

# THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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## When Truth is Stranger Than Fiction

The other evening, I was tutoring Julian, a junior in high school, on vocabulary he'd find during the SATs he was scheduled to take next month. I've tutored low income first generation high school and college students for more than seven years. Not many have taken the SAT, so I was pleased to see his interest. When our hour was up, he said, "Miss Glenda, do you have your doctorate?" (When I was in high school, I'd never heard of a doctorate.)

"No," I answered. "I have an MA, a Master of Arts."

He smiled. "I'm going for a doctorate in pharmacy," said the teenager who was just learning to parallel park.

"Good for you," I responded. "Let's plan on how you'll get there," and we chatted about it for a few minutes.

His question made me think. Why didn't I go for a doctorate? I was a good student. I loved studying and research, but the advanced degree never interested me. I narrowed my thoughts down to "it was a choice." Did I want to go back to school, or did I want to write?

Writing won.

I don't think I was planning on writing a book, but it was part of something that forever stayed in the back of my mind. I needed a way to get it out. One of my past volunteer jobs was the Open Water Chair for Pacific Masters Swimming. I supervised more than 20 open water swims a season, ranging in length from 500 yards to 10 kilometers. The swims were held



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## President's Letter, continued

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anywhere there was water: Donner Lake, Lake Berryessa, Pacific Ocean in Santa Cruz, Livermore's Lake Del Valle, and San Francisco Bay. It was my job to make sure the swims were safe. That the sponsoring club had enough portable bathrooms, that ambulances were on site, that the course and results were correct, that the local police were alerted, and that there were enough on-the-water safety personnel. Since I was already there, I swam most of the events. One time there was a one-mile and a two-mile swim at Whiskeytown Lake outside of Redding, CA. During the one-mile swim, I was swimming toward the finish chute when a man in front of me made an abrupt turn to the shore. He staggered out of the water and collapsed. From my perspective in the water, I could see someone running to alert the ambulance. By the time I reached dry land and the circle of emergency personnel around him, they were performing CPR, but he never revived and was taken away in the ambulance, leaving his distraught wife at the scene and a teenage son still swimming.

The second race was about to start. I knew I couldn't get to the start line in time, and I really didn't want to swim again. My mind replayed the athlete lurching out of the lake and crumbling onto the beach. Instead, I stood by the finish chute as the racers took off. Forty minutes later, the lead athletes were heading back. I welcomed them all and congratulated them. Then a very experienced swimmer came through the arch, leaned over, placed his hands on his knees and said, "I don't feel so well." I pointed him toward the replacement ambulance that had arrived. That was the last time I saw him.

Both men, both swimmers, died. I fictionalized that experience and used it as the opening scenes in my first Trisha Carson mystery, *Dead in the Water*. I needed to write about the deaths. This was my way of working through that awful event. What about you? Was there a particular reason for writing your first book? Did the idea come from your imagination or was it based on something factual? I'd like to know. You can email me at president (at) sincnorcal.org.

Sincerely,

Glenda Carroll

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



# Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

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**Sunday, May 18, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.**

## ***Spring Author Showcase***

*Book Passage, 51 Tamal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera*

It's time again for our popular Author Showcase, where our chapter members with new books or stories will read from their work. There is plenty of parking in the shopping center lot, a wonderful selection of books, and a small café with sandwiches and drinks. Here are the participating authors:

Rachele Baker  
Glenda Carroll  
D.Z. Church  
June Gillam  
T.E. MacArthur  
Aletheia Morden

Gigi Pandian  
Karen A. Phillips  
Diane M. Schaffer  
Lisa Towles  
Carol (CJ) Verburg  
Danna Wilberg

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

## ***Cold Case Investigation with Tim Sturm and Bethany Skeen***

*Zoom meeting*



Please join us for a rare behind-the-scenes look at cold case investigations with members of the Calaveras County Sheriff's Cold Case Task Force. Captain Tim Sturm has 25 years of experience as a full-time law enforcement officer and eight additional years as a law enforcement volunteer/intern. He is the National Missing and Unidentified Persons Service Award Winner of 2022.



Bethany Skeen is a founding member and current treasurer of the Task Force and was previously employed at the Calaveras County Sheriff's Office as an administrative technician attached to the Investigations Unit. The Calaveras County Sheriff's Cold Case Task Force was formed in 2020 to investigate cases that had "gone cold," with the conviction that cutting edge advancements in forensic science and genetic genealogy identification would allow investigators to identify remains and solve cold cases.

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

## In Case You Missed It . . .

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

### February Meeting – *Annual Meet & Greet and Promotional/Marketing Panel*



Our Meet & Greet featured a panel with Vera Chan (moderator), George Cramer, Michelle Chouinard, Victoria Kazarian, and Lisa Towles, offering guidance and tips on a host of promotional tools, including blogs, websites, social media, newsletters, email, indirect marketing, book club visits, conventions, podcasts, and much more.

### March Meeting – *Location, Location, Location with Diana R. Chambers*

Our own Diana Chambers kept the audience spellbound as she talked about her latest book, *The Secret War of Julia Child*, a fictionalized version of Child's World War II involvement in Southeast Asia and China. Diana was interviewed by Robin Somers.



