: A Tale of Scallops, the Law, and Cooking for RBG*. When not writing, you’ll find her cooking, cycling, gardening, and observing cocktail hour promptly at five o’clock. She and her wife and their Jack Russell mix split their time between Hilo, Hawai’i and Santa Cruz, California. <https://www.lesliekarstauthor.com>

Travel Writing and Fiction

by Kathleen Bryant

I can barely remember a time when I wasn't scribbling away in a spiral notebook. My first paying writing job was with a software developer, preparing manuals, press releases, and corporate speeches. I quit to write romances for Silhouette and Harper. Then I moved to Sedona, Arizona, and started romancing the West, turning a love of road-tripping into a career of travel writing.



And now here I am, writing crime fiction. Fortunately, writers are lifelong learners and natural recyclers. Reinvention can sometimes feel like a burden . . . until I think of how many tips and tricks I've been able to adapt, reuse, and recycle along the way. Take travel writing, for instance.

My editor at *Arizona Highways* magazine was old school, a former reporter who worked his way up through the newsroom ranks. In my imagination, Bob Early sat with cowboy boots propped on his desk, a cloud of cigar smoke above his head, barking at reporters while typewriters clacked in the background. In real life, Bob was good-humored and patient, though his deep blue eyes were always laser-focused on copy inches. Whittling stories down to the standard 800, 1,500, or 2,500 words forced me—a long-winded novelist—to chip away weak wood like a beaver.

Though adventure tales were our stock in trade, *Highways'* writers and photographers were geeks at heart. At the annual contributors' meeting, we pitched "scoops" for unearthing obscure histories or backpacking remote mountaintops. Bob guarded the editorial gates with his favorite pass phrase: "What's in it for me? *That's* what our readers want to know."

Longtime contributors who'd winkled out Bob's soft spot—stories about lost gold mines—passed through the gates. The rest of us learned one rejection letter at a time. Our assignment wasn't to write about places; it was to take readers on a journey.

I had one advantage. With five romance novels under my belt, I had a secret weapon for transporting readers: sensuality. Of course, I never told Bob. Despite his tough-guy demeanor, he'd have blushed at the idea, and perhaps worry I'd try and slip something sexy into a family magazine, when my only aim was to weave the five senses into my stories. Given Arizona's gorgeous scenery, sight cues were easy. Incorporating sound, touch, smell, and taste? Challenging ... but doable.

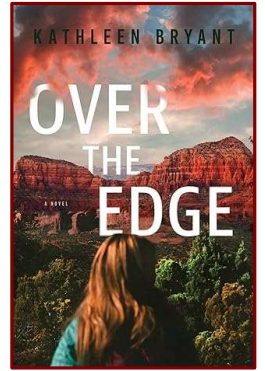
Nearly twenty years later, I still think of Bob whenever I start work on a book. He helped me learn not just craft but also professionalism. Rejection, for example, didn't mean the end of a story—it meant reworking the angle to slip through the gate. Revisions? An opportunity to learn from one of the most discerning editors I'd ever worked with. Deadlines? A way to build trust and reputation.

Travel Writing and Fiction, continued

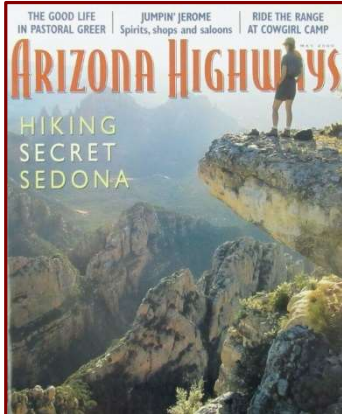
As for plotting – that’s still aspirational for me. Instead, I approach each scene like a reporter, asking the classic six questions: Who, what, when, where, why, and how. Then I tackle Bob’s favorite question – *What’s in it for me?* – aiming to transport the reader into the world I’ve created.

The Sedona I write about in my first mystery novel, *Over the Edge*, is plausible invention – real enough to feel authentic, but fictional enough to keep me out of legal peril. My desk is piled with the same tools I used to write guidebooks and articles – maps, field guides, sunrise/sunset charts, etc. These days, however, I just as often use Wikipedia or Google Street View.

My tools and genre may have evolved, yet I’m still a travel writer and guide at heart. I hope readers will experience Sedona through the vehicle of my characters. (Wow, here’s the moment where I have a forehead-smacking epiphany: Is this why my sleuth leads Jeep tours? Ha.)



