

# THE STILETTA

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Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

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## From Italy to Left Coast Crime

For those who follow my social media pages, you know I've just returned from my first trip to Florence and Rome. Spectacular is the only word that can describe it. While waiting for the high-speed train from one city to the other, I stepped into a huge bookstore and found the mystery section. Translated into Italian were thrillers by Dan Brown, John Grisham, and Ken Follett. I'm sure there were more. I kept looking, but I couldn't find any books by our NorCal SinC members, which I think belong on the shelves. So that's my future goal. Forget about winning contests. Instead, I want to find at least one of our books in another country, translated into their language.

A number of us come to Sisters in Crime from a journalism/TV background or were English majors in college (back in the days of the dinosaurs, as I like to say). Well, I think I stumbled across the first on-the-spot reporter. Only it took him about 25 years to write about what he'd seen. And that was the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. The very slow reporter was Pliny the Younger. He was 17 years old and staying with his mother and his uncle, Pliny the Elder, in a nearby town close to the sea when Vesuvius showed its true colors.

Pliny wrote about the "black and terrible cloud" that looked like a pine tree rising to the sky on a very long trunk and then branching out, the screams of the children and the parents trying to find them, the way the sea retreated from the shore, the constant tremors of the earth, and the death of his uncle, who



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## President's Letter, continued

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went to rescue his friends. His descriptions of the eruption were so accurate that volcanologists began calling disasters like this "Plinian Eruptions." Mt. Saint Helens was a Plinian Eruption. One other small thing I learned is that Pompeii used to be a major port town. But now it's landlocked, one mile from the modern coastline, all thanks to the volcanic ash that filled in the harbor and pushed out the seacoast. It took another 1,500 years to discover the disappeared city.

Enough of my fascination with Pompeii. Welcome to the Coastal Cruisers. On January 1, their Sisters in Crime chapter merged with ours. We are so glad you're here. I know that many of you from Coastal Cruisers already had dual membership. But for those who didn't, we can't wait to meet you.

Left Coast Crime is coming up at the end of February. Hope you can attend, even for a day or two. If you are attending, please consider volunteering. Vinnie Hansen and I are recruiting volunteers for the Hospitality Room for two-hour slots. Your job is to be friendly and check the coffee. We can all do that.

Our newsletter now has a new magazine format. What do you think? Your feedback is always welcome.

**Sincerely,**

**Glenda Carroll**

**President, Sisters in Crime NorCal**



# Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

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

## ***Annual Meet & Greet Potluck Featuring Lisa Towles – From Demographics to Devoted Readers: A 3-Step Strategy for Lasting Engagement***



*Melrose Branch of Oakland Library, 4805 Foothill Blvd., Oakland, CA, and on Zoom*  
Award-winning crime novelist Lisa Towles is the founder of Story Impact Consulting, offering marketing, branding, and strategy guidance to authors. She will demonstrate how to use a 3-step framework for building a loyal, long-term fanbase. Attendees who bring food to the potluck should also bring serving utensils if needed. Any leftover food must be taken home.

**Saturday, March 7 –time TBA**

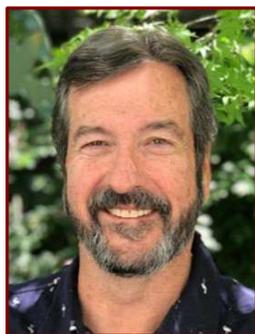
## ***Clues and Red Herrings, with Catriona McPherson***

*Location TBA*

Catriona McPherson will discuss what kinds of clues and red herrings we need in our mystery novels and how many we should include. Catriona writes modern psychological thrillers, detective stories with a gently-born lady sleuth, and comedies set in a barely-fictionalized version of her hometown in California.



**Saturday, April 4 – 10:00 a.m. to noon**



## ***What Writers Really Need to Know About What Happens in Prison, with James L'Etoile***

*Zoom meeting*

James L'Etoile uses his 29 years behind bars to influence his award-winning crime fiction. He is a former associate warden in a maximum-security prison, a hostage negotiator, and director of California's parole system. His novels have been short-listed for or awarded the Lefty, Anthony, Macavity, Silver Falchion, and the Public Safety Writers Award.

