

# THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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VOLUME 26, ISSUE 3

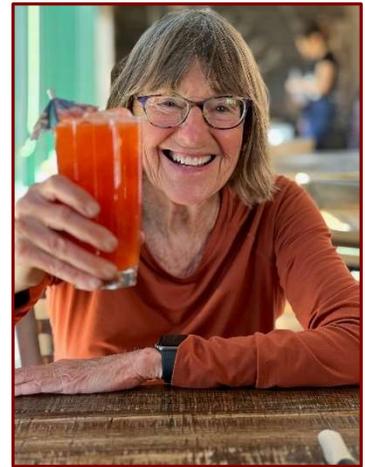
AUGUST 2025

## Stuck in the Doldrums

At one point in my life, I raced sailboats on the Charles River off Cambridge, MA, in San Francisco Bay, and offshore in the Pacific Ocean. I loved the speed of the boats when the wind blew, the mental challenge of outthinking an opponent or using the quirky tides and currents in the Bay to my boat's advantage. When the breeze blew itself out, since I was at the helm, I still had to come up with everything I could think of to keep the boat moving—not the easiest thing to do and often frustrating. Luckily the winds almost always blow around San Francisco.

There's a belt around the Earth near the Equator where sailing ships sometimes get stuck on windless waters.\* It's been nicknamed "the doldrums." I experienced something like the doldrums when I crewed on a sailboat from San Francisco to Hawaii. Smack dab in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the wind stopped and the three of us on board floated around for a few days, until the captain decided to turn on the boat's engine and power us toward Oahu.

I'm in the middle of the doldrums now with my writing. I can't seem to move forward. The fourth book of the Trisha Carson series, *Better Off Dead*, came out in March, five months ago. Book store events, talks, and social media posts kept me up and energized. I immediately plunged into book #5, wrote one chapter, then stopped. That was at least three months ago. The



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## President's Letter, continued

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wind had blown out of my sails, and now I'm drifting through calm waters. I know what I need to do, but I can't muster the spark to do it. I work through my ideas in my head, especially when I'm swimming. Then ideas float away to return a few days later.

This isn't really writer's block because I haven't written more than a handful of pages. I can't be alone in this experience. Have you experienced this? If so, what do you do when a book is waiting to be created and you aren't interested in doing the creating? Any suggestions are welcome.

*\*NOAA's National Ocean Service*

### **LEFT COAST CRIME: San Francisco Scheming February 26 – March 1, 2026**

Since the next Left Coast Crime conference will be in San Francisco in just six months, it's time for our SinC Northern California chapter to see how we can help. Its co-chairs are names you will instantly recognize. Michele Drier, past president of SinC NorCal, and Ana Manwaring, the current vice president of our chapter, are the California Scheming co-chairs and are now deep in planning for a successful LCC.

Our chapter has been asked to take the lead in manning the Hospitality Suite. This is usually a very comfortable room that convention-goers can stop in, rest for a bit, have something to drink and maybe a snack or two. SinC NorCal will supply people to work shifts of 2-3 hours each in the Hospitality Suite from Thursday through Saturday. You are there to make sure the Suite runs smoothly . . . pretty simple job. That is a great way to meet people. We all get tired at one point or another and land in the Hospitality Suite for some much-needed rest. Think of it . . . other writers, agents, publishers . . . who knows who will walk in? We may want to have a table for chapter outreach aimed at interested writers and readers. I don't have a signup sheet put together yet, but it's coming. To volunteer to work in the Hospitality Suite or to take any other volunteer job, you must be registered for LCC. Start thinking now about the day and time you'd like to volunteer. <https://leftcoastcrime.org/2026/index.html>.

**Sincerely,**

**Glenda Carroll  
President, Sisters in Crime NorCal**

# Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

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**Saturday, August 2 - 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.**

## ***Answers About Audiobooks***

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

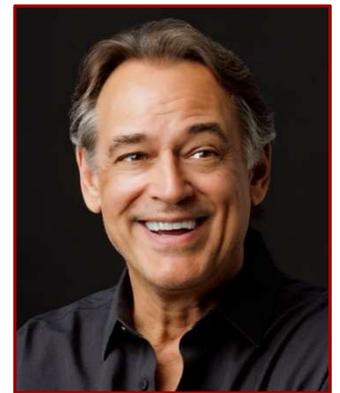
Have you wondered what makes a good audition piece? Struggled to choose the right actor for your work? And what does per finished word mean anyway? These questions and more will be answered by a panel of audiobook professionals, moderated by Maureen Studer. Terry McGovern is one of the Bay Area's most versatile performers, with success in radio and TV, animation and video games, and feature films. Jennifer March has performed for more than 15 years – on stage, over the airwaves, and now behind the mic, and she believes in the power of storytelling. Ralph Scott produces audiobooks, audio theatre, scripted entertainment, and commercial spots. Together with a roster of expert thespians, he turns the studio into a theatre for the ear.

**Saturday, September 13 – 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.**

## ***A Conversation with Jon Lindstrom, with Michele Drier***

*Zoom only*

An Emmy nominee, award-winning actor, director, and screenwriter, Jon Lindstrom has entered the world of mystery novels with his first book, *Hollywood Hustle*, a *USA Today* bestseller. In conversation with Michele Drier, Jon will discuss the matrix of his visions between acting, directing, and writing. His second book, *Hollywood Payback*, will be released in March 2026. He is also co-writing with Jeff Ayers (as A.J. Landau) the third installment of the Michael Walker National Parks thriller series. He can currently be seen in the TV series *Beyond the Gates*



**Saturday, October 4 – time TBD**

## ***What Type of Publishing is Right for You? with Gigi Pandian***

*In person (location TBD) plus Zoom (will not be recorded)*

Learn about the differences between publishing with small press, mid-size press, Big 5 publisher, and self-publishing from an author who's done them all! Bestselling *USA Today* author and locked-room mystery enthusiast Gigi Pandian will share the surprising differences between different types of publishing and help you figure out which publishing path is best for your books, your personality, and your specific goals.