When you get right down to it, aren’t all writers travel writers? We take readers on journeys through fictional worlds made lifelike through technique, skill, and experience. With apologies to Edward Abbey: “May your trails [fictional journeys] be crooked, winding, lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing view.”



And Bob, if you’re reading this, I promise: Someday I’ll write about a lost gold mine.



That’s Kathleen on the cover of an issue of *Arizona Highways*. She says it’s a weird coincidence that the rock formation in the distance – Twin Buttes – is the same formation depicted on the cover of her new book (see above).

Kathleen Bryant spun her adventures into stories for *Arizona Highways*, *American Archaeology*, *Sunset*, *The Guardian*, and other publications, and wrote travel guides spotlighting Sedona, Grand Canyon, and the Four Corners. She’s also written romance novels, interviewed chefs for her *National Parks’ Lodges Cookbook*, and reimagined Southwestern flute player lore for an award-winning children’s book featuring Kokopelli. Her first mystery novel, *Over the Edge*, will be published on June 4, 2024 by Crooked Lane Books. Kathleen lives in Sonoma, CA.

Series or Standalones?

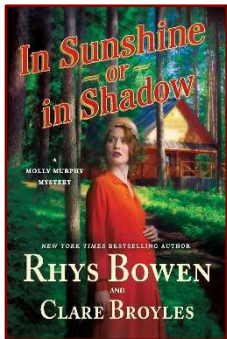
by Susan C. Shea



Some of our favorite authors have asked and answered this question for themselves over the years with great success. For new writers, though, the question may be hovering in the background, waiting for a potential agent or publisher to push them for an answer. Hint: Series is generally the preferred answer, for some obvious financial reasons. Even if you get an agent's serious interest in what you thought was a standalone, don't be surprised to hear, "So is this, or could this be, a series?" Agents, who are usually the gatekeepers, may be able to sell several of your books at once if it is mapped out to be a series, earning that 15%

commission that will continue to provide revenue if the books have a longer time in print and earn royalties long after the advance. Publishers will continue to make money on the first of a series long after it debuts, benefiting (as the author will) from readers who start with a later book, then go back to read the earlier ones.

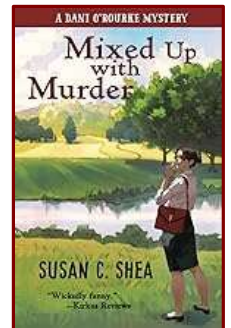
So, money. But the creative aspect may be tougher to decide. I asked two successful authors who have done both to share their thinking. Their reasoning and experiences are helping me now because I'm in that situation and trying to decide which way to jump--what are the pros and cons I need to factor into my decision?



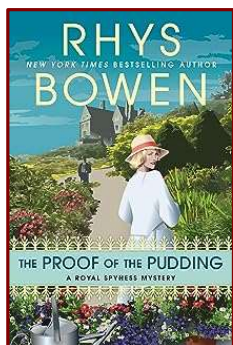
Rhys Bowen has done it all. She entered the crime fiction world as an already well-published author and jumped in with the much-loved Evan Evans series. With that platform, in 2001 she was able to begin a new series, the Molly Murphy mysteries set in early 20th century New York and still going strong at 20 books. She says, "The good thing is you have a guaranteed audience who loves your characters and their environment. The problem could become that you're stuck in one place. If you take your characters elsewhere, you could lose readers."

My own attempt to straddle that divide was writing my first three-book series, the Dani O'Rourke Mysteries, which debuted in 2010, set primarily in San Francisco, where she lives and works, but featuring plots that take her to other places in the US.

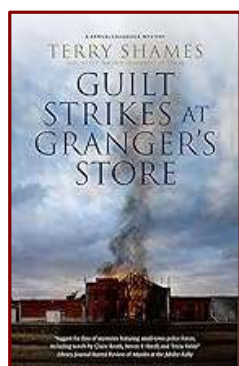
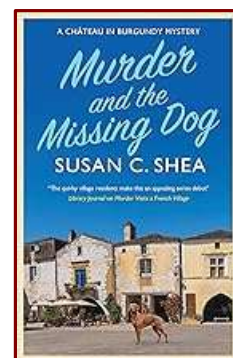
Rhys and I have since then taken on fresh series. She began her Royal Spyness novels featuring Lady Georgiana, a genuine but penniless heir to the