### April Meeting – *Firefighters and First Responders in Crime Fiction with Christy Warren*



In conversation with Ellen Kirschman, former Berkeley FD Fire Captain Christy Warren gave us an inside look at her 25 years as a paramedic and 18 years as a firefighter in the Berkeley, CA Fire Department. She told us which TV shows get it right (and wrong), how she dealt with PTSD and injuries, and what were the more mundane responsibilities we don't realize firefighters have in addition to actual firefighting. Christy's book is *Flash Point: A Firefighter's Journey Through PTSD*.



# *Crafting Stories from the Past*

## by Ana Brazil

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I love a good reference book and have lots of them on my bookshelves. Books such as *A Field Guide to American Architecture*, *How to Read Fashion*, and the *Notable American Women* dictionary (yes, I'm that nerd) are among my favorites.

I love reference books so much that I even flirted with becoming a reference librarian. But when the time came to decide upon my graduate studies, I bypassed library science for my true love: the study of history.

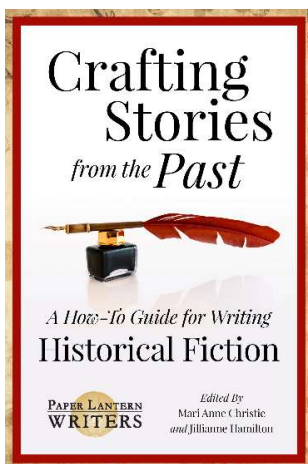
I've been fascinated, curious about, and energized by history since my teen years, and it wasn't surprising that years after grad school, when I sat down to write my first novel in the early 1980s, it was set in Gilded Age New Orleans.



But what was surprising was that there were no reference books to tell me how to write historical fiction.

Although plenty of wise and encouraging how-to-write-all-types-of-fiction books have been published since the 80s, there are still few useful books about how to write historical fiction. And that lack of trusted resources is one of the reasons my historical fiction promotional group, the Paper Lantern Writers, decided to combine our expertise and write one.

The other reason was that after much discussion, our editors, Mari Anne Christie and Jillianne Hamilton, came up with a book structure that really resonated with us. In response to a specific writing question, each of us would write "how-to" chapters on aspects of historical fiction that we had explored, tried, tested, and mastered.



I'm happy to share that *Crafting Stories from the Past: A How-To Guide for Writing Historical Fiction* launched on May 1, 2025. Written by 12 award-winning authors of historical fiction, *Crafting Stories from the Past* contains 23 how-to essays and one deep reference section about how to start your historical fiction engines.

Here's a sampling of our chapter questions and author responses:

Q: My characters ride horses everywhere, but I've never even petted one. What do I even need to know about them?

## *Crafting Stories from the Past, continued*

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A: *How to Bring Horses to Life in Historical Fiction* by Anne Beggs, author of *By Arrow and Sword* and co-owner of Equisance horse boarding ranch in Watsonville.

Q: I think I need to write a love scene, but oh my God, my mother might read this. What do I do?

A: *How to Write a Historical Sex Scene* by Edie Cay, award-winning Regency Romance author.

Q: I want to include people who aren't like me, but I don't want to cause offense. What can I do to show different cultures?

A: *How to Embrace Diversity in Historical Fiction* by Edie Cay and Vanitha Sankaran, author of *Watermark* and former chair of the Historical Novel Society NA Conference.

Q: The physics of time travel is getting in the way of telling my story. How do I avoid some kind of time paradox?

A: *How to Manage Time Travel Anomalies* by Jonathan Posner, our time-traveling Tudor Adventure author.

Q: I have two different stories in two different eras, but I want them to intertwine. How do I even start this?

A: *How to Organize a Dual Timeline Novel* by Rebecca D'Harlingue, award-winning author and new Sisters in Crime NorCal member.

My contributions include *How to Describe Places You Can't Visit* and *How to Include Real People in Historical Fiction*—something I've done a lot of, beginning with my short story "Kate Chopin Tussles with a Novel Ending," my contribution to SinC NorCal's *Faultlines* anthology.

I also organized the in-depth chapter of *Resource Recommendations*. If you're eager to start writing about almost anything that's happened in the last two thousand years, our suggested books, maps, archives, and websites will get you going.

*Crafting Stories from the Past* was quite the labor of love for the Paper Lantern Writers, and I can't wait to get my hard copy. I've already got a spot on my reference shelf waiting for it.

## *Crafting Stories from the Past, continued*

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Ana Brazil writes historical fiction about curious, ambitious, and totally bodacious women. Her latest historical mystery, *The Red-Hot Blues Chanteuse*, features smart and sassy vaudevillian Viola Vermillion in 1919 San Francisco. Ana's debut mystery, *Fanny Newcomb and the Irish Channel Ripper*, won the IBPA Gold for Historical Fiction, and her short stories have appeared in numerous crime and historical fiction anthologies. Ana is a founding member of the Paper Lantern Writers.