**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

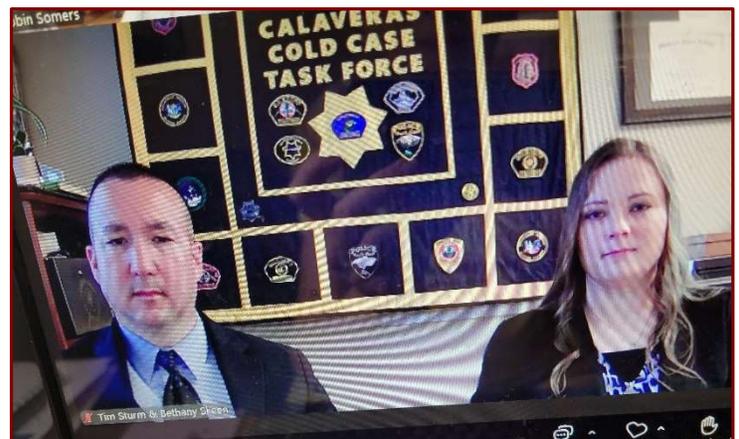
### *May Meeting - Spring Author Showcase*



Our Spring Author Showcase featured delightful readings from their latest works by our own chapter members. Pictured (left to right) are: First row: Ana Manwaring, Dänna Wilberg, Aletheia Morden, D.Z Church, Lisa Towles, Rachele Baker. Second row: T.E. MacArthur, Karen A. Phillips, C.J. Verburg, Diane M. Schaffer, Glenda Carroll, June Gillam. Third row: Michelle Chouinard, Gigi Pandian.

### *June Meeting - Cold Case Investigation: Behind and Scenes*

Captain Tim Sturn and analyst Bethany Skeen gave a fascinating presentation on the work of the Calaveras Cold Case Task Force. Taking a second look at long-unsolved cases with the help of new technology, methods such as genetic genealogy, new data, and new witnesses, the Task Force has solved cases that had remained open but where leads and information had previously been exhausted.



# The Mysteries of Writing

## by Victoria Zackheim

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When I put out the invitation to mystery writers asking them to reveal the mysteries of their lives for an anthology, I had no idea what to expect. As their essays arrived, I quickly discovered how we view mystery in very different and personal ways—from the logical to the mystical, the laugh-out-loud funny to the deeply introspective.

A mystery can be an enigma, a solution discovered, a challenge, a surprise--something magical. Falling in love--or out of love. Gaining stature and reputation or losing respect. Being innocent--and then not. Marriage and divorce, illness and death, the rise and fall of friendships. The expected and the serendipitous. Situations that hurt us and thrill us.

There are mysteries that defy believability. Hallie Ephron visited a spiritualist in the hope of understanding her friend's claims to have spoken with her murdered brother. The more Hallie delved, the more she found her own beliefs challenged, until she finally asked herself: What do I believe?

Australian writer Sulari Gentill stumbled upon a family photograph and found someone she had never seen. It took serious sleuthing on her part, but she discovered that he was an uncle whose existence had been kept a secret. That led her to the next challenge: uncovering the reason why his image was never shared, his name never spoken. This mystery changed the way Sulari looked at her family and its history. Her history.

We are confronted with mysteries when our health is in question. Rachel Howzell Hall was living her life balancing writing, family and career until a new word joined her lexicon: cancer. Part of her healing was unraveling the mysteries around this illness.

Caroline Leavitt struggled with a raspy voice and, on occasion, no voice at all. This was often accompanied by shortness of breath and asthma-like symptoms. She turned to some of the country's top specialists and underwent every possible exam, but no answers could be found. To this day, Caroline continues her own research, hoping to solve this mystery.

All of the authors pulled from personal experiences when mapping out their essays for this book, and a few explored areas so painful that I have to think they questioned whether or not to share these with readers. Connie May Fowler recalled her abuse at the hands of her mother, and the brutal lies her mother told her about members of their family. Connie's mystery was how to untie the tangled knot that represented her relationship with a woman who was not only unloving, but did everything possible to destroy her daughter's confidence.

# The Mysteries of Writing, continued

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William Kent Krueger also wrote about his mother and a childhood defined by the mysteries of her mental illness—the same woman who would one day become the protagonist in one of his novels.

I was captivated by the dissimilarities in the way writers described their experiences of war. Rhys Bowen told us, “I was destined to write about World War II. It has haunted my subconscious for my entire life. After all, I was born into the middle of it, and I survived a near miss during a bombing raid. While I was too young to remember details, my heart rate still quickens if I hear a siren wailing or see a searchlight strafing the sky. I do remember the matter-of-fact way everyone got on with it, did their duty and didn’t panic.”

Rhys was a child trapped in the nightmare of war, while Martin Limón faced the challenges of a young American soldier dropped into the foreign and sometimes mysterious culture of Korea.

According to the author, “When I first hopped off the plane at Kimpo Airfield in 1968, most of the GIs . . . had heard of Korea only in reference to the war that had ended fifteen years earlier . . . a war that left a peninsula divided into a brutal Communist dictatorship in the north and an authoritarian military oligarchy in the south. But there was more to this place than just conflict and suffering. And soon I was faced with a number of mysteries, involving both the U.S. Army and the country, which my adolescent mind would, in short order, begin to struggle to unravel. The first mystery was crime.

“The U.S. military was, and still is, a secret society, keeping its nefarious skeletons hidden in safes within vaults within crypts. Good luck with unraveling its mysteries, or exposing its peccadillos to the light of day. Many have tried. Many have failed. Young GIs, if they knew what was good for them, left these mysteries unsolved, and even unspoken. Like docents tiptoeing around the holy of holies, they whispered and pressed forefingers to their lips.”

Other mysteries are less volatile, without the political and international weightiness that Martin Limón experienced.

Cara Black had considered Paris so much a part of her being that Inspector Maigret was evident everywhere she went. She wrote, “I confess that when I first began writing my Aimée Leduc novels, I would think, okay, there’s a murder, a staircase dripping with blood . . . What would Inspector Maigret do?” Again and again, Cara is drawn to “. . . my Paris streets dark and narrow, with glistening cobbles. The air thick with mist and suspicion.” The mystery for her was one of place as much as plot!

There are mysteries we face when exploring our beliefs, political and spiritual. The essay submitted by Anne Perry struck me as an exclamation of both surprise and passion.