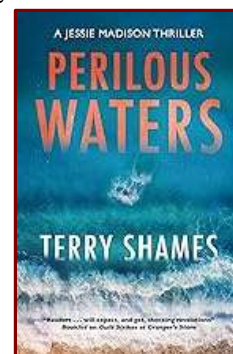
Series or Standalones, continued



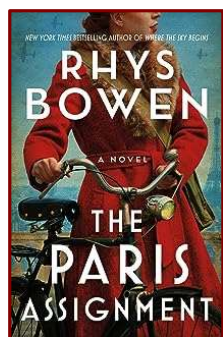
British throne, which Rhys says was “therapeutic,” a light, comedic series that took off like a rocket. My last four mysteries have been set in rural France but are slightly bifurcated into two series by two separate traditional publishers. In both cases, our agents encouraged us because we already had what they call “platforms,” established successes, visibility to readers, social media presence, and good professional reviews. So, series and more series work.



Terry Shames is the author of the long-running, award-winning Samuel Craddock series, set in Texas. Her new book, out in April, isn't part of that series, but when her agent read the manuscript and said, “Is it a series?” she said yes. The decision to try something new doesn't always lead to a standalone, even if that's what the author might have thought while doing the draft. “Sometimes, you get tired of writing your series characters and want to branch out a bit,” Terry says. “My longstanding Samuel Craddock series featured an older male protagonist and a small town in Texas. My new series, the Jessie Madison thriller series, features an intrepid young woman, a diver whose first adventure was in the Bahamas. From there, she'll be in the Mediterranean. I haven't had time to tire of her, but there are a lot of interesting characters I may want to explore.”



Terry says, “Sometimes an idea comes up that simply doesn't fit into your series. Most of the time you can ignore it and it will go away. But if the idea keeps nagging at you, and characters wave at you from the periphery, you can't help pursuing it.” She says that decades ago, a line that just came to her lodged in her head and kept nudging her. Who said it? Was it true? And who was he talking about? When she finally gave in to her own creative nagging, she answered those internal questions, and over time it became a book. “Not part of a series. Just a book that would stand on its own. And I like it. I'm pleased with it and hope it finds a publisher.”



Rhys, who has written a number of best-selling standalone novels at the same time she's continued to write her two current series, says, “It's harder to break in as a new author with a standalone.” Even after proving your worth with a series, she notes, “The biggest risk is whether your readers will follow you. You can't get too far from your brand, but in a standalone book you can leave your characters in a good place.”

What if the book you want to write won't lend itself to morphing into a series? “You have to write what you're passionate about,” Rhys says. Terry is excited about a

Series or Standalones, continued

different book that she hopes her agent can sell even though it isn't able to become a series because of the outcome of the story.

Right now, I'm considering focusing on a draft of a definite standalone book I relished writing and am ready to pour myself into even though my agent is not jumping for joy. But I also revisited the draft of a fun crime fiction book I put aside when the contract for the French village books came through. That one could be the first in a series if I tweak a couple of plot points. And there's potential for another mystery set in Burgundy. So, here I sit, having listened to my friends, balancing the question: Series or standalone?

Susan C. Shea has been writing since she was old enough to read. She left a career in non-profits to write crime fiction because it looked like more fun. It is! She writes three highly praised series, all of which are available in one or more formats: The Dani O'Rourke Mysteries; two Burgundy mysteries; and the French Château murder series. The newest château novel was published in March. They're all traditional-cozy hybrids, laced with humor. Susan lives with two cats, blogs with some dynamite authors at *7CriminalMinds*, and has an author page on Facebook. www.susancshea.com.



... to our newest members
(joining SinC NorCal from January 1, 2024 through March 31, 2024)

Jim Aikin
Shannon Dugan
Cynthis Mach
Lynda Markham
Aletheia Morden
Terry Shepherd
Emily Willingham

Reading Your Work Before an Audience

Part 3: Scoring the Script

by Maureen Studer



In this article, I'm going to talk about scoring the script, a nitty gritty method of preparing the script to read aloud. This can make the difference between telling the story and just saying the words aloud.

Why call it scoring? Because just as music is expressed through a series of notes, played for a length of time, which create the rhythm, pace, and sounds we enjoy, dance to, cry with . . . scoring your script is intended to give the audience the same experience with words.

In any given sentence there are words that should be highlighted, punched, or expressed with a little more emphasis or emotion than the rest, giving the text color and expression. When I determine the primary word in my excerpt, I circle it. It should be the word that illuminates the meaning of sentence and tells the story. I physically circle it in pencil, so I don't forget or skip past when I'm rehearsing or reading. There shouldn't be a circled word in every sentence, as that can cause confusion. You'll start to sound overly animated, like a caricature. I encourage you to try several different words to see which works best for your story.

