

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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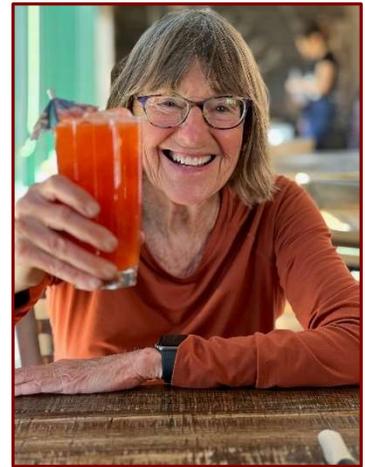
NOVEMBER 2025

Volunteering Can Be Fun: Who Knew?

By the time you read this, I will have been the President of Sisters in Crime NorCal for ten months. Not that long in the scheme of things, but enough to make a tremendous difference in me. I LOVE THIS JOB! Yes, like everyone else, I'm a volunteer. And yes, I've been president and sat on boards of other organizations. But there is something about SinC NorCal that suits me. I enjoy supporting everyone in this association. Sometimes it's just a "like" on a social media post, a few words of congratulations, or a peppy "go for it—you've got this" to a struggling writer.

What has impressed me is our Board. Some people have been on the Board for ten years or more, bringing institutional knowledge. Others have been on the Board or an officer for only one year, bringing new ideas and great energy. As an organization, we are lucky to be run by steadfast, eager volunteers. They're fun to work with and beyond competent.

If that doesn't encourage you to apply for the one opening we have for 2026, I don't know what else will. We need (you need) a chairman for the Speakers Bureau. We occasionally get requests for our mystery writers to speak or be part of a panel throughout the Bay Area. The chair's job is to find the speaker for the organization and connect the two. Not a tough job and certainly not time-consuming. If you're interested, tell someone on the Board. Volunteering is the best way to meet people.



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President's Letter, continued

As a speaker, you never know who you're going to meet. About five years ago I was on a panel at the San Francisco Library. My second book in the Trisha Carson Mystery series, *Drop Dead Red*, had just come out. I think I talked about the importance of location and how to make a place a character in its own right. A few people bought books, and I went home happy. Fast forward to five years later, *Better Off Dead*, the fourth book in the series, came out and I read at our Spring Author Showcase at Book Passage earlier this year. I packed the place with relatives: my sons, my grandkids, my daughter-in-law, and two ex-sisters-in-law. Afterwards, we were all huddled together when an older man approached me with two of my books, *Dead Code* and *Better Off Dead*, and asked for an autograph. He mentioned something about the dedication, and I said, "Those people are right here. Maybe they should sign them."

He laughed and said, "You probably don't remember me, but I was at your reading at the San Francisco Library. I enjoy your writing, and I've been waiting to hear you speak again."

I signed both books and thanked him for seeking me out.

As I left with my family, I turned to them and said, "I have a fan! It's not my family or my friends, but a real fan!"

So, my friends, readers are out there waiting for your books. Keep on writing.

Don't forget, the Fall Author Showcase is Saturday, November 8, 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at Orenda Books, Orinda Village Square, 276 Village Square, Orinda, CA.

Sincerely,

Glenda Carroll

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal

Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, November 8 - 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Fall Author Showcase

Orinda Books, 276 Village Square, Orinda, CA , and on Zoom

As we do twice a year, we have a wonderful lineup of SinC NorCal authors who will read an excerpt from a recently released book or short story. Here is the list of participating authors:

Emcee: Glenda Carroll

Daisy Bateman

Susan Bickford

Josie Brown

Yves Fey

Vinnie Hansen

Claire Johnson

Victoria Kazarian

Claudia H. Long

Janice Peacock

Nannette Potter

Victoria Zackheim

Saturday, December 7 - 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Holiday Mixer

Grand Oak Room, Los Altos Community Center, 97 Hillview Avenue, Los Altos, CA

Save the Date for our fabulous Holiday Mixer with our friends at MWA NorCal, and keep an eye on your emails and the SinC NorCal website for more information.



Please check our website and your email for updates and more details on our events and presenters, and for registration links for all events. <https://www.sincnorcal.org/>

In Case You Missed It . . .

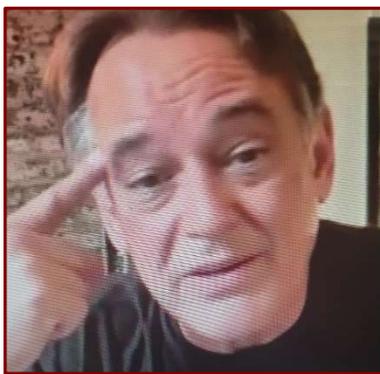
If you weren't able to attend our recent events, here's what you missed. Members can find recordings of most of these events in the Members Only section of our website.

August Meeting - Answers About Audiobooks, with Maureen Studer

A delightful panel of audiobook experts participated in an entertaining presentation that answered our questions about the art of the audiobook. Panelists included seasoned actor and voice artist Terry McGovern, podcaster and narrator Jennifer March, and producer and narrator Ralph Scott. Together they covered the role of the book's author, how to choose the right narrator, the narrator's process, individual or multiple narrators, editing, the business side of making and promoting audiobooks, and much more.



(left to right): : Ralph Scott, Terry McGovern, Jennifer March



September Meeting - A Conversation with Jon Lindstrom, with Michele Drier

Actor, director, screenwriter, audiobook narrator, musician, and now mystery writer—Jon Lindstrom has done it all. He regaled us with his philosophy of how many of these roles are interconnected, one leading to another—he calls it the “matrix of creativity.” Jon's first thriller, *Hollywood Hustle*, has been optioned for the screen. The second in the series, *Hollywood Payback*, will be released in April.

October Meeting - What Type of Publishing is Right for You? With Gigi Pandian

Our own Gigi Pandian, the author of three successful series, described for us all of the different types of publishing, from Big Five to self-publishing, and outlined the pros and cons of each in detail. Gigi speaks from experience, having been published since 2012 and worked with many of these types of publishers. She encourages writers to set their own goals, based on their personality and without comparing themselves to other authors, before deciding what type of publisher to pursue. For more information, see the recap of her presentation on pages 15-16.