**About Paper Lantern Writers:** In 2019, to maximize their individual book promotional efforts, five historical fiction authors created the Paper Lantern Writers. Promotion loves company, right? Now in our sixth year, Paper Lantern Writers consistently cross-promote each other's work through our websites, newsletters, Paper Lantern Readers Facebook group, and on other social media. We have published multiple award-winning historical fiction short story anthologies and are thrilled to have compiled the nonfiction *Crafting Stories from the Past*.



**to our newest members**  
**(joining SinC NorCal from January 1, 2025, through March 31, 2025)**

Laurel Halbany  
Jacqueline Hampton  
Craig Kingsman  
Aspen Logan  
Laurie Richards (pen name Laurie Heath)  
Diane Schaffer  
Barbara Stewart

# To SP or Not SP: That is the Question

## by Elena E. Smith

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Self-publishing is not for everyone. It requires wearing multiple hats, something not all of us are cut out for. In addition to creating a great story, you must also be able to step back with a critical eye to edit it well, and you must be willing to do your own marketing.

How did I get here? I watched authors knock themselves out to gain sales and decided if I'd have to work that hard, I wanted to do it for myself.

I feel very fortunate, because everything I did in my career has contributed to where I am now. I have a solid business background, outside sales experience in advertising and promotions, and paralegal work that taught me good investigative skills and some contract law.

How am I doing so far? I published two books in 2024. I have sold 80 copies (combined). Considering that 30,000 copies is the benchmark of author success, not so well. Considering I am a one-person shop with no real budget to speak of and no staff, I'd say "not bad."

One secret, I believe, is making your book the best it can possibly be before releasing it: a commitment to regular small group critique sessions, multiple spelling and grammar checks, beta readers, and an excellent cover design (shout out to Cheryl Ryan of Tucson SinC).

Choose the resource books that will help you the most. For me, they were *Promophobia* (edited by Diane Vallere and published by Sisters in Crime) and *Finding Your Path to Publication* by Judy Penz Sheluk.

Choose a company to work with that will help you publish, distribute, and manage sales. Draft2Digital was recommended to me by author Amber Foxx, and it has more than met my expectations. My books are available on all platforms in ebook and paperback (*The Arizona Kid*, a collection of short stories, and *Mahuenga*, a cozy noir crime novel).

I also recommend membership and participation in professional organizations such as Sisters in Crime.

Elena E. Smith is a hard-boiled cozy writer who grew up in Arizona, then spent her adult life in L.A. She has had several careers, including entry-level jobs in the entertainment industry, advertising sales account executive, and paralegal. She has been to London and Paris and owned a horse. She has a bachelor's degree in Adult Basic Education and a certificate in Criminal Justice.



# Getting Your Book into the Library

## by Jenn Hooker

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The relationship between librarians and authors is symbiotic; one cannot exist without the other. Without authors, libraries would be beautiful husks, full of potential but amounting to little more than a programming space with free Wi-Fi. Without libraries, authors' works would be relegated to the bourgeoisie, tokens of years of research, writing, and editing available only to the elite. How, then, do books find their way into libraries\*\*? More importantly, how do you get your book into the library?

There are many ways, of course, and every library will be funded, filled, and flavored differently. My goal here is to pull the curtain back and expose some of the ways libraries stock their shelves and--more importantly--ways you can go about getting your items into the hands of library patrons.

### 1. Trained Selectors

First and foremost, libraries almost always have at least one trained selector of books. The job titles will differ, and sometimes that person will wear many hats (like me), but libraries that purchase books usually do so according to a Collection Development Policy. Recently, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law the Freedom to Read Act (AB 1825) which creates a requirement, among other things, for libraries to have collection development policies. These policies typically indicate what the library does and does not buy, instructions for the public as to challenging a title, and criteria for how libraries keep or weed their collections and maintain relevance. For example, a community with a large Mandarin-speaking population is more likely to have books in Mandarin than, say, a library in a majority Spanish-speaking community. Collection development policies also make sure all facets of a community have something of interest to read or, as I like to call it, "something to piss off everyone." It's the selector's job to understand their collection, the demands of the community, and the relevance of certain topics or titles in the mainstream.

### 2. Core Collections

In my humble opinion, core collections are falling further and further to the wayside. Core collections are books in and of themselves that determine what titles any library should carry. We're talking about your literary classics, your "must-read" nonfiction, thesauri and dictionaries, etc. Books that if you were looking for them and didn't find them, you'd think, "How could they not have this in their collection?!" While core collections are great for building a new collection or determining if you should get rid of something, they often don't contain new and popular titles.

# Getting Your Book into the Library, continued

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## 3. Donations

This, above all others, is the greatest variance in mileage among libraries. Some libraries take donations and add them to their collection to fill gaps. It's a great way to get duplicate copies of popular titles to circulate, prohibitively expensive coffee table books, or out-of-print items that are hard to replace. However, depending on the volume of donations a library receives on any given day, it may be impossible for someone to go through them all and find the diamonds in the rough. Some libraries don't add donations to the collection, and some libraries don't accept any donations except for . . .