Additionally, there are other words that are important and should get some emphasis, but not quite as much as a circled word. I underline this word. This is a word I might want to deliver in a completely different way than the circled word.

Remember, this is just for you. Nobody is going to evaluate the way you score your script. If circles and underlines don't work for you, then do something else. Use an asterisk or an arrow or whatever helps to keep you on track. Just know you're going to want to really emphasize some words more than others. The whole point of this is to give yourself a road map to read your story in as interesting a way as possible.

As an example, I'm going to give you a sentence that is pretty common. The phrase, "where are my keys," is probably something that you found yourself saying a time or two. At least, if you misplace your keys as often as I do. For our purposes, I've bolded the word that will get more emphasis and underlined the secondary emphasized word. Because the sentence is short, there will be two words that are not scored in any way. So now, take a minute and speak the line aloud. It's important to say it aloud. With each variation of the delivery, you'll hear a difference in tone, emotional texture, and color.

Go ahead and speak them now, a couple of times if necessary.

Reading Your Work: Scoring the Script, continued

Where **are** my keys?

Where are **my** keys?

Where are my keys?

Where are my **keys**?

What do you notice about the differences in the way the sentences sound and what is implied? Did you sound more impatient? More cajoling? More commanding? This little tip is the beginning of connecting your audience to your words and the intention of your characters. The audience will identify your writing if they understand the tone and attitude of your characters. Identifying the key words and defining the emotional and psychological emphasis of the character is a great start to telling the story.

Next, start thinking about pitch, tone, and vocal variety. Your voice should rise and fall, at moments be a little intense, or easy, depending on the narrative. As you practice, you'll notice the rise and fall in your voice. It might seem strange at first because we certainly don't talk like this on a regular basis. In fact, it would sound weird if this were the way we spoke regularly. But for the purpose of presenting your work, it helps the reader to tap into their imagination.

It's a good idea to accentuate the rise and fall in your voice in order to find it, then pull back so it sounds natural. It's not necessary to force too much of a rise and fall. You don't want to sound mechanical, clownish, or condescending.

What's next?

I have a few more written signals I give myself to remind me of the tone and mood I want to create for my novel presentation. To make my reading sound more interesting, I use slashes, commas, and periods to break up language to sound more real and less like a teacher reading to her students, a parent to his child. Please note, these signals are something I've used for years. I created my cues when I was in college trying to learn how to find beats in a monologue. Use any written signals that make sense to you.

A slash, for me, is a change in mood, tone, or character transition. If I put a slash between two words, then I know the emphasis changes from one word to the next. Confident/insecure. Loving/mistrusting. Hopeful/despairing. These are really stark differences, and you might not have something this stark in your work, but if there is a change in emphasis, you can indicate it and let it come through in your reading.

Reading Your Work: Scoring the Script, continued

A familiar example illustrates the effect the notations will have on the sound of the language. Please rehearse reading aloud, taking into consideration the notations. These next shorter lines are meant to help you understand reading the grammar of a slash, comma, or nothing at all.

Don't / Stop.

Don't, Stop.

Don't Stop.

Now, I hope you can take a little time and reflect on your own writing. I hope you can apply these suggestions to find the best way to tell your story. Happy Reading!

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: Ritu Mukerji

Thirtieth in a series to introduce our members
to each other

Ritu Mukerji, an M.D. who has worked as an internist for 15 years in the Bay Area, recently had her first historical mystery, *Murder by Degrees*, published by Simon & Schuster and is a nominee for the 2024 Edgar Award for Best First Novel. Ritu lives in Marin County with her husband, three children, two cats and two dogs.

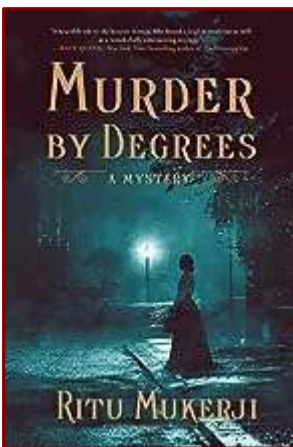


Stiletta: Please introduce us to your protagonist in *Murder by Degrees*, Dr. Lydia Weston.