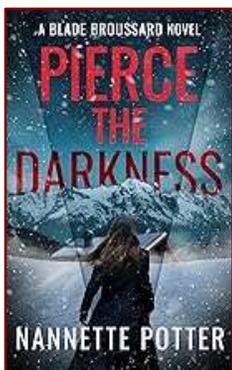


Embracing the Bot: One Author's Journey into AI-Assisted Branding by Nannette Potter



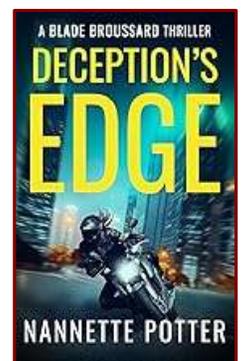
Artificial intelligence is a controversial subject—revered by some, detested by others. I land somewhere in the middle. I've embraced artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool, primarily to use for tasks I find difficult in my author business.

While the manuscript for my second book was in the trusted hands of my editor, I took the opportunity to dig deep into marketing and promotion. My first assignment: taking a webinar on author branding. I listened to the presenter and tried to complete the worksheets. But I came away confused and frustrated by the entire experience.



I'd been experimenting with ChatGPT, and besides asking about the best winter pants to purchase for Alaska, I thought, "Why not ask Chat to explain what an author brand is?" I added my synopses for both *Pierce the Darkness* and *Deception's Edge*, my website address, and bio to the following prompt:

I'm struggling to comprehend and clarify my author brand as Nannette Potter. As a brand strategist, what can you tell me about it—can you give me a pithy two-to-three lines about it, and then an expansion?



This is what I received for a pithy statement:

Nannette Potter writes pulse-pounding international thrillers where a fearless heroine uncovers buried truths, faces global conspiracies, and wrestles with the shadows of faith, love, and loyalty. Her stories balance grit and grace—always with a knife's edge of danger.

Now, I don't know what you think about the pithy statement, but I was impressed. Then, Chat asked if I'd like a complete author brand kit. Within seconds, I had a two-page report that included a brand statement, a visual mood board, tagline options, a reader promise, and audience snapshot.

Embracing the Bot, continued

Since then, I've asked Chat to help me with several marketing tasks, that include:

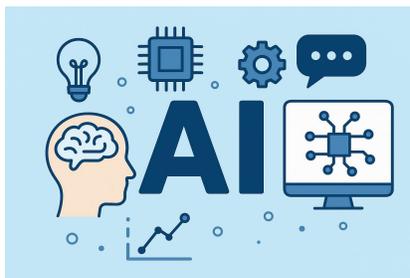
- Media kit ideas
- A marketing plan for my launch, including a visual checklist
- Music selection ideas for social media posts
- Ad headlines and taglines for Amazon and Facebook
- Hashtag ideas for thriller books
- Instructions on how to utilize my Wix automation function for email marketing

I've also asked ChatGPT numerous questions about travel, research, and other author business challenges.

This is my personal take on using AI. Pandora's box is wide open, and there is no going back. I remember when automation revolutionized businesses in the 1980s. I worked for the State of California, and many people retired rather than deal with learning a new skill set. I love learning new processes, and this is just one more innovation to conquer. Of course, we all must draw our own ethical line in its use. But haven't we always had to do that?

One last point: I wrote and edited this article without the assistance of AI.

Nannette Potter is the award-winning author of the Blade Broussard international thriller series. An adventuress at heart, she lives vicariously through her fearless and impetuous characters. Beyond writing, she loves spending time with family and traveling the globe, where she dreams up future high-stakes conspiracies.



Novelist Badge

by Thonie Hevron



Not too long ago, I was asked to speak to a group of 14-to-15-year-old Girl Scouts working toward a Novelist Badge. Who knew it was a thing?

I googled “Girl Scout Novelist Badge” and pulled up a worksheet they were to complete. I was amazed at the depth and sophistication of the tasks. It was nothing like making a pair of moccasins as I did back in the day.

So, I got thinking. What would I say to these burgeoning authors? This kept me awake at night, knowing the weight of inspiring or discouraging these young women. Here’s what I came up with:

Write. Now. Today and tomorrow. And the day after. Failure is a sure thing if you don’t write. Take a gamble on yourself. Do it. Write. Learn from your mistakes and turn your discouragement into solutions. Write some more.

Identify your genre and read books within that genre. Decide on goals: do you want to write for yourself or publish? What will the work look like? Novels, novellas, short stories, mysteries, sci-fi, romance. If you want to publish, learn the formulas for your target market. Every genre has a formula, and while you can cross genres, as in a sci-fi romance, publishers have a difficult time classifying your book, and book sellers don’t know which shelf to put it on. Take this seriously. It is a business.

Learn. Read craft books, listen to craft podcasts, attend writers’ meetings and conferences. Sign up for membership in a writing community (Redwood Writers is local and has student memberships available) and/or critique group. Search out resources: Google is wonderful, as is Wikipedia, but there is more to writing a setting than just a blue sky. I’m referring to the area geology, flora and fauna, weather including particular cloud formations, and history. Learn about plotting, character development, how to write an emotional scene and then how to write an action scene.

Find a mentor. This one is worth its weight in gold. I wrote a post for George Cramer this month to acknowledge my mentors. You might be interested. In it you will find links to several posts you might learn from. Find someone experienced. They don’t have to be a raging success in the field, just been through the wars. But first, be sure to ask the person if they’d be willing to mentor you. They must be someone who will take the time to explain a concept or point of disagreement. Patience is

Novelist Badge, continued

crucial for both parties. Sometimes authors are so busy (such as authors working on a contract/timeline) that they don't want or cannot take the time to pay it forward. If you find this person, take a hard pass on them.

If you want to sell your work, learn about marketing. Start early, before your work is done. I know publishers who will pass on an author who has no online presence. This is a huge topic which I'm not going to get into here.