## 4. Local Author Contributions

Here's the point I'm sure you've been waiting for. How do you, as an author, get your book into your library? First, you should check your local library's Collection Development Policy. It may state whether or not they accept contributions from local authors as a special collection. I feel like I should clarify: "local author" can be subjective but usually pertains to someone who lives in the city or county the library is in. For example, where I work, we only identify "local authors" as those who live in our city or an adjacent town. Second, ask to speak with the person who purchases books. Send them an email (as I am a millennial, please don't call me). When I say talk to them, I don't mean cold call them and send them a generic "please buy my book" pitch. Ask them what their selection process is or if there's a special route one should take to get their book in the library. We don't take any old local author's book and stick it on the shelf. We evaluate the item for relevance to the community (see Point #1) and we often rely on reviews from periodicals such as *Kirkus*, *Library Journal*, or *Publisher's Weekly*. Third, ask if you can donate a copy versus the library needing to purchase one. Depending on funding, some libraries might take a donated copy and circulate it, whereas others may have a contractual obligation to buy it from their book provider.

While there is no magical way for getting your book into a library, hopefully this answers some of your questions and demystifies the process. Every library is different because every community is different. That's part of what makes libraries so special.

A note about ebooks: The process for acquiring your book as an ebook for your library may be different, depending on what platform your library uses, but the general rules will likely apply. While ebooks may be "easier" to add to a collection or take a chance on, e-content licensing can be incredibly expensive to a library. It also depends on the availability of your ebook/e-audio through your publisher. When in doubt, just ask!

# Getting Your Book into the Library, continued

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**\*\***When I say "libraries" I mean public libraries, as this is my area of expertise. Academic and specialty libraries may act similarly, but I cannot speak to those.

Jenn Hooker (she/her) is an unapologetically queer writer who loves mysteries and all things spooky. When she's not helping the public as a librarian, she's thinking about writing, fretting about writing, and contemplating what to write next. She's currently working on her first novel. She lives in the Bay Area with her family. You can learn more at [thejennhooker.com](http://thejennhooker.com).

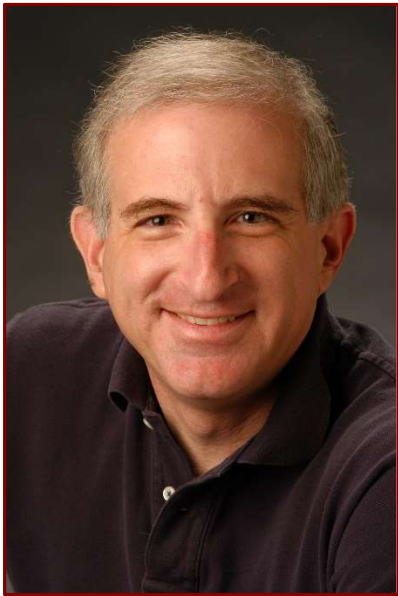


# Member Profile: Sheldon Siegel

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Thirty-fourth in a series to introduce our members  
to each other

Sheldon Siegel is a prolific and celebrated author, with 17 books in his popular Mike Daley/Rosie Fernandez Legal Thriller series. With a law degree from Boalt Hall at UC Berkeley and a decades-long career specializing in corporate and securities law, he lives in the Bay Area with his wife and is the father of twin sons.



*Stiletta:* Sheldon, I understand you have always wanted to write. What motivated you to actually start writing when you did, and how did you fit it into your work schedule?

*Sheldon Siegel:* I've asked this question of many authors, and the answer is generally similar. It seems that we have something hotwired into our brains that we should try to be writers. I had wanted to try to write a novel since I was in high school. I am a very unlikely author. I was a corporate lawyer for 40 years, but I never handled a criminal case. Somehow, I've managed to write 17 novels about murder trials, and people think I know what I'm talking about.

I started writing my first novel in 1995, when I was 37 years old and working full time. My goal was to try to finish a full draft by the time I was 40. My wife, Linda, bought me a laptop, and I worked on my novel for three years while I was commuting on the Larkspur ferry. I finished the novel three days before my fortieth birthday. It was a very productive use of my midlife crisis.

*Stiletta:* You have worked for years as a corporate lawyer, but your protagonists are criminal defense attorneys. How do you ensure authenticity when writing about investigations and courtroom scenes?

*SS:* I get a lot of help from my friends who are police officers, prosecutors, defense attorneys and judges. People are very generous with their time, especially if you tell them that you're writing a novel.

*Stiletta:* How similar is Mike Daley to you, and what are the biggest differences?

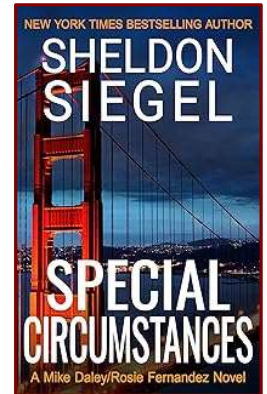
*SS:* Mike sounds just like me, and Mike's law partner and ex-wife, Rosie Fernandez, sounds a lot like my wife, Linda. And like Linda, Rosie is always right. However, that's where the similarities

## Member Profile: Sheldon Siegel, continued

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end. Mike is a former public defender, former priest, and former husband who grew up in San Francisco's Sunset District. I'm a Jewish guy from Chicago, although I've lived in the Bay Area since 1980. Linda is a Jewish woman from Santa Rosa, not a Latina from the Mission District like Rosie. And Linda isn't a lawyer. I like to think that Mike and I share similar sensibilities about life. In addition, Linda and I get along better than Mike and Rosie. We've been married for 37 years!