Ritu Mukerji: Dr. Lydia Weston is a professor and anatomist at Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, one of the first medical schools for women students in the US. She is a self-made, determined, and fiercely independent heroine. When the body of one of her patients is dredged out of the Schuylkill River, she is drawn into the police investigation. Soon she must solve the crime before she becomes a victim herself.

Stiletta: What made you decide to set your novel in 19th century Philadelphia?

RM: For many years, I had the idea to write a mystery novel about a woman doctor. But the question was: should it be set in the modern day or in the past? When I discovered the historic medical college, I knew I had the perfect setting—I had lived in Philly as a medical student, so I knew the city well. But it gave me the chance to do cool research into my own profession and draw on my own experiences as a doctor, all of which is infused into the story.



Stiletta: How did you ensure that the details of location, social conditions, and available technology described in the book were appropriate for the setting and time?

RM: Before I started writing, I did extensive research. It was important to first create the world of 19th century medicine and Philadelphia, before placing the characters in it and constructing the story. So, I read, and then I read some more: old medical textbooks and medical journals, histories of medicine and the city of Philadelphia, biographies of famous physicians and Civil War era surgeons. The historical details were so important for the story to ring true.

Member Profile: Ritu Mukerji, continued

Stiletta: Your book features the difficulties female physicians had gaining acceptance in that era. Can you tell us a little about that?

RM: Outside of the supportive environment of the medical college, women doctors faced steep challenges: difficulty finding jobs or attending privileges at hospitals to see patients. They were barred from state medical societies, an important place to present research. It is a very interesting dynamic to explore as a writer, how these extraordinary women defied social conventions to pursue their careers.

Stiletta: In your book, the chambermaid's diary provides clues by way of snippets of Victorian poetry. How did you choose the poems for that diary?

RM: Choosing the poems was great fun, like completing a puzzle. I enjoy reading all types of poetry, especially Victorian poetry. The poetry fragments in the book are a way of hearing the character Anna's voice, so I chose many that were cryptic and suspenseful.

Stiletta: You are a self-professed library lover and committed reader. When and why did you decide to write your own novel – and a mystery to boot?

RM: I have been an avid reader of mystery and crime novels since my earliest days as a reader and have had so many hours of reading pleasure from this wonderful genre. And I have always been interested in the history of women in medicine. These interests simmered in my mind for many years. There was no "lightbulb" moment, but one day I decided to start writing, as I had been thinking of it for so long.

Stiletta: When you started your first book, did you think you were a plotter or a pantsier, and did that change as you wrote it?

RM: I am a plotter through and through! Even though many elements of the story will change, I need to have the narrative fully outlined before I start writing.

Stiletta: Who are some of your literary influences?

RM: Some of my favorite authors are Ruth Rendell, PD James, Val McDermid, Henning Mankell – I love the complex, detailed plots and the psychological portraits drawn in their work. I am also drawn to series that feature a strong, independent woman investigator – Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, Jacqueline Winspear's Maisie Dobbs, and Sujata Massey's Perveen Mistry novels are favorites.

Member Profile: Ritu Mukerji, continued

Stiletta: While working full-time as a physician, when do you have time to write?

RM: I would work early in the morning before work, or late in the evening when the house was quiet, time when I could work uninterrupted. I became conditioned to working during those times, and it was very effective to keep the momentum going, even on the frustrating days.

Stiletta: Are there more Lydia Weston books coming, and are you able to tell us a little about what we can expect?

RM: I am currently working on the second Lydia Weston book, set at the Centennial Exposition, the World's Fair that was held in Philadelphia in 1876. The story centers on a brilliant woman surgeon, and a surgical procedure under anesthesia gone awry.

Stiletta: What benefits have you received, or do you hope to receive, from membership in Sisters in Crime?

RM: I hope to meet and connect with other writers and be part of a robust mystery/crime fiction writing community.

Ritu Mukerji was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.
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Decade-Birthday Villain

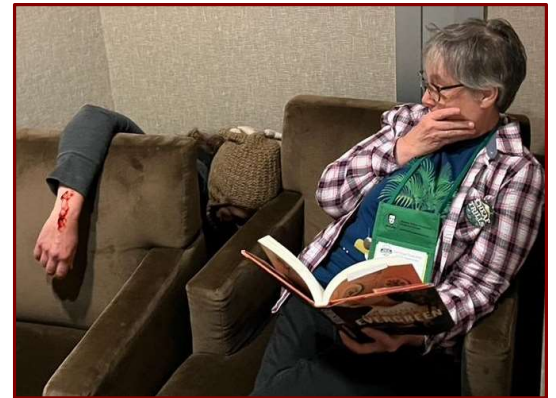
by Vinnie Hansen

A decade birthday taps me on the shoulder. She's an inescapable villain, whispering in my ear, "You are older than you've ever been, and younger than you'll ever be. If there's anything you wanna do, now's the time."