Consider using a book bible. A book bible is a binder that has several sections. Mine has one on **characters** so I can keep track of names and relationships. Too many names that start with the same letter can confuse the reader—and me. **Setting** is where I list my resources for plant information, terrain, and weather. If I think of a good description, I jot it down on a binder page and tuck it in the section. The **plot** section holds my outline, which is flexible. A divider for **resources** lists where I find the details I've used. I'm old school, but you can use an online version of a book bible or find free/cheap/expensive software to help. Here are a few places to look: Grammarly, Scrivener, Microsoft Word.

Edit. Learn to do it yourself. When you think you're done, give it to a knowledgeable person to edit. Be selective about the person you choose. Teachers make great proofreaders. And specify whether you want content editing and/or line editing. Content editing is keeping that car in chapter two red and developing plot/character. Line editing is grammar and punctuation, which can be tricky.

Write. If you must, get up at 5:00 in the morning and write. Write some more, even if it's so bad you send it off to the recycling bin. Then write some more.

A word about AI:

It's a tool. Don't submit to the temptation of "easy" at the expense of your creativity. You are gifted with a talent that requires time and energy to hone. Anyone can dance, but it takes practice for a ballerina to do a plié.

Plus, many publishers have a program to determine AI material. Most will pass on AI work.

Good writing!

Thonie Hevron is a retired 911 dispatcher. She has written five award-winning mysteries set primarily in Sonoma County. She authored the Layers of Mystery cozies with dogs, horses, and cats, under a pen name for CKN Christian Publishing (an imprint of Wolfpack Press). She worked on a ghost-writing mystery adventure in the Young Adult genre and is currently working on a new mystery that she hopes to develop into a series. Thonie lives in Petaluma with her husband, two rescue puppies, and a princess kitty. She enjoys riding her friend's horse as often as she can.

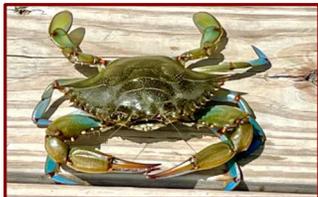
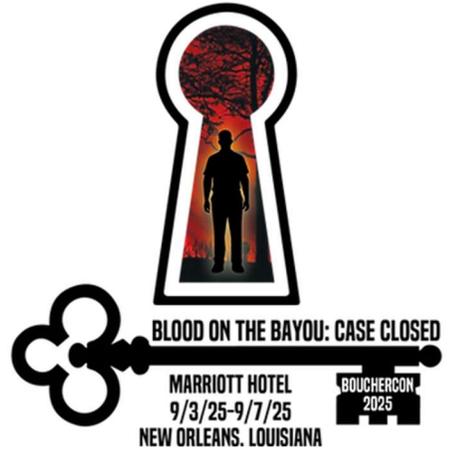
Bouchercon 2025: A Travelogue

by Leslie Karst

For those of you who weren't able to attend Bouchercon 2025 and for those who look back on it fondly, here are one SinC NorCal member's memories of this year's convention and the time she spent in New Orleans.

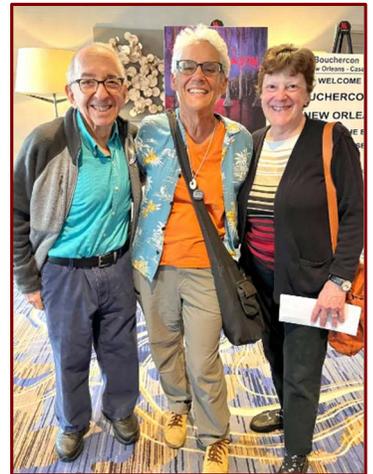
The biggest annual crime writing convention in the US (attracting some 1,500 attendees) is Bouchercon, named for the famed writer, reviewer, and editor Anthony Boucher (rhymes with "voucher"). The first one was held in Santa Monica, California in 1970. Little did I suspect as I started the ninth grade at Lincoln Junior High in Santa Monica that same year, that just minutes away was the start of something that some fifty years later would become such an important part of my own life.

This year, Bouchercon was held in New Orleans from September 3 to 7, and I was lucky enough to room with author Ellen Byron, who—having lived in NOLA for some years—acted as tour guide extraordinaire for the six days we were there. Here are some of the highlights.



I arrived in New Orleans a day early so I could spend some time with my pal Valerie who lives there, and she was kind enough to drive us down the Gulf Coast for the day, where we took in the beautiful water and local wildlife.

But the next day, it was time to head to the Bouchercon hotel, where some of the first folks I recognized were my beloved Les and Leslie Blatt. So, of course, we had to take our traditional "Three Leslies" photo.



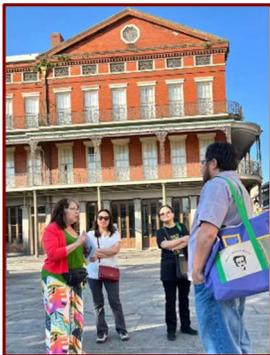
I sat on my first panel on Wednesday, "Great Ensemble Casts," then headed over to be timekeeper for the "Wisecrackin' Through Crime" panel. Next, time for quick bite with Lisa Q. Mathews at the historic Napoleon House, where we enjoyed delicious Pimms Cups along with chicken and andouille gumbo.

Bouchercon 2025: A Travelogue, continued

Wednesday night started with the fabulous Cozies and Cocktails hosted by Ellen Byron along with Raquel V. Reyes. And this was followed by the Sisters in Crime reception, celebrating 40 years for this marvelous organization.



Thursday morning, Ellen took several of us on a walking tour of the Vieux Carré, aka the French Quarter. Later that morning, I was on the “Cozies that Will Wine and Dine You” panel. Good fun, but it made me hungry.



After sitting at the Left Coast Crime table, talking up the conference to be held next February in San Francisco (where I'll be Toastmaster!) with the marvelous Lucinda Surber and Stan Ulrich, it was time for the Bouchercon Second Line parade to the WWII museum for the opening ceremonies.