# The Mysteries of Writing, continued

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“I want to be a magician! Not the sort who makes things appear and disappear inexplicably, but the one who creates worlds and peoples them, makes events occur, marvelous, terrible, funny, heartfelt, and I want them to last so they can be revisited anytime. And, of course, all kinds of characters, old, young, eccentric, brave. I want to be one of them. Put more plainly, I want to be a writer. I want to . . . bring dreams to life, and understandings of anything that my imagination dares grasp, and then share them. Does that sound arrogant? It isn’t. Not really. Other people have done that down the centuries and shared their visions of the wonderful, the terrible, the elusive and mysterious, their victories and losses, the beauty and laughter and pain. I have been with them as they sought the reasons for everything. I have seen the Great Flood with Gilgamesh and watched the heavens rain and the hidden waters of the great deep spew forth. I have praised the rising sun over Egypt with the rebel Pharaoh Akhenaten, who dared to say there was only one God. I have seen the fall of Troy and the eruption of Vesuvius that buried Herculaneum and Pompeii. I have searched for the source of the White Nile. I have traveled alien worlds that don’t exist, except in the imagination, and been with fantastical creatures. And more than that, I have had companionship in my loneliness, courage in my fear, and beauty in the midst of pain through the words of others. I want to put something back into that great tide of human sharing. Perhaps it is an attempt to be like those I most admire and ultimately belong to that golden fellowship who people my daydreams. Don’t we all hunger to belong? And where better? As long as we remember them, they are immortal.”

One of the wisest bits of writerly advice Anne shared was, “Look for elements of yourself and your life, apply them to the lives of your characters. As you “grow” them, I promise you’ll have a greater understanding of who you are!”

When we see the name Jeffery Deaver, we think of the international bestselling author who keeps us reading until 4:00 a.m. But was he always at the top of his game? According to the author, “I was a nerd when I was growing up. And a nerd when the word meant something. Not like nowadays, when being a nerd comes with \$1 billion in stock options and a Silicon Valley mansion, thanks to your inventing a social network platform or an algorithm for self-driving drones. I was a true nerd, a pure nerd: pudgy, clumsy, socially inept, ignored by the cheerleaders and pom-pom girls. I owned a slide rule (look it up on Google).

“There was a reason that sports team captains in school picked me last for their teams. Even on the field, I would neglect the game and daydream, composing stories about knights and orcs and cowboys and poems that went something like this:

The score is tied; three boys on base.  
I see the batter’s happy face  
As he grips the bat and looks my way.

# The Mysteries of Writing, continued

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All I can do is hope and pray  
That he won't hit that ball to me.  
But we all know how it goes;  
He swings for me and breaks my nose.

But my status as nerd didn't really matter. I had something better than sports; I had the Glen Ellyn, Illinois, Public Library. That was where I fell in love with books. I knew then that I wanted to make my living as a writer. How to achieve that goal, though, was a mystery."

Among the genres that he explored was poetry. That didn't work, so he decided to become a singer/songwriter, but he was too literary. When he used a semicolon in his lyrics, one of the singers questioned it. He explained the punctuation mark's vital role in the world of sentence structure, and then he gave a croaky, albeit grammatically correct, performance.

He abandoned his quest to be a novelist or songwriter and went to law school. Gainfully employed, he wrote his first murder mystery while managing a three-hour commute. And then? "I kept at it, and despite the pressure of a full-time job—and numbness in the extremities—I managed to finish my first novel. I was proud as could be." And then heartened, he wrote the second. The problem was, ". . . I went back and read them both, cover to cover. I learned that they were indeed consistent. Consistently dreadful. The mystery of becoming a writer was solved. I wasn't meant to be one."

He persevered... and wrote another novel, and he was thrilled with it. In fact, as he revealed in his essay, "When I read through my final product, I decided that unlike those first two, this one was, in my opinion, probably the best commercial novel written that year. It was submitted and the response arrived:

Dear Mr. Deaver:

Thank you for your submission. I feel I must tell you that I believe this manuscript to be unpublishable.

Very truly yours,

[Redacted] Publishing, Inc.

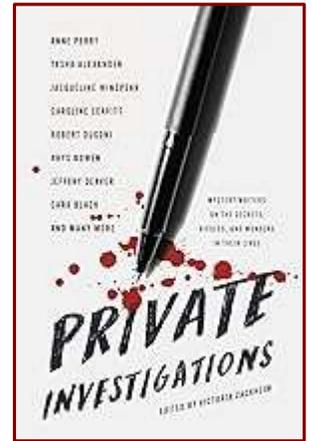
"I of course focused on the positive: the "Thank you..." and the "Very truly yours." Which I took to be signs of encouragement and sent out the manuscript again. Over and over and over. With no success."

## The Mysteries of Writing, continued

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Did he give up? We all know the answer to that! His next novel was picked up on its first submission and he has been unstoppable. Fifty million books sold in 150 countries, a top television series (*Tracker*), and books to film. And his view of these developments? I'll let Jeffery Deaver close this article. His words are the perfect summation.

"I'm sure every author has a different response to the question of how he or she came to lead a writer's life. But for me, the answer was stunning in its simplicity: the trick was merely writing the types of books and short stories that I, as that young boy sitting in the Glen Ellyn Public Library many years ago, so loved to read. Mystery solved."



Elements of these essays have been taken from the anthology: *Private Investigations: Mystery Writers on the Secrets, Riddles, and Wonders of Their Lives* by Victoria Zackheim, April 21, 2020.

Victoria Zackheim is the author of novels *The Bone Weaver* and *The Curtain Falls in Paris*. She is the creator/editor of seven anthologies, including the international bestseller *The Other Woman*, adapted to the theater and performed in several dozen theaters across the United States. She wrote the documentary *Where Birds Never Sang: The Story of Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen Concentration Camps*, which aired nationwide on PBS. She teaches creative nonfiction in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program and is a frequent conference speaker and writing instructor in the US and abroad. A freelance editor, Victoria has worked with many authors on their novels, including international bestseller Anne Perry and New York Times bestseller Caroline Leavitt, and the memoirs of Robb Forman Dew, Gillian Herbert and many more. She is a San Francisco Library Laureate and lives in Northern California.

# Should You Write What You Know?

## by Elena E. Smith

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There are good arguments on both sides of this question.