Besides driving across Montana and the Enchanted Highway in North Dakota to Teddy Roosevelt National Park, I've wanted to step up my game at writing conventions. When registration for Left Coast Crime rolled around, Decade-Birthday Villain gave me a swift push into two new experiences: moderating a panel and offering an author/reader connection. The prospects excited and terrified me.



My "Stash the Stiff" Author/Reader Connection (ARC) idea came from enjoying a similar event led by mystery writer Cindy Brown at LCC Crimelandia in 2023. She gave an enthusiastic thumbs up to my planned event.



For "Stash the Stiff," I offered to lead five intrepid souls about the conference environs to scope out places to hide dead bodies. We would then assume the position—so to speak—and take photos to post.



The ARC filled in two days!

What could I do but buy some fake blood and wonder what I (or rather Decade-Birthday Villain) had begotten. My "Stash the Stiff" crew turned out to be adventurous to the point of worrying innocent passersby.

As for moderating, LCC finally offered short story panels—right in my wheelhouse and an amount of reading I could

Decade-Birthday Villain, continued

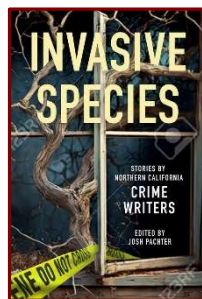
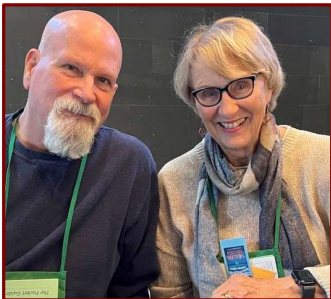
handle. My panel had the ironically long title, “The Whole Story in a Single Sitting: Short Fiction that Satisfies.”

The panelists – Merrilee Robson, Chris Dreith, Smita Harish Jain, and Steven Steinbock – were a joy. I was prepared with about a dozen too many questions and landed somewhere in the mid-range of moderators--not spectacular, but not horrible. Through these two new experiences, I made real connections, one of the joys of a convention like Left Coast Crime. As Smita said, we’re now her “peeps.” And they are mine.

Next month, Decade-Birthday Villain has me flying to Bozeman.

Still sane(ish) after 27 years of teaching high school English, Vinnie Hansen has retired and plays keyboards with ukulele groups in Santa Cruz, CA, where she lives with her husband and the requisite cat. She also writes crime fiction. A Claymore and a Silver Falchion finalist, Vinnie is the author of the Carol Sabala mystery series, the novels *Lostart Street* and *One Gun*, as well as over 60 published short works. Her next story will appear in *Black Cat Weekly* on May 12. Level Best Books will re-issue *One Gun* in 2024 and publish her new suspense novel, *Crime Writer*, in 2025.

And speaking of Left Coast Crime . . .



Left Coast Crime photos (continued)



Left Coast Crime photos (continued)



Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

Over the Edge by Kathleen Bryant will be released on June 4 by Crooked Lane Books.

Dänna Wilberg's short story, "Amarillo by Morning," and Terry Shepherd's short story, "Oliver Kowalski," will be included in the Sisters in Crime North Dallas Anthology, "Notorious in North Texas," due to launch in Frisco, Texas on June 8 at Barnes & Noble and again on June 9 at The Wild Detective.

She Left, a standalone thriller by Stacie Grey (aka Daisy Bateman) will be released by Poison Pen Press on May 14.

Bewitched, Bothered, and Beheaded, book #10 of the Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries by Heather Haven, was released on April 10

Public Appearances

A launch party for *She Left* by Stacie Grey (Daisy Bateman) will be held at Books, Inc. in Alameda at 7:00 p.m. on May 15, in conversation with Michelle Chouinard.

To celebrate the release of her brand new Orchid Isle mystery, *Molten Death*, Leslie Karst will be in conversation with Elizabeth McKenzie (*The Dog of the North*) at Bookshop Santa Cruz on Thursday, May 9 at 7:00 p.m. In addition to the conversation and book signing, there will be a Q&A session as well as prosecco! Register for this free event [here](#) (to give the bookshop an idea of the number of potential attendees).