Friday morning: At 6:30 am, Ellen and I roust ourselves from bed and stumble down to partner for the Speed Dating event, where authors go from table to table, getting two minutes to give an elevator pitch about their books to the readers in attendance.

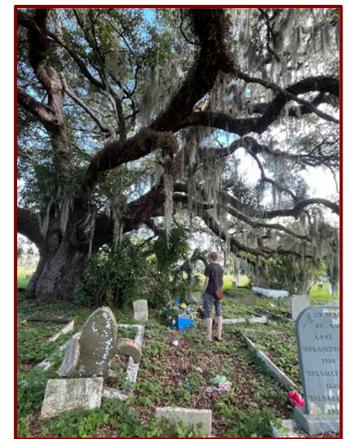


That night, a group of us had dinner together at the amazing Arnaud's restaurant, where we were treated to a tour of their museum beforehand – a collection of one of the past owner's Mardi Gras gowns from the mid-1900s. Simply fabulous! (I had sweetbreads meunière, shrimp bisque, and asparagus with Hollandaise sauce for dinner-delicious!)



Afterwards I attended the Underrepresented Voices Celebration, with a meet-and-greet, raffles, and bingo. Here I am with Audrey Lee and Rob Osler.

Saturday morning, I got up at the ungodly hour of 5:00 a.m. to go on a walk along the canal in Bywater down to the Mississippi River with my pal Valerie and her adorable but rambunctious Dobermans, Tristan and Freya. And then a trip to the Holt Cemetery, a “potter's field” (aka a burial ground for the poor, unidentified, or unclaimed), with gravestones dating back to the late 1800s and magnificent live oak trees.



Bouchercon 2025: A Travelogue, continued



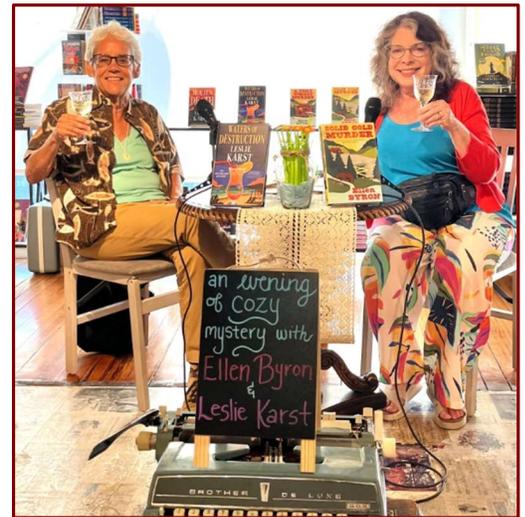
Next it was off with Ellen and Dru Ann Love to the iconic Dew Drop Inn—considered one of the most influential venues in the development of rhythm and blues—for brunch and a revue of R&B and early rock ‘n roll music. The house band and singers were outstanding!

On Sunday morning, our last full day in New Orleans, Ellen and I went to the gospel mass at St. Augustine’s Church in the Tremé neighborhood. It was so much fun to get to sing along to uplifting songs and clap our hands in church!

And then, on Sunday evening, Ellen and I did an author event at Blue Cypress Books, a great way to cap off a terrific week in beautiful New Orleans! And they even provided bubbly for all of us!



To top off a perfect day--and week—we went to Boil Seafood House for some Louisiana shrimp boil, blue crab and charbroiled oysters. I was in heaven.



Excerpted from Leslie Karst’s Chicks on the Case blogpost on September 8, 2025

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

What Book Clubs Taught Me

by Robin Somers

I'm sitting in an unfamiliar living room, surrounded by a dozen very intelligent women

They're members of the same book club, and all of them have recently read my new mystery. They're excited to meet the author, which is the first thing I love about book clubs. The respect these readers-in-the-flesh demonstrate for their authors bears witness to the days, weeks and years we put into bringing our work to fruition.

And we don't have to worry about spoilers. The first time I realized this at a palpable level was during my first book club meeting before Valentine's Day. The meeting was themed. Everyone wore something related to this love holiday—heart earrings, light-up heart leis, scarlet sequined sweatshirt. The host offered me her red chiffon scarf. She'd laid out a luscious spread of homemade desserts the members had baked and bought. We nibbled and chatted and made informal introductions until the time came to take our seats in a variety of armchairs and couches. Pretty quickly our conversation turned to one woman's question which, if I answered fully, would require divulging the ending. I balked a second before realizing: they've read the book. The freedom I felt to discuss the book openly without fear of giving away the ending was profound. My mind and body relaxed, and the book club hook sunk in deeply.

Readers, especially those who value literature enough to create a book club, invest themselves emotionally and intellectually in the work they're consuming. Their insights into what makes a character tick are often revelatory. For example, my protagonist Eleanor Wooley is a reporter for a small town daily newspaper whose editor makes her stick to the news and not investigate. Yet, Eleanor investigates. Their opinions of what made Eleanor such an effective reporter were lobbed back and forth, and I was mesmerized by their insights. When they looked to me for the answer, I understood the character I'd created from new angles and at greater depth.

The positive vibes of these readers fill my joy tank, a feeling comparable to the joy I receive grooming a horse. With that comes a tiny shred of caution because anyone who's lived as long as I have understands that people and horses are capable of inflicting pain. Entering that space is an act of courage, and a critical reader who questions our narrative moves becomes equally as important as an ingratiatingly awed reader, but in a completely different way. The host of my third book club, sitting at the opposite end of her living room, asked why Eleanor, whose obsession to find her missing



What Book Clubs Taught Me, continued

friend had landed her in a remote wilderness, had trekked deeper into the high desert instead of returning the way she'd come. "If I were her," she said, "I'd turn around and go back to town!"

I took a breath and approached the gauntlet. "Well, she didn't know the way back to town. Blah, blah, blah." A rather intense debate between the members ensued. And then I spilled the beans. This plot point, I confided, was a huge problem I had to resolve while writing the book. I needed Eleanor to travel deeper into her lost psychic state of mind while staying on the trajectory of seeking her missing friend. I needed her to "enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path," as Joseph Campbell wrote. That's where the miracle happens. If Eleanor had returned the way she'd come, the story would be over.