If you are writing about a place you've lived, an environment you've worked in, certain types of people you know, then there will be a ring of truth that resonates with others if they've had a shared experience. On the other hand, if you are writing about a showbiz family (*Revenge on Route 66* by Kris Neri) and your reader has no such experience, then it can draw them into an interesting world to which they would never otherwise have been exposed. You, as an author, can teach them about a profession, a hobby, music of a certain era, or any manner of things.

A good example is *Mother-Daughter Murder Night* by Nina Simon. It takes place on the East Coast in a small town, a place where many of us have never lived or visited. We learn about some of the local businesses and about intergenerational relationships. It is clear from this well-crafted book that Simon knows what these relationships are like. Who remembers the early mystery/ private eye fiction written by men who were loner alcoholics? It may have been interesting, but after a while, a guy who can't get along with anyone and whose relationships are little more than one-night stands can get tiresome.

I had an interesting experience with Louise Penny's *Still Life*. I really enjoyed the book because the characters were artistic and quirky. They reminded me of my own circle of friends. I was in a book club where a number of participants hated it – because they couldn't relate to the characters!

On the other hand, historical fiction is a great seller these days. Authors of this genre must spend a lot of time in research to build a world that exposes us to places we can never go and experiences we can never have. These books take us away from our everyday concerns and propel us into another era.

A good example is *Her Royal Spyness* by Rhys Bowen. How many of us are royalty or have lived in England? Bowen gives us a look into a world we do not already know. The rules and regulations of how royalty behaves, how servants behave, the expectations of her class. We may already know a lot of this from watching *Downton Abbey*, but isn't it fun to be thrust back into this world?

What are the downsides of either choice?

In terms of writing what you know, no matter how well you know it, there may be readers who have a different take than you do and will have a hard time buying into your world view. An

## Should You Write What You Know, continued

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example might be *#FashionVictim: A Novel* by Amina Akhtar, narrated by a very dislike-able (probably mentally ill) main character. Although we may have heard about a backstabbing profession such as the fashion industry (*The Devil Wears Prada*), do we buy into it? Maybe, maybe not. This perspective may titillate some readers and turn others off.

Whatever you do, if you are writing from your experience, do be sure to check your own facts. You don't want to write about a character who travels by foot from one location to another in 20 minutes when a reader may know that these two locales are five miles apart. Be very careful about any names/ movies/ songs you refer to, that they really did exist at the time of your story and that your timeline isn't off. And find things to say about your real experiences that will uplift/ engage/ intrigue your readers. A good writer can keep anything from being boring. (Too bad textbook publishers haven't figured this out, yet.)

In terms of writing that requires research, this can be a delicate issue. You, as the writer, must decide what you do and do not want to include. If you want to describe an Old West town like Tombstone, you may want to take a road trip to soak up the ambiance rather than just rely on information others have written. Describing the windstorms, the dry heat, and what kind of clouds you see in the sky can pull your reader deeper into your story. I think there is nothing more thrilling than visiting a place you have read about, only to see that it was exactly the way the author described it. I had that experience when I visited Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum in London. (This was a long time ago, so I'm not sure who the author was, but I think it was Agatha Christie.)

On the other hand, you don't have to kitchen-sink it, throwing in every detail to prove that you are a great researcher. Some things can be nuanced. Ask yourself what kind of descriptive information your reader might like best. In my opinion, it is more important to draw them into the scene and let them experience it through your lens than to write something so descriptive that it reads like a newspaper article.

Speaking of the movie *Tombstone*, did you know that it has what is regarded as exceptional dialogue? Someone researched slang terms of that time period and peppered them throughout the script. I recommend everyone watch this movie; I am on my third copy of it and have seen it at least 25 times. It never gets old. Wouldn't you love to have readers feel that way about your work?

I hope I have given you some things to think about. Happy writing!

Elena E. Smith is the self-published author of two books, *The Arizona Kid* and *Mahuenga*, with two more books coming out soon. She has appeared in several SinC anthologies and in the *Rock and a Hard Place* magazine.

# Getting Daffy with a Duck

## by Claudia H. Long

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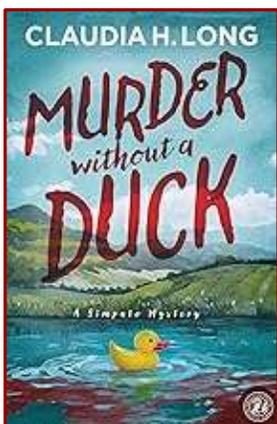
As soon as the first book in the Simpato Mystery Series, *Murder without a Duck*, came out, I was asked, “When did you start writing humor?” My answer was, “I always did. But it wore a heavy overcoat.” For the Simpato Mystery Series, I decided it was time to take the coat off, put some feathers on it, and let the humor fly a bit. To paraphrase Emily Dickinson, hope is a funny feathered thing.

The world can be a grim place, and humor has a way of lightening the load. It can also tell “truth to power,” as the saying goes, as long as that truth is dressed in bad duck puns. When I sat down at my computer for my annual November draft (alas, poor NaNoWriMo, we knew you . . . well . . .), I’d been to the high mountain of joy—my son’s wedding—to the low of October 7. What on earth could I write about?



I come from a long tradition of broken-hearted jokes. My ancestors knew that sometimes only the darkest humor could bring light. And heaven knows, my people have seen much darkness. When I wrote the Zara and Lilly mysteries, *Nine Tenths of the Law* and *Our Lying Kin*, they were set against a tapestry of inherited war trauma, yet they sailed on a net of quips, snark, and the occasional guffaw.

During the pandemic my husband and I sold our suburban house and moved to a tiny town (5000 souls) in northern Napa County. Legend had it that the founder of the town had been too drunk to write out the intended name--Saratoga, California—and had misspelled it to Calistoga, Saraformia. The Calistoga part stuck, held in place by sulfur mud baths, boiling hot geysers, and, much, much later, by the Judgment of Paris in which a Calistoga winery, Chateau Montelena, beat out venerable French wines to win first place, and catapult Napa wines into the spotlight.



Now, as I looked out the window at the pouring rain, here in my new town, I thought: this weather is only suited to ducks.

Ducks . . . hmm . . . pato . . . Simpatico . . . Simpato . . . Sin-pato! In Spanish, that was: without a duck!