Training Delivered

The following SinC NorCal members are on the faculty of the Book Passage (Corte Madera, CA) Mystery Writers Conference 2024: Cara Black, Rhys Bowen, Karen Catalona, Ellen Kirschman, Susan C. Shea, Kelli Stanley, and Robin C. Stuart. More information on the conference is available here: <https://www.bookpassage.com/mwc-faculty-2024>

Member News, continued

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Justice is Served: A Tale of Scallops, The Law, and Cooking for RBG, a memoir by Leslie Karst, is one of three finalists for the IBPA (Independent Book Publishers Association) Benjamin Franklin Award. One will be a Gold Award winner, and two will be Silver Award winners.

The Raven Thief by Gigi Pandian was nominated for Malice Domestic's Agatha Award for Best Contemporary Mystery Novel.

G.M. Malliet is shortlisted for the 2024 *Ellery Queen* Readers Award for "The Pact."

Birthdays are Murder by Cindy Sample is a finalist for the Chanticleer Murder & Mayhem Award for Best Cozy Mystery.

The Molly Murphy Mystery series by Rhys Bowen and, recently, Clare Broyles won a Best Historical Series award in the "Best of the Best" Cozy Mystery Awards 2024.





Question of the Quarter

How do you feel about red herrings? As a writer, do you use them in your mysteries? As a reader, do you think they enhance the mystery?

As a reader, I love them when I am in the mood to try to solve the mystery and because they add to the plot line. As a writer, I do my best to add them because they are a fun twist. **Priscilla Royal**

Red herrings . . . I love them! That's a bit of an overstatement, but I do like puzzles. It's one of the reasons I write mysteries. In my Kandesky Vampire Chronicles paranormal romances, there are NO red herrings, just straightforward romance and dastardly geopolitical doings. I tell a story and stick to the facts, with some tension but no sleight of hand.

The mysteries, though, do have some twists and turns. There are usually one or two characters who may not be what they seem. Whose motivations could be suspect. Or an action that could be construed in several ways. As we've found out in the last few years, facts can be slippery things. Well, not facts—those are things that allow the mystery to be solved. But spins on the fact, a small fact that could evolve into a conspiracy theory. My red herrings are usually characters who seem to have ulterior motives or who act suspiciously.

One of my favorite reviews for my first book, *Edited for Death*, came early on. The reviewer loved the book and particularly liked that by the time he'd finished the book, he'd figured out the bad guy . . . three different times! He really thought it was a puzzle he'd finally solved. **Michele Drier**

Red herrings are essential to mystery novels. I suppose you don't have to have them, but without them, the solution might be too obvious. Red herrings provide the twists that keep readers intrigued. Red herrings can be people, or events, or even hints of what might have happened. Of course, you have to play fair. A red herring can't be something dragged in at the last second to provide an unearned twist. They have to be believable and yet when they are revealed, the explanation has to be cogent. **Terry Shames**

Being from New York, I prefer my herring in sour cream or wine sauce. As for the red variety, I think mysteries work best when the reader has to guess which of several characters is the villain. **Ellen Kirschman**

I love to use red herrings, but I realize that when I do that, I'm messing with the reader, and I don't want to take that lightly. If I misdirect the reader, I try to make the following red herring benefit the reader in some way, even if it's not giving them the solution to the mystery. Following the red herring might reveal something new about the crime or a character's backstory, or even reinforce a theme in the story. I try to make it in some way enrich the reader's experience. **Victoria Kazarian**

I'm all about red herrings. That's what makes a detective story. **Amelia Mosely**

Question of the Quarter, continued

I'm writing a true crime play, and I do have two red herrings in the play! Personally, I love them as an audience member. I enjoy twists and turns which can be provided with red herrings. However, if a red herring is too obvious or if it isn't believable, then I really don't like them. I would likely put down the book. It's the same with cliffhangers for me. If it's good, I just love it. **Maureen Studer**

I love red herrings. They're lots of fun to read in a story. They're lots of fun to write in a story. I don't necessarily think of them as leading the reader down the garden path but, rather, as throwing some thoughts of: Could it be this? Could it be that? Red herrings can also give characters in the story similar thoughts, adding to the plot. However, you have to be careful not to make them too oblique, fanciful, or far-fetched or they become intrusive. And there can't be too many of them. Red herrings are sort of like prunes: are six too many, are five enough? **Heather Haven**

They have their place. Too many in one book ruins the story for me. I think one good one is enough. I also think that a good red herring should imitate the reality of crime scene investigation. Although in many real-life scenarios the perp may be obvious, there have been many times when the obvious suspect was cleared. What I am saying is that a good red herring should seem realistic, and not like a plot device that is used in order to move the story along.