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 . . .

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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.

### November Meeting - Fall Author Showcase

At our twice-a-year Author Showcase, each of our authors read an excerpt from her most recently released book or short story. Emceed by our President, Glenda Carroll, the authors included: Daisy Bateman/Stacie Grey; Susan Bickford, Josie Brown, Yves Fey, Vinnie Hansen, Claire M. Johnson, Victoria Kazarian, Claudia H. Long, Thena MacArthur, Janice Peacock, Nannette Potter, and Victoria Zackheim.



### December Meeting - Holiday Mixer

SinC NorCal and MWA NorCal members got together for a celebration at the Los Altos Community Center for a celebration of fun, food, and a fascinating panel on the topic of branding. Pictured below are (left to right) moderator Jenn Hooker, Lisa Towles, Thena MacArthur, and Michelle Chouinard.



## Our 2026 Board Members and their wishes for SinC NorCal in 2026

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**GLEND A CARROLL, President:** I write the Trisha Carson mysteries: *Better Off Dead*, *Dead Code*, *Drop Dead Red*, and *Dead in the Water*. The fifth book, *Dead and Gone*, is coming together at a snail's pace. My books are set in the San Francisco Bay Area, including Marin, the East Bay State Parks, and San Francisco. I consider myself the turtle of writing -- slow but steady. I live in San Rafael, CA with my dog, McCovey. *I'd like to see more members step forward and help plan activities.*

**ANA MANWARING, Vice President:** I'm the author of the five JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures, suspense/thrillers set in Mexico, but I'm currently working on a political thriller based on true events, due out sometime this year. I continue to run North Bay Poetics, a monthly poetry event. I am a former lifestyle columnist, and my reviews of Siblings' books can be found at <https://anamanwaring.com/>, as well as information on my editing business, JAM Manuscript Consulting. I teach creative writing in Sonoma, CA. *In 2026 I want to see members make more connections with each other and leverage our collective knowledge and expertise to lift us all up in our writing careers. I'm pondering how to make a Feedback Bureau critique and beta reading work. Ideas?*



**MICHAL STRUTIN, Secretary:** *Masquerading in Venice*, the first book in my 16th-century mystery trilogy, will be published in spring 2027 by Sibylline Press. Books #2 and #3 are set in Istanbul and Croatia, respectively. *Judging Noa: a Fight for Women's Rights in the Turmoil of the Exodus* is my first fiction. My nonfiction books are on nature, culture, and travel. I've been an editor at *Outside*, *National Parks*, and other major magazines. Gardening and hiking are my getaways. *I hope we can write columns on our books more regularly for Bay City Books or other avenues of media attention. While self-promoting sometimes seems awkward, promoting other SinC NorCal books is easy.*

## Our 2026 Board Members, continued

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**MALENA ELJUMAILY, Treasurer:** I am an award-winning playwright and author. Several of my short plays (one act, ten minutes, and one minute) have been produced in festivals around the country. I am currently hoping to turn my favorite hobby and passion into a career as a knitwear designer. Someday soon my patterns will be available on *Ravelry* under the moniker Mel J. I have two goals for 2026 with SinC NorCal. The first is to guarantee that the Coastal Cruisers, who have just joined our chapter, feel welcomed, respected and appreciated. Secondly, I want to make our presence known at Left Coast Crime this year, as we are the host city/ area.

**NANNETTE POTTER, Membership:** I am the award-winning author of the Blade Broussard international thriller series. Beyond writing, I love spending time with family and traveling the globe, where I dream up future high-stakes conspiracies. My debut thriller, *Pierce the Darkness*, earned an Honorable Mention in the Writer's Digest 12th Annual Self-Published E-Book Awards. *Deception's Edge*, the second in the series, is a finalist for the CLUE thriller and suspense award. My wish for our chapter is for every one of our members to accomplish their goals in 2026.