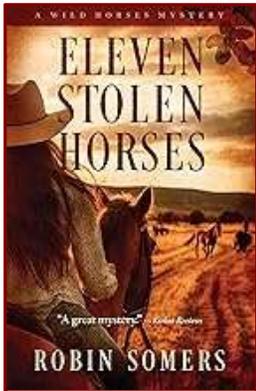
Letting these women in on the very real struggles of writing creates an intimacy in the room that I consider spiritual. That particular night, I left with, one, a yearning to join their book club so I could hang with them again and, two, a really smart Vygotsky-esque skeptic embedded in the left side of my brain who asks while I write, why the hell did she do that?

Readers are as intrigued by our process as they are immersed in the story. And if your book is a series, like mine, a book club meeting offers a rare opportunity to invite them into the process by asking what they want to see in the next book. They have a lot to say on the topic – what they hope for the protagonist, how they imagine the plot unfolding, a twist I hadn't thought of. Their ideas spoken with such earnestness are more evidence of the thought they've given to the lives of these characters in the aftermath of finishing the book. The invite to collaborate in the now creates this unique reciprocity that validates reader and author until our enthusiasm reaches a pitch. Spoiler caution: Here's where an author must practice restraint from gleeful outbursts such as "that's exactly what I'm doing."

One question that always comes up for me is how close the story is to my actual life. I'm pretty open about that, so it's no wonder that one very well-intentioned book club member felt perfectly comfortable asking if I'd experienced trauma, since my female characters endured substantial trauma. An interesting question but I was caught off guard. I fumbled, hemmed and hawed, and I came up with an insufficient answer that looped and resonated for days until one creative friend advised me, "You've given people a book. You don't have to give them your life." Wow! Although I would never respond to a reader with words anywhere close to those, boundaries are important. Even in the kind environment of a book club meeting, it's wise to own a sense of where our personal life ends and the rest of the world begins. For me, that's a very porous line.

Book clubs express their own distinct personalities. The constant is love. And good food. The exception to sensational edible delights is the Zoom book club meeting, and a Zoom book club with

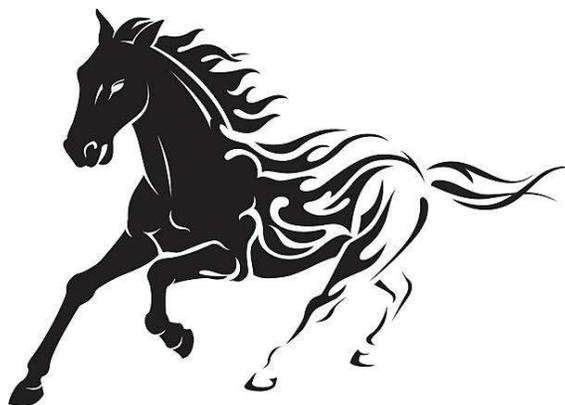
What Book Clubs Taught Me, continued



a *raison d'être* is even more distinct. Don't assume everyone attending will have read your book. They're attending because they share a passion. I'm a member of a wild horse advocacy non-profit. Our director created the org's first book club event and featured *Eleven Stolen Horses: a Wild Horses Mystery* because I cast a spotlight on the heartbreaking abuse of wild horses. (These magnificent icons of the West face tremendous peril under the management of the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service.) We were a small gathering. Half of the attendees had read the book. The others not, and they didn't hide the fact. But all of us shared a passion for protecting wild horses. Our enthusiasm grew as the meeting went on and spurred a brainstorming session that ended with an action for using my book to advance our cause.

This is why I write, after all. Book club readers I've had the honor of meeting in large part share my quest for justice. Meeting these women and the occasional man in their homes and Zoom squares has deepened my commitment to live up to their high standards for literature and to express my deepest philosophies in story, without agendizing. Which is another subject. Stay tuned.

Robin Somers is retired faculty of the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she taught writing. Her earlier career as crime reporter for a daily rural newspaper in the Sierra Nevada inspired *Eleven Stolen Horses, a Wild Horses Mystery* (Sibylline Press 2024). *Three Marys*, the second book in the series, will be released in spring 2026. She's the author of *Beet Fields*, an eco-mystery set in Santa Cruz, where she lives with her husband and Havanese, Buster. She remains a frequent traveler to the Sierras and is a volunteer ambassador for American Wild Horse Conservation. <https://www.robinsomers.com>



Recap of “Your Best Path to Publishing” by Gigi Pandian by Claire Ortalda

Gigi Pandian’s informative talk (“Your Best Path to Publishing,” (October 11, 2025) explored the different publishing paths we writers can take to get to our finished work in the hands of readers. Using her personal journey as illustration, she discussed such aspects as money (both incoming and writer outlay), marketing support, distribution, control over the finished product, speed of publication, aesthetics, prestige, and reviews.



The five methods of publication she discussed were: Big Five publishers, mid-sized presses, small presses, new types of presses, and self-publishing.

Pros for Big Five publication included bigger advances, a budget for marketing (including swag, ads, and sending writers to book festivals), submission for trade reviews, high quality interior and exterior design, editorial and copyediting support, and distribution to bookstores. Cons may include the fact that these presses traditionally focus on physical books, typically charging high prices for e-books, which may discourage that sort of sale. Writers might be small fish in a big pond and could be dropped by the publisher if they don’t meet sales goals. In addition, there is more of a revolving door for editors, which means you might, midway through the publication process, be switched from the editor who loved your book to one who may be less enthusiastic. Big Five publishers are firmly in control of all aspects of your book, which means you may have less of a say in marketing and cover design.