**Stiletta:** Why did you decide to make Mike's law partner, Rosie Fernandez, also his ex-wife?



**SS:** When you write in the first person, you need somebody for your protagonist to talk to, or the entire book will be inside the protagonist's head. So, I needed Mike to have a law partner. If you read this genre, the "helper" character is often an older male. I wanted something different, so I made Mike's law partner a strong female Latina. At the time that I was writing my first book, I was working on a transaction with an attorney on the East Coast whose name was Susan Fernandez. I never met her in person, but I liked the sound of her voice, so I decided that Mike's law partner would be a strong Latina. I made them ex-spouses-with-benefits to create tension between them. By the third book, Mike and Rosie resolve their relationship. They work together, but they haven't gotten remarried (yet). I wasn't sure that my readers would buy into their dynamics, but people love it. Mike and Rosie are excellent attorneys, dedicated life partners, and terrific parents.

**Stiletta:** You started out with a traditional publisher, then later moved to independent publishing. What motivated you to make that change, and what are the benefits of indie publishing?

**SS:** It's been quite an adventure. I did my first five books with big New York publishers. I got six-figure advances and made the *NY Times* list five times. Then my sales plateaued, and my publisher didn't renew my contract, which is not unusual in the publishing industry. I did two more books with a small publisher that went bankrupt during the Great Recession. It took me five years to re-acquire the rights to all of my books. I re-edited all seven books and removed dated references to stuff like fax machines and rotary phones. We republished all of the books on Amazon in print, ebook, and audio in 2014. Our timing was fortuitous. Around the same time, Amazon released the Kindle and Apple released the iPad and the iPhone. Ebooks exploded, and our sales went through the roof. Linda has a degree in computer science and spent 25 years doing digital effects for George Lucas, so she does my cover art, formatting, and online and social media marketing. I love bookstores, but more than 90 percent of our sales are ebooks. Since then, I've published ten more books in the series, and my audience is now comprised of anybody on Planet Earth with a tablet or an iPhone. The market



## Member Profile: Sheldon Siegel, continued

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has become much more competitive nowadays, so it would be difficult to duplicate our good fortune in the current environment. We have an excellent team, and I love having control over the entire process. I decide when the books will be published, and everything takes less time. For example, it takes my award-winning narrator, Tim Campbell, about three days to produce the audio versions of my books. The same process took months with a traditional publisher. Indie publishing isn't for everybody, but it's worked very well for us.

**Stiletta:** I can't resist asking: are you a plotter or a pantsers? And has that changed at all in the course of your writing career?

**SS:** I'm more of a pantsers than a plotter. I start with a light outline (about two pages) of the hot points in the story. I know the beginning and the ending before I start writing. I outline in a little more detail about 50 pages ahead of wherever I am in the writing process. Michael Connelly told me that he does it the same way. He described it as "outlining as far as I can see in my headlights." How I get from Point A to Point B is pure pantsing. Every time I start a new book, I promise myself that I'm going to be more rigorous about outlining. By the time I get to Chapter 3, I've already veered off the outline, and then I get mad at myself for wasting time on an outline that I'm not going to use. I can't tell if the book is going to work until I complete a first draft.

**Stiletta:** How do you spend your days when you are working on a book? Are you still a practicing attorney?

**SS:** I stopped practicing law in 2020 when Covid hit. It's been a great luxury because now I can write every day without a lot of interruptions. I get up early (around 5:30 a.m.), do the exercise bike while watching TV, have breakfast, and then start working on the book. I try to do three to five new pages (double spaced) five days a week. I try to produce one or two books a year, so it's a full-time job.

**Stiletta:** Your books have been translated into multiple languages and sold millions of copies worldwide. Have you ever laughed when you looked at one of your translated books because the title is so different from the original?

**SS:** The covers for the foreign versions are strange and seem to have no relation to the plotlines of my stories. The Dutch version of my first book shows a man without a face against a bright yellow background. The Japanese version showed a person tying his shoes. I'm not sure that this sold many legal thrillers.

**Stiletta:** You are a former president of SinC NorCal. What is one achievement of our chapter during your tenure as president that makes you particularly proud?

**SS:** I'm actually a former president of MWA NorCal, but I've been a member of SinC for more than 25 years. I'm very proud of our programming and our support for our members.

## Member Profile: Sheldon Siegel, continued

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*Stiletta:* I understand you are a popular speaker and teacher. Please tell us about what you speak/teach and to whom?

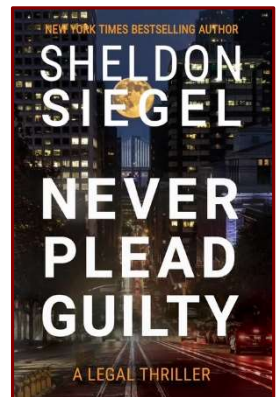
*SS:* I used to do a lot of teaching before Covid. Nowadays, not so much. I was the co-chair of the Book Passage Mystery Writers Conference for about 10 years. I was also a regular at the San Francisco Writers Conference. I try to give back where I can. We are fortunate that the Northern California writing community is very strong and supportive.