I typed out the name, Simpato. I typed out Sin-Pato. I typed out Without a Duck. And then I thought, the grocery store would have to be the Duck Shop, right? And the newspaper? The Quack, of course! And in a murder mystery we need a body. What is the most prized commodity in a small town? Gossip! Murder the gossip columnist!

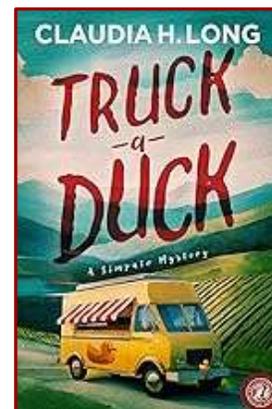
## Getting Daffy with a Duck, continued

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With no outline, I started *Murder without a Duck*.

As the consummate plotter, my outlines have sub-outlines, but I went directly to drafting *Murder without a Duck* on a dreary November morning, to counteract my sadness and gloom. By the middle of the draft, I was panicking, so I stopped and outlined the rest. Breathing easier, I finished it, and Sibylline Press took it right away. In fact, they suggested I get cracking on book number two immediately!

When it came time to write the second Simpato Mystery, I knew my town quite well. I had imagined into life an entire city government, shopkeepers, and a chief of police, and had given the local nuns a way to support themselves in these troubled times: cannabis cookies, anyone? And when the real-life Calistoga City Council voted on where to allow food trucks to park, my imaginary Simpato burst into taco truck wars. *Truck a Duck*, outlined and plotted, sprung fully formed from my fevered brain!



I still have my serious side. Book #3 of the Zara and Lilly series comes out in August 2026. But I'm having a rollicking time with my Duck books and *Truck a Duck* flies into bookstores and online on August 22, 2025, while book three is fermenting – dare I say quacking? – in in my head!

Claudia H. Long is a lawyer in the tiny wine-soaked town of Calistoga. Her long writing career includes the Zara and Lilly mystery series, one of which, *Nine Tenths of the Law* (Kasva Press), has been optioned for a feature film. *Truck a Duck* (August 2025) and *Murder Without a Duck* (2024) (a Simpato Mystery series, Sibylline Press Digital First) are humorous-edge-of-cozy, with wine, cannabis-cookie-selling nuns, and awful duck puns! When she's not working or writing, she weaves, cooks, and dotes on her grandchildren. [www.claudiahlong.com](http://www.claudiahlong.com)

# My First Publication: Fear and Anxiety

## by Jenn Hooker

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Those who have been published likely remember the feelings they had when they got the news that they were being published: giddiness, excitement, pride...fear?

I recently got to experience that first-time-published high when my short story “Double Feature” was selected as the June pick for *Stone’s Throw* at *Rock and a Hard Place Magazine*. For those who are unfamiliar, “*Stone’s Throw* is the monthly online companion to *Rock and a Hard Place Magazine*, delivering shorter, sharper content on a regular basis in an electronic medium, before collecting all 12 stories for an annual print anthology. Each month, writers will be given a submission prompt, and the best of the best, by our estimation, will be posted [here](#) the following month.”



My objective to get published before I turned 35 was getting more unobtainable by the day, and the desire to pursue short stories as a means of publication was more of a hail mary than a true calling. When I received the email that my story had been picked for *Stone’s Throw*, I was hot on the heels of a rejection from a story I’d submitted to an anthology a few months prior. That email sat unread in my inbox for a full 24 hours before I had the gall to open it, assuming it was yet another rejection.

I am not exaggerating when I say I had to reread the email two or three times before I actually comprehended what it was saying. They’d picked my story! Not just a story, but an overtly queer, hyper-violent short story that I wrote in about three days.

After the edits were said and done, and the excitement dwindled, I was overcome with a sense of *dread*. Now that I was going to be published, people were actually going to read my story. Writing has always been something that happened internally, something exclusively between me and my computer. Just sharing my story with my wife for editing was an anxiety-inducing task, and now the idea that strangers and friends and family were going to get a glimpse into this dark side of my mind absolutely terrified me.

As desperately as I wanted to be a published author, I never actually bothered to think what it would be like to crack open my head and let the world bear witness to my rich interior life.

I was faced with a conundrum: share my story with as many people as possible to reach a broad audience and really get my name out there or let it languish silently online where a handful of strangers would read it and forget my name in a matter of days. Predictably, I couldn’t let this exciting milestone go to waste, so I shared it with friends and family alike. I dreaded (and to this day still dread) that someone I care about will read my work and judge me differently. I understand now,

## My First Publication: Fear and Anxiety, continued

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though, that to be published means to be vulnerable. It means taking your innermost thoughts and splashing them across a billboard in Times Square (well, not for me yet, but maybe one day . . .).

In the two months since publication, my fear and anxiety have dwindled to be barely noticeable, like an old injury that has long since healed. I'm still well aware that it exists, but it doesn't bother me every day. When my next story gets published, I will be better prepared for the variety of emotions to come. For now, I'm proud of my story and I can't wait to see who reads it.

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 <https://www.thejennhooker.com/>



**To our newest members  
(joining SinC NorCal from April 1, 2025, through June 30, 2025)**

Leslie Brody  
Rebecca D'Harlingue  
Paula Green (pen name PLC Green)  
Mary Lim  
Richard Meredith  
Fran Nolden (pen name Franck Cleveland)

# Member Profile: D.Z. Church

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## Thirty-fifth in a series to introduce our members to each other

D. Z. (Dawn) Church is an accomplished mystery/thriller writer who now lives on California's Central Coast, but hails from the Midwest and has lived all over the United States and on Barbados.



**Stiletta:** Dawn, you earned BS and MS degrees in journalism from the University of California and Northwestern, respectively. What type of career were you anticipating, and did it turn out the way you expected?

**D. Z. Church:** I planned to be a newspaper reporter, but I graduated from UC during a paper shortage. Newspapers were laying off, not hiring. So, I walked into the Navy Recruiting Station, to my Air Force Officer father's chagrin, though he knew I hoped to be among the

Navy's first female jet pilots (trust me, there is a story there). I became one of the 10% of women accepted as officers and took an interim job at a nascent computer company in Broomfield, CO as a telephone operator until my assigned class W7301 began. Ask me about using a peg telephone exchange. While there, I received a call from the *Lamar Tri-County News* in Lamar, Colorado, looking for a reporter. Wouldn't you know it? I passed the job offer to a friend.