Emphasizing that there is a wide range of presses one could label “mid-sized,” Pandian defined, for the purposes of her talk, a mid-range press as one which does an offset print run (compared to publishers who rely completely on print-on-demand) and have bookstore distribution that includes returns, an important consideration for bookstores when they make their stocking decisions. But mid-sized presses may not have as wide a distribution network as a Big Five press. Advances may be more modest. Mid-sized presses often will take un-agented submissions (whereas Big Five presses rarely do) and have library distribution. Drawbacks are that mid-sized presses often don’t have wide bookstore distribution and don’t have as many resources for marketing.

Small presses can be more “nimble,” innovative, and ready to try new material and new approaches to marketing. Most will take un-agented submissions. Many agents are not motivated to send work to small presses because they typically don’t pay advances, though they usually pay higher royalty

Recap of “Your Best Path to Publishing, continued

percentages. Your experience as a writer for a small press will vary widely, depending on the small press. On the con side, small presses are very unlikely to have bookstore distribution, because most use print-on-demand printing without returns. Authors may be able to work out consignment deals with bookstores, but that requires paperwork and monitoring by author and bookstore alike. Editorial support can vary widely. A concerning note: some underfunded small presses may close altogether, leaving authors scrambling to get rights reversions and to buy stock of their books.

Two new types of presses are hybrid presses and co-op presses. As differentiated from vanity presses, reputable hybrid and co-op presses do curate the books they publish--they don't accept everything and can be very selective. In a hybrid press, the author invests in the publication of their book and is considered a partner with the publisher, which provides editorial and marketing support. Besides the sometimes considerable financial investment writers are required to make, a disadvantage to these presses may be “discoverability.”

A simultaneous advantage and disadvantage to the last category, self-publishing, is the complete control authors can exercise over the timing of publication, the marketing, the distribution and the aesthetics of their book. Some writers like this, and some hate it.

Throughout the talk, Pandian noted that considerations personal to each author can influence their choice of publisher type. She gave an example of a writer wanting to quickly get a book into the hands of a dying relative – in that case, self-publishing might be the best option. If a writer has a desire to see their book in bookstores, a Big Five or mid-size press might be the better choice. Realistically, not all authors will be able to land an agent or traditional publisher.

Pandian also touched on nomination for prizes, crowdfunding, audiobooks, and a host of other options today's writers have. She concluded by passing around three of her own published books--one by a Big Five publisher, one self-published, and one by a mid-sized press – to illustrate differences in appearance. Altogether, it was a fascinating overview of today's publishing options, delivered in a personal and engaging manner. Thank you, Gigi!

SinC NorCal member Claire Ortalda has been published in numerous literary journals and anthologies. She is the winner of Georgia State University, *Fugue*, and national Hackney Fiction prizes, among other awards. Her mystery writing has appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and in the Anne Perry-edited anthology, *Odd Partners*.

Member Profile: Malena Eljumaily

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



For our 36th member profile in *The Stiletta*, we decided to revisit the subject of our *second* member profile, Malena Eljumaily (February 2017 issue, article by Susan Shea). Why? Because Malena has been a longtime NorCal Sister and Board member, as well as a regular contributor to our meetings. First, we'll catch up on Malena's background, and then we'll get her perspective on SinC NorCal *then* (when she became a member in 2007) and *today*. Malena lives in Santa Rosa and calls herself an avid reader of mysteries, memoirs, and self-help books.

Stiletta: Malena, please remind us about your education and career experience.

ME: I grew up in Chatsworth, CA in the very Northwest corner of the San Fernando Valley. Not a true Valley Girl--they came from the Southeast, places like Encino and Tarzana. Chatsworth was horse country when we moved in but soon turned into the worst sort of urban sprawl. Still, I endured. After graduating high school, I went to CSU Northridge with an English major. I soon grew restless and spent a couple of years in Oregon. When I came back to LA, I worked as a waitress while trying to finish my degree. I decided I wanted a more stable job than an English degree could support and went to nursing school. I worked as an RN for many years while I continued writing and FINALLY completed my BA in English from Sonoma State at age 36!

Stiletta: How and when did you discover Sisters in Crime and what attracted you to join?

ME: I attended the Book Passage Mystery Conference all the way back in 2007, which was a fantastic experience. That's where I first heard of Sisters in Crime, and I quickly joined the NorCal chapter.

Stiletta: Did you ever aspire to write a mystery novel, or were you drawn more to other literary formats?

ME: Yes, before attending the Book Passage conference, I completed the first draft of a mystery novel. I set it in London, which is my favorite city to visit, as an excuse to do research. I did get through a second draft of that book but eventually lost interest. To be honest, I don't really enjoy the writing part of writing. I love coming up with plots and characters and making all the clues work. I've outlined about a dozen novels that I'll probably never write, but really enjoyed imagining up.

Stiletta: Tell us about your experience as a writer of one-act plays and the accomplishments that you most treasure.

Member Profile: Malena Eljumaily, continued

ME: That resulted from a 10-minute play contest put on by the other writing group I belong to, Redwood Writers, which is my local branch of the California Writers Club. My mother really loved the theater, and I was lucky to attend many fabulous musicals and plays, starting when I was about 11 years old. The first show I saw was *Applause* starring Lauren Bacall!

Anyway, that experience, along with the fact that I really love writing dialog, gave me the confidence to try my hand at play writing. My play, *Special Delivery*, was chosen to be produced along with six others and won the Audience Choice Award. I spent several years writing short plays on a regular basis and had quite a few produced in festivals. I also wrote theater reviews for *The Sonoma County Gazette*.

Stiletta: When and why did you first agree to be a member of the SinC NorCal Board? What were your responsibilities as Membership Chair, and what were the biggest challenges?

ME: I was friends with author and playwright Pat Morin, who was looking to give up the Membership position and asked if I might be interested. This was in 2009, when I'd been a member for less than two years. But I attended most meetings, and they could see I was keen. When I took it over, there were about 80 members, so the job was lighter than today. It involves a lot of emailing and record keeping but otherwise is fun because I "knew" all the members of the club.

I gave that up and took on the role of Board Treasurer so that then-Treasurer Ana Manwaring could become the Events Coordinator. She's now our VP. I'm also the Treasurer for Redwood Writers, so it was an easy transition for me.