*Stiletta:* What do you do when you're not reading or writing?

*SS:* I spend time with Linda and our grown children (and their pets). I like to exercise, read other people's crime novels, and watch (too much) sports on TV. Now that our kids are grown-ups, Linda and I are doing more traveling. We were in Paris and Italy last summer. It was great, and we ate way too much.

*Stiletta:* Tell us about your new series book, released on March 27, 2025. And what are you working on next?

*SS:* *Never Plead Guilty* is the 17<sup>th</sup> book in the Mike Daley/Rosie Fernandez courtroom dramas set in San Francisco. Mike and Rosie represent a homeless man accused of killing a hotshot lawyer in his driveway in the upscale Marina District across the street from the Palace of Fine Arts. After doing several books in the Tenderloin and South of Market, I decided to write a story in a more upscale neighborhood! I've already started my next book. The working title is *Unfinished Business*. Mike and Rosie represent a man accused of a murder that took place in 1978. It's set in present-day, but it's sort of like writing historical fiction. I'm hoping to finish it by the end of the year.



Sheldon Siegel was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.
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# Illusions and Impossible Crimes: An Author-Reader Connection at Denver's Museum of Illusions

## By Gigi Pandian



While attending Left Coast Crime in Denver, I hosted an Author-Reader Connection at the Museum of Illusions—an outing inspired by my Secret Staircase mysteries, which feature stage illusionist Tempest Raj and her family's Secret Staircase Construction business. When I discovered a museum dedicated entirely to illusions just two blocks from the conference hotel, it felt like the perfect spot for a reader meetup!

The Museum of Illusions is an interactive space in downtown Denver, featuring visual illusions that challenge the senses, that's great for both kids and adults. Our group explored a variety of installations, and here are a few of the highlights:

### Hanging Off the Side of a Building

A brick building facade is constructed on the floor, and by simply lying down, you can appear to dangle from a balcony, save a friend from falling, or do a handstand on the front stoop. A mirror on the ceiling transforms the scene in photos, making it look as if you're truly hanging off the side of a high-rise. We couldn't stop laughing as we "rescued" each other.



### Floating Head on a Table

Stepping into a classic magician's trick, angled mirrors around a table created the illusion of a head floating on its own. Each of us took a turn seeing bodiless ourselves on the table, making for some unforgettable photos.



### Shrinking Friend

Not all illusions relied on mirrors. In one exhibit, simply changing the viewer's vantage point made it look like the person sitting in a chair was shrinking before our eyes. Expectations of how big a chair should be and a bit of controlled perspective made all the difference.



## Illusions and Impossible Crimes, continued

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### Riding an Upside-Down Train

My personal favorite, perhaps because of my fond memories of the London Underground, was the tube-inspired train car. Can you guess how we're hanging upside-down?

Other memorable moments included the dizzying vortex tunnel, where spinning images tricked our senses into feeling like we were tumbling through space, and the infinity room, where we peered into endless reflections. The museum's interactive fun and exhibits that left us with fabulous photos

made it a hit for everyone, which was great since most of us hadn't known each other until five minutes before stepping into our first illusion.

The Museum of Illusions is a mini chain, with locations in cities such as Seattle, Boston, and Washington, D.C., though sadly it's not yet in San Francisco. Since I already know you love mysteries if you're reading this newsletter, if you've ever wanted to experience the impossible firsthand, I highly recommend a visit.

Gigi Pandian is a *USA Today* bestselling and Agatha, Anthony, and Lefty Award-winning author who writes the Accidental Alchemist mysteries, the Jaya Jones Treasure Hunt mysteries, and the Secret Staircase mysteries. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and a gargoyle who watches over the garden. [www.gigipandian.com](http://www.gigipandian.com)





# A New Author Goes to LCC

## by Diane Schaffer

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When Left Coast Crime in Denver began, I was a complete newbie—new to NorCal and new to the role of published author. (Sibylline Press had rushed the publication date of my novel *Mortal Zin* specifically to have it ready for LCC.) Walking into the Westin Denver Downtown, I felt quite lonely. However, Sisters in Crime NorCal’s social hour, the night before the conference began, gave me the opportunity to meet many sister authors, and throughout the coming days I saw many friendly faces (thank you, Ana Manwaring). Lonely no more!



Later in the conference, I participated in an excellent panel titled “Setting as Character,” along with SinC NorCal member Susan Bickford. Tracee de Hahn, President of the Board of Sisters in Crime, gave a virtuoso performance as moderator. Unlike every other moderator I heard at LCC, she didn’t waste the audience’s time by reading out loud the bios of each panel member. And, having queried each of us in advance regarding the points we hoped to make, she fashioned her perceptive questions around our input. As a result, every minute of our 45-minute program was filled with meaningful remarks from the authors. Future moderators, please take note!



(left to right); Debra Bokur, Susan Bickford, George Gurney, Tracee de Hahn, Diane Schaffer

Diane Schaffer, a Stanford PhD, is a retired professor and longtime resident of Santa Cruz County. *Mortal Zin*, her first mystery novel, is rooted in her summer work in a Santa Cruz zinfandel winery, where she became fascinated with the unique history of zinfandel, California’s mystery grape. When she’s not writing, she’s hiking, river kayaking, or reading a good mystery novel. She now lives in Ashland, Oregon, with her husband.