When I read—and write—I see three kinds of investigators: (1) The person who knows everything and solves it at the end, whether you have solved it or not—Sherlock Holmes; (2) The procedural: the clues are revealed to the reader as the investigator discovers them. Maybe you figure it out first; maybe you don't—Harry Bosch; (3) The investigator is inept, so the reader is always ahead and waiting for them to catch on—Inspector Clouseau. When using red herrings, be sure they fit appropriately with the kind of investigator you are writing **Elena Smith**

I definitely think red herrings play an important part in mystery novels. I always have five possible suspects in my books. I plant false clues that throw off the book's sleuth. I think mystery readers like the genre because it's interactive. They want to pit their own instincts against the book's "detective," whether a pro or an amateur. That's the fun of the game. Examples of this method include many of Agatha Christie's books and the writers of the *Murder She Wrote* TV series. **Sharon St. George**

My new novel, *The Secret War of Julia Child*, is not technically a mystery, but there's a lot of clandestine activity going on! Of course, I thought of red herrings and developed the story and characters accordingly. After it comes out in October, I hope readers will wonder: *which one is the bad guy?* **Diana Chambers**

Since I don't plot anything out, I don't realize I'm writing in red herrings. I'm following what my protagonist would do, who she would question, who she might consider as the one who did it. It was only when someone said, "that was a good red herring," that I realized I was writing them. (I'm a

Question of the Quarter, continued

little slow on the uptake.) *Glenda Carroll*

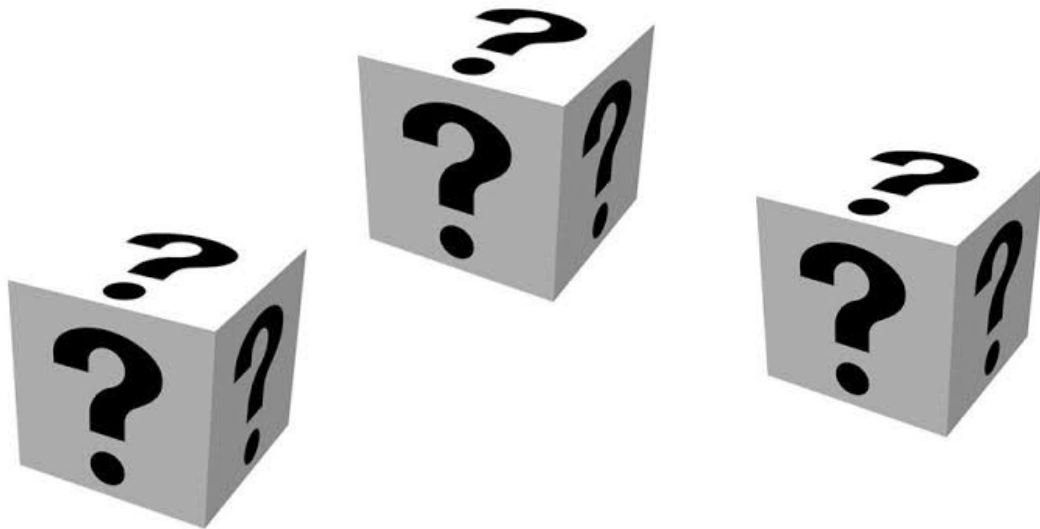
For me, red herrings have to have some valid relation to the story, via plot or character, or else I feel conned. Unless the story is told by an unreliable first-person narrator, and then—gotcha!—I am delighted to be conned. *Michal Strutin*

I never liked the term “red herring.” It always sounded like a purposeful trick a trickster would play to mess with the reader’s mind—a clever little flag created to mislead, misdirect—see, I fooled you. A false clue smells of artifice.

It has been my belief that real art and life are willing partners. Life is the ultimate trickster. Why invent a red herring? When solving any mystery, there are always wrong turns. A clearly reasonable direction may lead nowhere. There are seldom straight lines in any investigation. A search may result in numerous dead ends. A seemingly logical idea may go nowhere in the puzzle maze we live in.

To me, mystery novels rely on plausibility. Dead ends serve as clarifiers, places to reconsider, plan. Dead ends are real. Life misdirects. Why shouldn’t a novel be just as real?

I never use the words red herring. *Ken Gwin*



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Please contact **Dänna 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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