I love giving back to this group by being on the Board. It's more fun than you'd expect, mostly because the other Board members are so fun and easy to work with.

Stiletta: Taking a look at SinC NorCal from your first impression to today, what benefits have you reaped from your membership in our chapter? And what keeps you interested and active?

ME: I was bowled over when I first joined with how friendly and kind all the people were. Even famous authors! It was not at all competitive; everyone was always pulling for everyone else. It's still that way. There is so much support and encouragement all around. Nothing makes me happier than to hear that one of our members has a new book out or just won an award. I really wish I had time to read all the SinC NorCal books.

Stiletta: How do you think Sisters in Crime in general, and NorCal in particular, has changed over the years? What changes would you like to see in the future?

Member Profile: Malena Eljumaily, continued

ME: When I first joined, there wasn't a lot of self-publishing going on and it was considered less acceptable than it is today. The publishing world has changed since then, and everyone can do their own thing and feel fine with whatever publishing path they choose. I know SinC NorCal will continue to adapt to the trends and support the members, no matter what comes along in the future.

Stiletta: It is mentioned in your earlier profile that you always try to attend chapter meetings, even though it is often quite a commute. Obviously, that wasn't possible during the pandemic, but have you now resumed that commitment?

ME: Oh, yes, I love the meetings and honestly don't mind driving. I usually carpool with a few other members from the North Bay, so it's always fun to catch up and the journey goes quickly. I enjoy seeing people in person. As nice as Zoom is for bringing people together from far reaches, it's always best to be in the same room with people you like and admire.

Stiletta: What are you writing currently, and what other activities do you enjoy?

ME: Well, anyone who's seen me at a meeting knows I love to knit. It's always been a hobby, but it became an obsession once I started knitting socks. At the beginning of the year, I decided to try my hand at knitwear designing. Mostly socks and mostly DK socks, if anyone knows what that means. I've done really well with the designing part and have close to 30 socks, hats and gloves off my needles, but the writing of the patterns has been challenging. I'm hoping to have a few patterns up on Ravelry.com in the beginning of 2026. So, if anyone knits or knows someone who does, look for my shop, Knits and Purrs. I'm designing under the name Mel J. Who knows, maybe a knitting book will come out of this someday.

Stiletta: Is there anything I haven't asked that you would like your fellow Sisters and Mistresses to know about you?

ME: I'm going to tell you this only because I know my two sons, age 28 and 24, will never read this newsletter. I don't often get to boast about this, but both are Diaper Derby champions! How many mothers can say that?

Malena Eljumaily was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

Vinnie Hansen's suspense novel, *Crime Writer*, was released on September 9, 2025 by Level Best Books. Novelist Zoey Kozinski is thrown into the heart of a murder investigation when her ride-along with a police officer goes horribly wrong.

"Ruby Red" by Betsy Barker was published in the *SoWest Danger Awaits* anthology by the Desert Sleuths Chapter of Sisters in Crime on September 19, 2025. Big money, tiny gems—an invitation to robbery? Sixty-five thousand gem traders invade Tucson, Arizona every February for its world-famous gem show. Will our jewelry artist sleuth and her policeman lover survive the robbery?

Tread Lightly, Elizabeth Kemp's debut domestic thriller, was published on October 10, 2025 by Sybilline Digital First. The story is about a stay-home mom with a past who navigates a murder in Silicon Valley.

All's Faire in Love and Murder by Cindy Sample, book #2 in the Spindrift Cove Mystery series featuring retired cruise director Sierra Sullivan, was published on October 2, 2025.

The Curious Poisoning of Jewel Barnes, book #12 in Terry Shames's Samuel Craddock series, will be released on December 2, 2025 by Severn House Publishing.

Death and the Final Cut, book #7 in the St. Just series by G.M. Malliet, will be released on November 4, 2025 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 and ends in disaster when a Viking knife is found buried in her chest.

Public Appearances

Ellen Kirschman is happy to join a stellar lineup of writers for the second annual Lincoln Library Book Festival on November 19, 2025. The library's address is 485 Twelve Bridges Drive in Lincoln, CA, and the event starts at 9:00 a.m. Ellen's panel is at 10:30 a.m.

Margaret Lucke will be taking part in the Local Artist Showcase sponsored by the Solano County Library on Friday, December 5, 2025 from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. The event will take place at the Solano County Events Center at 601 Texas Street in Fairfield. Its purpose is to bring together libraries, local authors, and readers in a celebration of stories and connection. Learn more about the event at: <https://solanolibrary.com/localauthorshowcase2025/>

Member News, continued

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Ellen Kirschman's fifth Dot Meyerhoff Mystery, *Call Me Carmela*, was a Killer Nashville Silver Falchion judges' top pick in the miscellaneous category.

Elena Smith is pleased to announce that Arizona Mystery Writers has chosen her story, "The Wild Girls in Oatman" as second-place winner in their annual contest. The story will appear on their website in January 2026.

Three of our SinC NorCal members have books on the Clue Book Awards Short List, in competition for the 2025 Clue Semi-Finalists in the Suspense and Thriller category: *Kickback* by Ana Manwaring, *Deception's Edge* by Nannette Potter, and *Unicorns Can Be Deadly: A Discount Detective Mystery* by Charlotte Stuart. Finalists will be chosen from the Semi-Finalists and recognized at the Chanticleer Authors Conference, CAC26.

Nannette Carroll is happy to announce that her piece "Old News" was selected and published in the California Writers Club Statewide Ekphrasis Anthology, *Vision & Verse II*. Dating to ancient Greece, Ekphrasis is written expression engaging and dialoguing with visual art or responding emotionally to it. A black and white photo entitled "Old News" inspired her literary response. Last year, she was one of three authors whose Ekphrasis writing was spotlighted on stage at a San Francisco Bay Area library, sponsored by a local CWC chapter and two arts organizations.