# Report on the 2025 LCC Conference I Didn't Attend

## by Heather Haven

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I'd been waiting all year for the 2025 Left Coast Crime Conference to happen. I signed up for it sometime in the summer of 2024. My husband, Norm, and I made reservations on the Amtrak going from Emeryville, California, to Denver, Colorado. We were going to join friend and fellow writer Janet Dawson on the 36-hour train ride across the Rockies, play cards and Scrabble, eat wonderful meals, and arrive in Denver in time to check in for the conference on Wednesday evening. I had registered and paid for the conference and bought tickets to the Awards Dinner for Norm and me. I was on a fun panel. We had airline tickets to fly home Sunday evening at the end of the conference. There was even an afternoon tea at the famous Brown's Hotel on the agenda. All was right with the world, and the trip was planned to the last detail. But pass the cheese, please. The best-laid plans of mice and men.



Six days before we were to leave, I started coughing. I wasn't too worried. I had nearly a week to shake this, right? Besides, I had had all the vaccinations you can have. Nothing could happen, right? Wrong. Each day the coughing, sneezing, wheezing, and congestion got worse. On the fourth day of this scourge, I saw my doctor and got tested. No Covid, RSV, or flu. Just one of your common, everyday, unnamed viruses that knocks your socks off for at least ten to 14 days. Stay home, drink plenty of liquids, take whatever over-the-counter meds make you feel better, and ride it out. That'll be \$25, please.

Thank you, Doctor. I could have told you that and saved myself 25 bucks and a trip to Kaiser. I have since named the unnamed virus. After all, they name hurricanes, and this was my very own personal hurricane. I call it Fred.

But I digress. So, home I went, feeling enormously sorry for myself. I crawled back into bed, Norm brought me chamomile tea, the cats cuddled, and I resigned myself. We were scheduled to leave for Denver in three days, and I could barely lift my head from the pillow. There was no way I could make this trip. Even Norm, Mister-You-Can-Do-It, shook his head in sympathy. Time to put on my Big Girl Panties, so to speak, and let friends, associates, and fellow writers know I wasn't coming

## The 2025 LCC Conference I Didn't Attend , continued

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to LCC this year. My life was over. Well, not really. But when one feels like a bucket of horse manure and locked out of one of the most wonderful and fun times of the year, one is allowed to go there. So, there I went.

It was short-lived. Soon, I got texts and pictures from the train taken by our wonderful Janet, who was disappointed we couldn't join her but was making the best of it. In those brief moments, I felt a part of the trip, enjoying the shared moments. Janet continued to send me highlights of the trip, conference, and even the high tea at Brown's. Then a few other pals wrote emails or sent me texts, some with pictures. Even the panel moderator, Chris Dreith, decided not to replace me with another writer but wanted me to answer the same questions she would have asked had I been there. Chris made a sock puppet in my image. I gotta tell you, the resemblance is uncanny. (See right.) Using her ventriloquist skills, Chris used the sock to voice my answers. Then she gave the puppet sock and my latest book to a contest "winner," Grace Koshida, who happens to be the Fan of Honor at the conference. Because Grace is a sweetheart, she alerted me on Facebook about this and included more wonderful pictures.



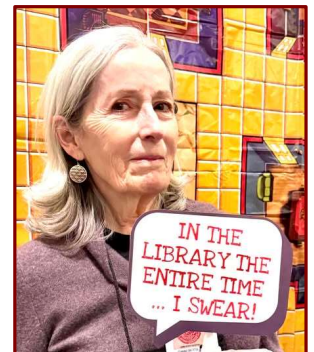
I may not have been at the conference, but so many people went out of their way to include me and make sure I knew I was missed, such as Baird Nuckolls, pictured left. I feel warm all over when I think about it. I am well now, but I am keeping the emails, texts, and pictures sent by my friends and associates from LCC 2025 for the future. If I ever feel sorry for myself, that nobody cares, and I'd better eat some worms, before I get out the frying pan I'm going to remember this incident. I'm going to be thankful I live in a world with friends who are mystery writers and readers because, surely, they are the most thoughtful and kindest people on the planet.

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/>





## Memories of LCC 2025





## Memories of LCC 2025, continued



## Memories of LCC 2025, continued





# Member News

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## *New and Upcoming Releases*

Three short story books by G.M. Malliet are newly available from Amazon, originally published either in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* or a SinC-sponsored anthology: "Bookworm: Revenge is Sweet," "Victory Garden," and "Something Blue."

Vinnie Hansen's short story, "Justice Served," is up on *Tough*, where you can read it for FREE. See what happened when Vinnie combined her husband's long-ago LSD trip at SeaWorld with her crime writing. <https://tinyurl.com/yu74437b>

Ana Brazil's short story "Millie and Loretta in the Desert Oasis" appears in the Historical Novel Society's first Conference Anthology, releasing in June. In 1959 Las Vegas, a woman desperately seeking a divorce finds herself at a casino craps table. What's the best that could happen?