After the Navy, I used my GI Bill to pursue a master's degree in advertising and brand management at Northwestern. Mind you, the GI Bill paid for most of my university housing in a graduate apartment, which I shared with the best roommate ever. I was also a TA, had a scholarship, sold my car, and took out a loan. After graduation, I took my shiny new degree to the West Coast, where I worked in the in-house advertising agency for Safeway Foods. The agency oversaw all of the advertising for the international food chain. And, in my spare time, I opened a public affairs company, Higuera and Zinser, until Higuera, bless her heart, met a tall, dark, handsome man on the beach, and that was that, because in those days there was no Internet. A brochure we developed for the City of Alameda made the nightly news in the Bay Area, and our marketing for a small cable company resulted in that company winning the Alameda concession against the biggies.

**Stiletta:** You mentioned that you served as a Division, Security and Public Affairs Officer in the US military when there were few female officers in the in the Navy. How did you achieve that position and what can you tell us about your Navy experience?

## Member Profile: D. Z. Church, continued

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*DZC:* The positions followed a normal path for women officers, who, at the time, were not allowed on ships. I was named Public Affairs Officer because of my bachelor's degree, and I tried to pursue that rating, but, because it required tours aboard ships, it was closed to women officers.

I can tell you, now that it is declassified, that the best way to tell a whale from a Russian submarine is that submarines have conning towers, whales don't, but whales have calves and submarines don't. And, if I've had enough wine, I will share my favorite story involving senior officers, Russian submarines, Washington, D.C. and Vietnam.

*Stiletta:* When you served as a Creative Director at an ad agency, you won the prestigious Clio Award for creative excellence in advertising. Can you tell us more about that?

*DZC:* I particularly remember the standing rib roast in the winning commercial, a family Christmas dinner. A friend absconded with the rib roast and nearly got us kicked off the plane from Los Angeles to San Francisco when his athletic bag was scanned.

The commercial was a very sumptuous family dinner with all the trimmings, created for Safeway, back when the Magowans owned the international company, well before the barbarians came through the gates. The commercial was rich in detail and homey, making you lick your chops.

*Stiletta:* What other careers did you have that you would like to mention?

*DZC:* As mentioned above, I had my own public relations company. Ultimately, I worked for an educational testing company that was a subsidiary of a Fortune 500 publisher. I began writing test items, until my weird background was discovered, and I was asked to help develop what became the accepted technique to do large-scale scoring of student writing samples. It required a peculiar set of skills, including the creation of instant onsite organizations, training up to 400 teachers to all score to the same scale consistently, and running the scanning and reporting operations. One night while scanning a few last sheets at 3 a.m., I looked up and saw my husband scanning, too, just to be with me. Well . . .

During that brief hiatus, I worked for a competitor and began writing the first book in the Cooper series, thinking it was a one-off. Before it was completed, the Vice President of Western Sales for the original company offered me a position, and I segued into selling assessments to school districts throughout Nevada and South Central California in my trusty Taurus wagon. After driving 220,000 miles in three and a half years, I became a National Accounts Manager responsible for working with the State Assessment Offices in most Western States.

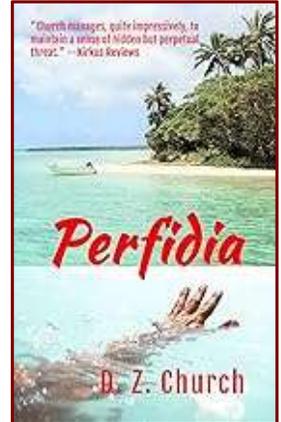
About four years later, while listening to coins drop and handles being pulled in McCarran Airport on my birthday, I was tapped to develop, hire, and manage the company's first proposal center. In

## Member Profile: D. Z. Church, continued

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that position, I generated well over half a billion dollars in revenue for the company. And, I went into the office very, very early every morning and wrote books two and book three (so long that it turned into books three and four) of the Cooper Quartet.

Exhausted, I retired and, while sitting in a hotel waiting for my husband, who was working on location, I finished a standalone thriller that I had started while in the Navy. Which became my first published book, *Perfidia*, a thriller set in Bakersfield, CA and Barbados.

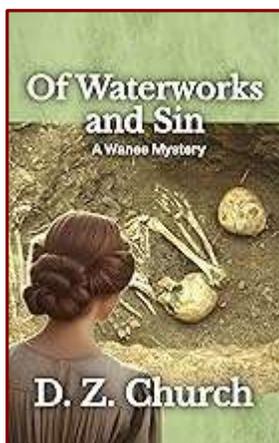


**Stiletta:** I've read that you started writing at age eight. What did you write as a child, and when did you decide to make writing mysteries a career?

**DZC:** I was a precocious reader, pounding through *Gone with the Wind* at eight (though I admit I got more out of it at 16), and I was keenly interested in the Civil War because we had toured Gettysburg and Antietam, both near where we lived. Thus, my first "book" was the world's worst Civil War romance. I still have it somewhere.

I didn't decide to write mysteries and thrillers; they are all I seem to be able to write. I am a bit like my character Cora Countryman that way. As Mr. Kanady would say, "I have a fierce nose for trouble."

**Stiletta:** You currently have four books in your historical Wane Mystery series, set in the late 1870s in an Illinois prairie town. Please tell us about your protagonist and the reason you tackled this particular era and location.



**DZC:** Cora Countryman finds herself on her own after her mother absconds with money from the town, leaving Cora deeply in debt, with a boarding house to run and only one boarder. She dreams of a life of mystery and adventure. But her dreams must take a back seat to her debt, which she calculates will be paid off sometime in the new century. And, when murder is done, Cora won't give in, back down, or submit to the behavior expected of a young lady in 1876 in a burgeoning prairie town.

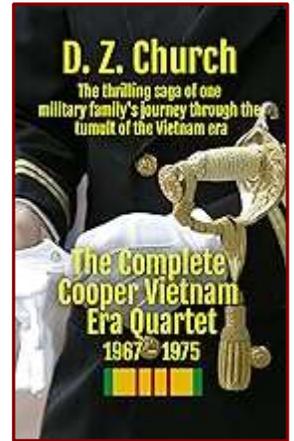
My family pioneered Henry County, Illinois, in the 1830s, before the Black Hawk Wars. I was born out there, and our family farm was there. I know the land, the people, and the real town my fictional town is based on. I love and respect the plains. The local Historical Society has collected wonderful records, including the 1876 town directory. My hometown boomed after the Civil War and busted after World War II. That alone provides terrific background and grit for my stories.