**MARGIE BUNTING, Newsletter:** A resident of El Dorado Hills, CA, I'm in my eleventh year as editor of *The Stiletta*, a role I relish. Armed with a BA in French language and literature, I had a career in HR management. Now I keep busy as a Toastmasters officer and mentor, attending book and movie review clubs and game get-togethers, and being a part of my young grandchildren's lives. Reading and reviewing remain my favorite pastimes. My wish is that our chapter members continue to come up with interesting articles for *The Stiletta* that they write from their own experience . . . preferably before I even ask them!

## Our 2026 Board Members, continued

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**MICHELE DRIER, Member at Large:** I am a fifth-generation Californian. During my career as a newspaper reporter and editor, I won awards for producing investigative series. I was also Executive Director of California non-profit organizations serving women's programs, domestic assault programs, legal services for seniors, and the arts. After retirement, I turned to my first love, writing, and am now working on my 19th novel. I'm past president of SinC NorCal, Capitol Crimes, and Guppies and co-chaired Bouchercon 2020. **My wish for NorCal in 2026 is outreach to add new members. Partnering with Coastal Cruisers gives us an opportunity to reach new writers and readers and by using hybrid tech for meetings, distance is not an issue now,**



**SUE TROWBRIDGE, Website:** I provide book formatting, website help, and general tech support to authors, as well as to several MWA and SinC chapters. In my spare time, I volunteer with Meals on Wheels and study advanced Swedish literature via Zoom through the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis. I live in Alameda with my husband and our very energetic Boston Terrier. Website: <https://interbridge.com/> **My wish for SinC NorCal is that we grow our membership in 2026 by providing writers and fans with can't-miss events, fellowship, and fun.**

**SUSAN ALICE BICKFORD: Member at Large:** I was born in Boston and grew up in Central New York, the setting for many of my stories. Eventually I migrated to Silicon Valley to work in high tech in a variety of engineering and managerial roles. I write thrillers and suspense stories that are deeply embedded in the rural areas of New York State and New England, featuring resourceful female protagonists. My short stories have appeared in several Sisters in Crime chapter anthologies, including our own *Invasive Species*, and other publications such as the *Saturday Evening Post*. My debut novel, *A Short Time to Die*, was nominated for Left Coast Crime Best Debut Novel. My second novel, *Dread of Winter*, was nominated for an Edgar. **I would like for us to both grow membership and continue to find ways to sponsor supporting activities such as critique groups, reader conversations, and mentorships.**



## Our 2026 Board Members, continued

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**M.M. (MICHELLE) CHOUINARD, Member at Large:** I am the Mary Higgins Clark Award nominated, *USA Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* bestselling author of *The Serial Killer Guide to San Francisco* series, the Detective Jo Fournier thriller series, and the standalone thriller *The Vacation*. I have a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Stanford and was a U.C. Merced founding faculty member. I enjoy amateur genealogy, zombie hunting, and baking, and am held together by caffeine and dry shampoo. **My wish for SinC NorCal in 2026 is to help our members make sense of the state of AI and how it applies to our writing.**



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

Mike Adamick  
Jackie Burrell  
Tina Ehsanipour  
Billie Hanson-Dupree  
Gordon Jack  
Lynda Markham  
Amy Jo Utstein

# Channeling Anne Perry

## by Victoria Zackheim

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When Random House released the news that I would be taking the existing nine chapters of Anne Perry’s last novel and completing it, I was thrilled, honored... and a bit terrified. The one question I’m asked is: how did that happen?

I first met Anne in 2012, when she was doing a reading at Book Passage, a wonderful bookstore in Marin County. We had some mutual friends, so I asked them to contact her about meeting me after the reading. When she said yes, I was delighted. I had read most of her novels and looked forward to spending a few minutes with her over tea. As it happened, I was asked to introduce her that day. We hadn’t met yet, but I pushed aside what I assumed were the normal introductions listing her many successes and asked her about her characters. It was the perfect ice-breaking moment, because she laughed, pondered over a few questions I threw out to her, and showed herself to be the warm and receptive Anne I would come to know over what would become a long friendship.