In *Crafting from the Past: A How-To Guide to Writing Historical Fiction*, Ana Brazil shares hard-earned knowledge about how to include real people in your historical fiction and how to describe long-ago places you can't visit. *Crafting Stories* is written by the Paper Lantern Writers and releases on May 1.

*Mortal Zin*, Diane Schaffer's debut mystery, was released by Sibylline Press on March 4.

*Stella Maris and the Venice Beach Diaries: a Novel with Dead Bodies* by Aletheia Morden was released by Canyon Rose Press on March 6.

*Doomsday Diary* by Josie Brown, book #26 in her Housewife Assassin series, will be released by Signal Press on June 20.

Be on the lookout for *Deep Dive* by Terry Shames, book #2 in her Jessie Madison Butler series, which will be released by Severn House on July 1.

Adam Plantinga's second Kurt Argento thriller, *Hard Town*, was released on April 8 by Grand Central Publishing.

*The Vessel* by T.E. MacArthur, book #3 in the Praetorius Agency Files series, will be released on May 31 by Indies United Publishing House LLC.

*A Deadly Match* by Karen A. Phillips, book #2 in the Rocky Nelson Boxing mystery series, will be released by River Rock Press in October.

*Specimen*, an adult thriller by Lisa Towles, was published by Indies United Publishing House LLC on December 3, 2024.

## Member News, continued

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*Borrowed Time Book 4: Golden State* by Danna Wilberg was released on February 14 by Ramirez & Clark Publishers LLC

*The Library Game* by Gigi Pandian, book #4 in her Secret Staircase mystery series, was published on March 18 by Minotaur Books. There's a body in the library – and everyone is a suspect.

*Beet Fields*, a murder mystery by Robin Somers, was released by Sibylline Press on March 14.

### Public Appearances

The launch party for Aletheia Morden's novel, *Stella Maris and the Venice Beach Diaries: a Novel with Dead Bodies* will be held on Sunday, May 4 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. at the *original* ferry building (right opposite the new ferry building) on the waterfront at Bay Hibachi Express in Vallejo.

Ellen Kirschman is delighted to once again join the faculty of the Book Passage Mystery Writers Conference, July 18-20. More info at <https://www.bookpassage.com/mystery>. Sign up for two days packed with panels, guest speakers, consultants, and more.

Cindy Sample will have a table at the Sacramento Book Festival on May 31 from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. at the Shepard Garden and Arts Center. She will also be on a mystery panel from 1:30 to 2:10 with Jennifer Morita, Cara Black, Karen Phillips, Claire Booth, and moderator Robin Burcell.

Terry Shames will be appearing at the Sacramento Book Festival on May 31 from 10:00 to 4:00 p.m. at Shepard Garden and Arts Center. She will also be on a Thrillers panel from 10:50 to 11:30 with Simon Wood, James L'Etoile, Richard Meredith, and Anne Da Vigo, moderated by Robin Burcell.

### Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Gigi Pandian won the Agatha Award from Malice Domestic for Best Contemporary Novel for *A Midnight Puzzle*.

### Miscellaneous

Michal Strutin reports she signed with Sibylline Press, whose leads have years of experience in publishing. Because Sibylline is small and devotes a lot of time to the marketing/publicizing aspect of publishing, the first book in her 16th-century mystery trilogy will take a while. But the next two will each be published one year after the book before it. The first book in her trilogy (*A Murderous Masquerade*--working title) is set in Venice, the second in Istanbul, and the third in Croatia. Two sleuths and a touch of magic in each. Here's what [Publishers Weekly](#) wrote about Sibylline.

# Question of the Quarter



What specific topic(s) would you like to read about in *The Stiletta*?

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Anything about writing is of interest to me, especially the art of writing mysteries. As for a specific topic, I would like to see more about how important humor is in a novel, even if it's not a "funny" book. Humor can add dimension to a character as well as release the tension after a taut scene. Those are just two of the ways humor adds to any novel. *Heather Haven*

I also appreciate articles on craft and the writing life. *Ellen Kirschman*

I'd like to read more about pacing in a mystery. I'd especially like to read about how to avoid the "muddled middle" of a story, how to keep the story moving forward in interesting ways, but not so fast that the reader thinks "your protagonists don't even have time for a bathroom break." *Michal Strutin*

I would like to see information about product placement in one's manuscript. When I worked for an international company, product placement in advertising and movies was a big deal. *George Cramer*

I'd like to get more information about publishers who will work with unagented writers, and perhaps some members talking about working with those publishers. I'd also like to hear from people who do deep research on how they find their sources. *Donna Albrecht*

I'd like to see a comprehensive, deep dive into a successful Facebook campaign for the first book in a mystery series from a member who has experienced it. *Josie Brown*

Things I'd like to see include: a discussion of styles, e.g., CMS, AP, MLA, etc.; interviews with some of our members on how they got their start; the do's and don'ts of traditional vs. indie publishing; a short feature each issue of a Bay Area bookseller (why do they stock what they stock?); any articles on marketing: the costs of some methods, do reviews help, virtual book tours. *Michele Drier*



## 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 **Robin Somers**, Program Coordinator (resomers11 (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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