## Member Profile: D. Z. Church, continued

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**Stiletta:** You also wrote four books in your Cooper Vietnam Era Quartet. How did your military service in the Vietnam era influence the writing of this series?

**DZC:** There is a female officer, Robin Haas, a cousin of the two male protagonists, whose story is woven through all four books. My military service informs her story, especially in book 4, *Don't Tell*. The Leading Chief Petty Officer of my division was the Navy's Matlovich, in other words, the first to be brought up on charges of homosexuality. I was appointed investigating officer, and I was the command's Public Relations Officer. It was a horrible, mind-bending, grizzly time—and the reason I left the Navy. Robin Haas's story, though fictionalized and with a different ending, is emotionally very much mine.



**Stiletta:** What are you working on for future publication?

**DZC:** I am hard at work on the fifth Cora Countryman book, currently titled *The Orleans Lady*, while plotting the sixth (untitled). And the hero and heroine of *Saving Calypso* won't leave me alone. They have this really great idea for another book. And there is the matter of Laury Cooper, who would like to explain his love-hate relationship with Chloe Minotier. And . . . and . . . always something, heh?

**Stiletta:** Why did you decide to use your initials rather than your first name in your author name?

**DZC:** I used D. Z. Church because *Dead Legend* was a noir, gritty, realistic military thriller set during the Vietnam War. At the time, all the similar books were written by male authors or women, hiding behind their initials.

Then, well, I was sort of stuck. I thought about using my name on the others, but there is a porn star using it, and a church in Georgia. So, I opted to stay with my initials.

**Stiletta:** Would you consider yourself a plotter or a pantser?

**DZC:** First, I do my research, deep dive, fill my brain with history, period, etc. etc. I know the beginning. I know the end. After that, I am so a pantser that it's a wonder anyone has pants on by the end of the first draft. It is always what comes next, then what, just keep going, get it done. When the first draft (?) is done, I employ the Navy spit shine method: I go back, pour lighter fluid on it, flash-burn it, apply polish, then spit, and then shine.

**Stiletta:** I heard that you read every issue of *Time Magazine* from the first issue through your college graduation—very impressive! What benefits did you receive from this accomplishment?

**DZC:** It all started with a journalism assignment to compare the reporting of a well-known event from two different publications. I chose the sailing of the Exodus to Palestine as reported in *Time* and *Newsweek*. This meant going down a spiral staircase to, like, the seventh basement in the University

## Member Profile: D. Z. Church, continued

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of Colorado library. After I turned in the assignment, I couldn't stop myself and spent the three-hour break between afternoon classes down there, even arranging for the same break the next semester, just me, and *Time Magazine*. I read and absorbed information I would never have been introduced to otherwise. Like a flash course in US history and culture. I'd do it all again, though there were the occasional ghastly sounds, footsteps, but no people, gasps, you know, the usual.

*Stiletta:* You blog monthly at [Ladies of Mystery](#). What types of blogposts do you like to write?

*DZC:* Lately, Artificial Intelligence has been on my mind. And, of course, Amazon's bizarre scoring system. And world building and character tension. And, well, writing about writing.

*Stiletta:* What would you like your fellow SinC NorCal members to know about you that I haven't asked?

*DZC:* It's great to be part of the sisterhood.

D. Z. Church was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



# Member News

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## *New and Upcoming Releases*

*The Curtain Falls in Paris*; An Aria Nevins and Noah Roche Mystery, Victoria Zackheim's debut novel, was published on May 13 by Level Best Books.

Betsy Barker's short story "Ruby Red" will be published in *Danger Awaits*, the latest anthology of Sisters in Crime, Desert Sleuths chapter, checking off a lifetime goal on her bucket list. The anthology will be released on September 19. Betsy's sleuth is a woman with a disability who solves crime.

*Truck a Duck*, book #2 in Claudia H. Long's Simpato Mystery Series, will be released by Sybilline Digital First on August 22.

*Switch*, the third and final book in Lisa Towles' E&A Investigations series, will be released by Indies United Publishing on September 30.

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

*Death and the Final Cut* by G.M. Malliet, book #7 in her St. Just series, will be released on November 4 by Severn House. Hollywood descends on Cambridge, England, when the historic Round Church becomes a film set for *Viking Bride*, starring famous actress Agnes Dermont. Her big comeback quickly descends into farce due to the woeful script and acting and ends in disaster when a Viking knife is found buried in her chest.

*The Room at the End of the Hall* by Susan McCormick will be released on August 5. A skilled surgeon, who gives up a promising career to care for his quirky mother, must discover why his patients are dying and whether a sin from his past is threatening his reputation, his patients, and his life. The book was a 2022 PNWA (Pacific Northwest Writers Association) Mystery/Thriller Finalist and a 2023 Killer Nashville Claymore Award Finalist for Best Suspense, both for an unpublished manuscript.

## *Public Appearances*

Ellen Kirschman is again braving the heat and humidity. She'll be heading to Nashville, TN from August 21 to 24 to attend Killer Nashville. Learn more about this conference at <https://www.killernashville.com> and sign up for Ellen's master class on the Psychology of First Responders.

## Member News, continued

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Robin Somers's reading and discussion of *Eleven Stolen Horses* has been rescheduled for Saturday, September 13 at the Scotts Valley Public Library, from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Ellen Kirschman will be joining 30 local authors at the Chill Out and Read summer book fair sponsored by the San Jose Women's Club and the Women's National Book Association. Free sundaes and books, what could be better? Sunday, August 17, 1:00 to 5:00 p.m., at San Jose Women's Club, 72 South 11<sup>th</sup> Street, San Jose.

### *Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!*

Catriona McPherson has been nominated for two Anthony Awards: Best Historical for *The Witching Hour* and Best Cozy/Humorous for *Scotzilla*.

"Curse of the Super Taster" by Leslie Karst has been nominated for a Macavity Award for Best Mystery Short Story.