I’ve told this story of our first meeting whenever Anne and I shared the stage at a writers’ conference. But there’s another story that we often laughed about. A few years after that first meeting, I was scheduled to interview Anne on stage at the Tucson Festival of Books. Our event was the very last one on the schedule, coming on the heels of a three-day celebration of books, authors and readers. The 100,000 attendees were heading home, and we were concerned that attendance would be low. But, in truth, neither of us minded because we loved doing our dog-and-pony show for a few or for many! So, imagine us being escorted to the Chemistry Building, where the large lecture hall was the designated venue, and noticing the long line that began at the front of the building and snaked out of sight around the back of the building. “Goodness, I wonder who they’re here to see!” Anne said. “I guess we’ll be lucky to have fifty at our event.”

Ever curious, I walked over, approached a man in line, and asked whose event he was attending.

“Oh,” he said, his eyes dancing with anticipation, “Anne Perry!”

## Channeling Anne Perry, continued

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When I returned to Anne and informed her, she pressed her hand against her heart and said, “Oh, my!”

That was something unique about Anne. Nearly thirty million books in print, published in more than a dozen languages, and she was always surprised by the admiration and fondness shown her.

But, as they say in those annoying television ads, Wait, there’s more!

We approached the entrance to the building, both of us wearing name tags. The man policing the event saw Anne’s name, gave her a smile that was broader than broad, and welcomed her in what I can only describe as gushing enthusiasm. She smiled, stepped forward, and I was right behind her.

The man lowered his arm in his best train-gate fashion. “No cutting. Go to the back of the line.”

Before I could explain, my dear and protective friend stretched to her full five-eight height and announced, “We are sharing the stage, sir. This event will not be possible without her.”

I nodded sweetly to the man as he slunk away, and we went inside. Within minutes, the lecture hall filled, standing room only, observed by perhaps six hundred fans eager to learn about their beloved Anne Perry.



*Photo by Lulubird*

Why am I relating this, a decade later? Because, over the years, when this little vignette came up, Anne was still expressing her annoyance at the man’s dismissive attitude towards me . . . and I was still laughing!

Now, back to the beginning of our friendship. The day after we met, I drove Anne to the airport. We hardly knew each other, but forty minutes in the car taught me that she was brilliant, humble, warm, and outrageously funny. Three months later, after visiting friends in London, I flew to Scotland and spent three days in her

## Channeling Anne Perry, continued

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home. It was then that we had time to sit quietly – no crowds, no fans – and just . . . talk. I learned that Anne was a devout Mormon and a feminist. She supported same-sex marriage and a woman’s right to choose. I also learned that she was politically astute and followed fast-changing governments all over the world.

In time, Anne began to bring me into her projects. She was under contract to write two novels and one novella every year for Random House/Ballantine, and I was doing freelance editing. Our collaboration started with her calling and asking about a plot idea, or about a character she wanted to develop. This brainstorming evolved into my reading and commenting on new material, always in the early stages. And then things shifted. We began to work on outlines for new novels, and then I found myself editing her manuscripts. I was in San Francisco, she was in West Hollywood, so we spoke on the phone, sometimes four or five times every day. These discussions were truly joyful as we shared ideas, some of them far too outrageous to ever end up on the page!

I began working on my Paris mystery around 1996. It was a labor of love . . . and a source of enormous frustration. My literary agent loved the concept, but I couldn’t get it right, so I revised. And revised. Several years after Anne and I became dear friends, I told her about the novel and she insisted on reading it. I declined, explaining that our friendship was very special to me and I never wanted her to think I had nurtured the friendship so she could help with this novel. She didn’t like my decision, but she respected it. It was sometime around our eighth year of friendship that I finally relented, but with as much anxiety as fear. What if she hated it? How would she find a way to tell me, without actually telling me? The minute I emailed the file, I regretted it.

She didn’t hate it, she had some good suggestions, and we never discussed it again . . . my choice.