Training To Be Delivered

Margaret Lucke will be teaching her 10-week course, "Writing Genre Fiction: Science Fiction, Mystery, Romance, and More" for UC Berkeley Extension early next year. Students will learn techniques that are essential to all fiction while examining the characteristics, conventions, and reader expectations associated with each particular genre, and they will have the opportunity to make progress and receive individual feedback on their own writing projects. The class sessions take place on Zoom (so you can join from anywhere) on Thursday evenings from January 22 to April 2. There is no class scheduled for February 26 so everyone can attend Left Coast Crime. Learn more at <https://extension.berkeley.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=41083>.

Member News, continued

Miscellaneous

From Terry Shames: Please visit my new website at <https://terryshames.com/>. It's a nice update!

Glenda Carroll, author of the Trisha Carson mysteries, was recently featured on the Hasty Book List, <https://tinyurl.com/yc6m7wdh>. In her interesting and funny interview, she tells what authors have inspired her, what book character she'd like to be stuck in an elevator with, and the book character who would be her best friend.

A shoutout from Carol (CJ) Verburg to all the Sisters in Crime who crossed the fiction aisle during this Gorey Centennial year to help celebrate her lavish art biography, *The Theatrical Adventures of Edward Gorey: Rare Drawings, Scripts, and Stories* (Chronicle Books, Halloween 2024). From its July 2024 pre-launch at New York City's Strand Bookstore to the Cartoon Art Museum's September 2025 closing reception in San Francisco, this has been a giddy year! One revelation: CJ's paperback Edgar Rowdey Cape Cod mysteries earn her more per sale than Carol's "Spectacular" full-color illustrated biography of the same artist.



**To our newest members
(joining SinC NorCal from June 1, 2025 through August 31, 2025)**

Alex Bash (pen name A.J. Decker)
Autumn Harrison
Carol Keane
Elizabeth Kemp
Rachael Samberg (pen name Violet Moorhen)
Terry Tricomi

Question of the Quarter



What is your favorite part of attending a mystery convention (or what do you think it would be if you haven't yet attended)?

When I first started attending conferences, I thought they were a way to promote my books. Now they are all about connecting with people, many that I never see elsewhere, but that have become very dear to me over the years. For me, conferences are all about community and belonging. *Vinnie Hansen*

My favorite part of attending a mystery convention is hanging out with other writers. Always much to learn about the craft of writing and the business of being a writer. *Ellen Kirschman*

It's hard to choose just one thing, so I'll mention a few. I enjoy catching up with people I know and meeting new ones: authors, readers, booksellers, etc. I also enjoy catching up on "industry gossip" (I guess you'd call it), hearing what folks think about the current state of the publishing world and so on. I enjoy attending panels (yes, I really do, even after all these years). So I guess I could sum it up by saying I enjoy "sinking into" the mystery world and reconnecting with the mystery community, while I put aside the usual day-to-day stuff for the duration of the conference. *Ann Parker*

My favorite bit of attending a mystery convention? It's not the lovely big, empty, clean hotel room (with possible room service) – no way. I pine to be at home with cat and husband stealing blankets in a room as clean as we've made it, wondering what to make for dinner. Okay, there are a lot of serious answers to this question, but my very favorite thing is getting to be a reader and fan: going to other people's panels, looking in my book bag to see what I got, shopping in the book room, talking to other readers about the books we've both loved, or not heard of, or are looking forward to. *Catriona McPherson*

I love speed dating, both as an author and an attendee. As an author, I found it fun to get into a groove and pitch my book. As an attendee, it is always a great way to put names to faces and help zero in on books that I think will be fun for me to read. *Susan Bickford*

My favorite part of attending a mystery convention is meeting other SinC sisters and attending their panels. *Diane Schaffer*

Meeting people you only see on Zoom, have only heard about, or just met out of the blue are the best parts of a mystery convention for me. I kept hearing Gigi Pandian's name. I attended a session she was part of, then spoke with her briefly. I liked her energy and enthusiasm and bought *The Library Game*. So appropriate, as I'm a librarian as well as an author. The first time I saw rolling stacks, I thought, "Oh, you could squeeze someone to death with these." More critically, at a recent

Question of the Quarter, continued

Bouchercon, I talked with graphic artist Dale Berry, who had mentioned he worked briefly as a carnny. Over coffee, he told me how to execute a Three-Part Com. So cool. It's going to be the escape device in Book #2 of my 16th-century mystery trilogy. Coming up three-fourths through the manuscript. Soon . . . can't wait! *Michal Strutin*

I really enjoy volunteering at any conference I go to. That way I meet more people and feel much more involved in everything. I highly recommend volunteering. *Kate Wyland*

At mystery conventions, I love either being on a panel or moderating one. My mind is working non-stop and I don't have time to censor what I say. I'm probably at my most spontaneous. *Glenda Carroll*

I love attending the panels and special events, but the most fun for me is meeting other readers, seeing my fellow SinC NorCal members in person again (I moved away from the Bay Area in 2020), and getting to talk to authors I admire. At Bouchercon in 2023, I accosted Lou Berney in the hallway to tell him how much I loved his book, *Dark Ride*. It hadn't been released yet (I had read a NetGalley ARC), so he seemed thrilled to hear a good review from a fan. I used to be shy about talking to authors I didn't know, but I'm happy to say I'm not shy anymore and am more than willing to "accost" anyone when I feel moved to do so. One of the perks of being "vintage," I guess. Looking forward to LCC in San Francisco! *Margie Bunting*

What I love about mystery conventions is well expressed in the statement of purpose of Solano Library's Local Authors Showcase, in which I'll be participating on December 5 (see Member News): a celebration of stories and connection. Both of those elements are so important. A convention is an opportunity to spend several days immersed in stories—delving into how they are created and discovering new and wonderful ones to read. It is also a chance to spend time immersed in the company of like-minded people, both readers and writers, to exchange ideas about craft and creativity and to forge lasting friendships. One of my favorite conventions is Left Coast Crime, which will take place in San Francisco in late February. I hope to see many of you there. *Margaret Lucke*



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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