Robin Somers's mystery *Beet Fields* (Sybilline Press 2025) won an Honorable Mention for Fiction from the San Francisco Book Festival.

*Call Me Carmela*, book #5 in Ellen Kirschman's Dot Meyerhoff Mystery series, won a bronze medallion from the Public Safety Writers Association.



## Question of the Quarter



If you could pick one special person to blurb your next (or first) book, who would it be?

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Ann Cleeves is my choice. But that's a difficult question. Since my novel came out last month, it was pretty much my dream team: Anne Perry, Robert Dugoni, Cara Black, Charles Todd, Sulari Gentill, and Caroline Leavitt. This might sound maudlin, but my first choice for any book would always be Anne Perry. She passed away two years ago, and I think of her every day. *Victoria Zackheim*

If I could have my next book blurbed by absolutely anyone, I'd get Doris Day to blurb *Scot's Eggs* (December 2). It's as bright and cheerful as her rom-coms, and therefore not completely bonkers, but that would mean she was still alive. Then I'd get Stephen King to blurb *The Dead Room* (March 2026), not just for the bump of my life (although it wouldn't hurt) but because he is genuinely my favorite living writer. *Catriona McPherson*

To sell books: Oprah Winfrey (if she's not available, Reese Witherspoon). To make me proud: Tana French or Don Winslow. *Ellen Kirschman*

I would be so happy if Robert Dugoni blurbed my upcoming release, *Switch* (September 30). *Lisa Towles*

If I could pick one special person to blurb my next book, it would probably be Anthony Horowitz. What an honor, right? Of course, tomorrow I will probably have another choice. Too many special people to narrow it down to one! *Chris Dreith*

I have been so fortunate in my "blurb" life that I would feel greedy asking for more. In the first book the wonderful Bill Crider, Carolyn Hart, Susan Shea, and Sophie Littlefield gave me glowing reviews, starting me off right. From there, Catriona McPherson, Sheldon Siegel, and William Kent Krueger chimed in. And the list grew. Like I said, fortunate! I would like to have had a blurb from Craig Johnson but never pressed him to do so. I have to say I'm always humbled when someone asks me to blurb their book. If I'm not completely swamped, I always say yes. And I read the whole book before I write the blurb. Thank you to all those who said yes to me! *Terry Shames*

Lou Berney *Vinnie Hansen*

If I could get one person to blurb my next book, it would be Cleve Jones, the San Francisco Bay activist who conceived the idea of the AIDS quilt. The quilt is featured in the book I just completed, entitled *The Death of a Gay Man 1950*, the frame story of which is set at the height of the AIDS epidemic. In the book, a bereaved brother and a researcher on a mission unite forces to find out what killed a brilliant and charismatic man — bon vivant, world traveler, possibly spy — in a Post-World War II San Francisco

## Question of the Quarter, continued

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where murder, harassment, suicide, and the Lavender Scare, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy of HUAC fame, threatened the gay community. *Claire Ortalda*

If I could pick one special person to blurb my first book, it would be Raquel V. Reyes. Her writing is so special to me and reminds me of why I'm writing. She's also an incredibly nice person, which is a plus! *Jenn Hooker*

Kate Quinn for sure. She writes fine historical fiction that includes action, daring, and go-forth characters. Quinn's novels range from Roman times to the near present. *The Huntress* is one of my all-time favorites. Nina, a protagonist, is brilliantly and powerfully imagined. I can close my eyes and see her.

Laurie R. King is the only living historical mystery writer whose books I never hesitate to read. Her Mary Russell series: compelling. I've been a Sherlock fan since middle school and King's Mary Russell is just as quirky and well developed as Sherlock himself. King's *Back to the Garden* mystery, set—in part—in the 1970s, telling me that I must be historical, has a twisty plot and a protagonist I'm hoping to meet again.

**If I could raise the dead, I'd ask Ellis Peters (Edith Mary Pargeter).** I've read and reread Ellis's twelfth-century Brother Cadfael mystery series. And watched all the Derek Jacobi TV episodes.

I can't stop at only two live authors. Others: Michael Chabon, whose characters are exuberant, sometimes self-doubting, inventive, and full of winking humor. Chabon's *Gentlemen of the Road*, set along the Silk Road near the turn of the first millennium, is anchored by two "practiced bamboozlers." I can't leave out Dara Horn, whose *A Guide for the Perplexed* travels from the present to 1890s Egypt, with stops to the biblical Joseph story, weaving history, sibling rivalry, and technological advancements. *Michal Strutin*

I would love for Anthony Horowitz or Richard Osman to blurb my next book. They are both breaking new ground writing "modern cozies," and their books are tremendous fun. *G.M. Malliet*

If I could have picked anyone in the world to blurb my first book, I'd probably have gone for Alexander McCall Smith. Local lad, you know, but he was writing about Botswana then, hadn't started the Scottish stuff. It would have been a nice change for him. Next book? Well, *The Edinburgh Murders* is new out in the US so I'm going to say . . . Alexander McCall Smith. *Catriona McPherson*

I don't have an ideal person in mind to write a blurb for me. I'm not writing any books these days. But I am writing plays, and if I could choose a person to write a review or a response to one of my

## Question of the Quarter, continued

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plays, it would be either Lillian Hellman or Shakespeare. Assuming they would respond the way I would like! LOL *Maureen Studer*

I would love to have Jane Ann Krentz blurb any of my books. I really enjoy her work and would love to be as successful as she is. *Kate Wyland*

I'd choose Tana French to blurb my books. Her books are intricate, cleaving to the border between literature and police procedurals, her prose is fluent, her settings evocative, and her characters complex. *AMichele Drier*

Probably J.A. Jance. She is a well-known Arizona author and a member of SinC, and it would be an honor to have someone like her blurb my books. *Elena Smith*

Wally Lamb. *Nicola Trwst*

If she were still alive, I'd like Sue Grafton to write a blurb for one of my books. When I began reading her alphabet series, I felt like I'd found a kindred spirit. Her writing was simple, but powerful. Easy to read with an undercurrent of complications. It might just be the name. *Glenda Carroll*



## 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.

President: Glenda Carroll – president (at) sincnorcal.org

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Program Coordinator: Robin Somers – resomers11 (at) gmail.com

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