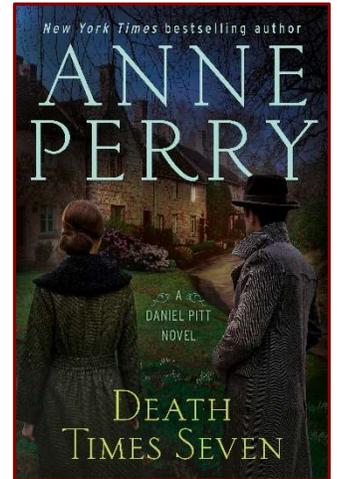
It was perhaps the last five years of Anne’s life that we formed a kind of literary partnership. I became her personal editor, working with her at all levels of development until the final draft was submitted to Susanna Porter, her gifted, supportive, and delightful editor and friend at Random House.

It was early December 2022 when Anne called me to announce that she had just written Chapter Nine in her new Daniel Pitt novel. It was the seventh in the series. She had a heart attack that night, and it was the beginning of four months of declining health, ending in her death in April 2023. Later that year, Susanna asked if I would take those nine chapters and complete the novel. I had

## Channeling Anne Perry, continued

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Anne's comprehensive outline, so the plot and description of scenes were firmly established. I began writing, trying my best to hear Anne's voice, that very proper British accent, although I wasn't foolish enough to believe that I could write with her poetic style or copy her gorgeous descriptions of time and place. The support I received from Susanna, and from Anne's agents, Meg Davis and Donald Maass, helped me through some dark days of worry and doubt. With their support, the novel was written and delivered. The title is *Death Times Seven*, and it has a publication date of April 14, 2026.



There are so many elements of my friendship with Anne that I miss. For one thing, I've never laughed so hard as I did with her. We were political allies at several levels, mainly when it came to human rights, particularly women's rights, so those intense discussions are missed. And I miss that loving voice reminding me every day how precious a friendship can be. I'm sad that Anne didn't live to see the publication of *The Curtain Falls in Paris*, my nemesis of a novel that took me nearly thirty years to write and was finally published this past May.

So, now you know the journey that led to this very special novel, jointly authored with my great friend. People ask what I hope to gain from the publication of *Death Times Seven*. To be honest, my heartfelt wish is that I've written something that would have made Anne proud.

Victoria Zackheim is the author of the novels *The Bone Weaver* and *The Curtain Falls in Paris* (with sequels to be published in 2026/2027). She completed *Death Times Seven*, the final novel in Anne Perry's Daniel Pitt series, to be published by Random House/Ballantine on April 14, 2026). Victoria is editor of seven anthologies, including the international bestseller *The Other Woman*, adapted to the theater. She wrote the documentary *Where Birds Never Sang: The Story of Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen Concentration Camps* (PBS). She is a freelance editor and teaches creative nonfiction (Personal Essay and Memoir) in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program. Victoria has been a frequent workshop leader and speaker at writing conferences. She loves to meet with book groups, either in person or via Zoom. <https://www.victoriazackheim.com/>

# My Experiments with Foreign Book Markets

## by Alec Peche

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*This is a straightforward account of my experience using AI translation. Every author has to decide what AI tools, if any, they're comfortable using in their business.*



The hardest part of an author's life is finishing the manuscript. Period. Writing a good book is a grind, and even seasoned authors wrestle with imposter syndrome along the way. But once the book is done, the business side kicks in: getting that story in front of as many readers as possible, in as many formats as possible.

Is your book available as an ebook, paperback, hardcover, and audio? Is it available in other languages?

I've indie published 28 books over the past 12 years, plus a few short stories. Despite that output, I know I haven't reached all of my potential readers. Some readers don't consume books in my available formats. Others don't read English at all.

I've sold English-language books in Germany – but not German editions. And that matters. Germany is widely considered one of the strongest book markets in the world on a per-capita basis, with a particular appetite for mystery and thriller fiction. Many mystery/thriller authors I know consider Germany the next major expansion market after the big four English-language markets: the US, UK, Australia, and Canada.

I've wanted to enter the German market for years. The problem is cost.

Professional human translations typically run \$8,000-\$10,000 per book. My average royalty is about \$2.75 per ebook and \$2.09 per print copy. That means I'd need to sell roughly 4,000 copies of *each* translated edition just to break even. If I translated all 28 books into German, French, and Spanish, I'd be looking at over **\$500,000 upfront** (28 books × 3 languages × \$8,000).

## My Experiments with Foreign Book Markets, continued

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I'm not a bestseller. I don't sell at that scale. That makes traditional translation financially unrealistic for me. The choice was simple: either experiment with AI translation or continue ignoring non-English readers entirely.

After hearing consistent feedback from other indie authors, I decided to test Scribe Shadow. For \$299 per month, the service allows up to 500,000 translated words. I used that allotment to translate the first two books of my sixteen-book series into European Spanish, French, and German, plus a short story prequel into German.

The translations were fast—about 15 minutes for an 80,000-word novel—and delivered as Word documents, which can be easily imported into Vellum for formatting. Scribe Shadow currently supports eight languages, with more in beta testing. They also maintain an active and genuinely helpful Facebook group.

I've paused my subscription for now while I wait to see how these books perform once I run Amazon ads in the foreign-language markets.

I'm also hiring a native German speaker to proofread the German editions, which will cost me about \$100 per book on Fiverr. Based on feedback from other authors, the French and Spanish translations tend to be stronger than the German, so human proofreading feels non-negotiable there.

Translation is only part of the work. You also need to:

- Translate and localize the book blurb.
- Translate keywords.
- Redesign ebook and print covers with translated titles.

Germany adds another wrinkle: book titles must not duplicate existing German titles, or you risk copyright issues. Category selection is also different in each Amazon store (DE, FR, ES), so nothing transfers cleanly from the US marketplace.

Amazon has recently rolled out its own free translation option, but I'm not using it—for two reasons. First, Amazon's early AI-narrated audiobooks were genuinely terrible, and while they've improved, they're still unimpressive. Second, when I uploaded my German translation to KDP, Amazon flagged roughly fifty "spelling errors." Independent checks—and reports from other Scribe

## My Experiments with Foreign Book Markets, continued

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Shadow users – confirmed those so-called errors were actually correct German. That doesn't inspire confidence.

So that's where I am. This isn't a recommendation or a warning, just a real-world account of one author testing the limits of what's financially possible in today's publishing landscape. Expanding into foreign markets is no longer a question of whether it can be done. It's a question of how much risk you're willing to carry to try.

And like everything else in indie publishing, there are no guarantees – only experiments.

Alec Peche is the author of 28 novels across mystery, thriller, and paranormal genres. Formerly of NorCal, she now resides in Wisconsin. She writes the 16-book Jill Quint, MD, Forensic Pathologist series, the Damian Green cold case mysteries, and thrillers featuring a teleporting CIA officer. She's a proud pantser who is incapable of learning to outline.



# Hitting the Wall

## by Terry Shames

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Most writers, unless they are very, very lucky, get to a point in a book they are writing when they realize something is really wrong. The book simply isn't developing the way other books have in the past. I call it hitting a wall. It's happened to me more than once, and I've developed some tricks for dealing with it.



Four scenarios to consider:

1. A couple of months ago I woke up in the middle of the night, thought about the book I was writing and said to myself, "This book makes no sense." I decided to ditch it.
2. When I was writing my third Samuel Craddock novel, I got to the end, and thought, "This makes no sense." This time, I had a contract, so I had to figure out what to do.
3. Another time, before I was published, I finished a book, gave it to my writer's group and asked if the protagonist was too stupid to live. The answer? Yes.
4. I had a contract, wrote the book, and abandoned it.

In all four cases, I had hit a wall. But each had a different outcome. Let's start with the worst case and work backwards with details.

**Number 4:** By the time I finished the book, I loathed the characters and thought the plot was ugly. I realized I had plowed forward long after the book pleased me. I told my agent I was giving up on it. Always supportive, she told me to send it to her. Her verdict? Awful! At that point I didn't even want to try to salvage it. I didn't want my name on it. It was a relief to jettison the book. Even the thought of reviving it makes me recoil.

**Number 3:** Too stupid to live? Embarrassing. I abandoned the project, but maybe not forever. I still think about the characters and the situation, so I may go back to it one day. I simply haven't had the time.

**Number 2:** I had to muddle through with the third Craddock novel because I had a contract and basically liked the book – up to a point. I needed to figure out what was wrong.

## Hitting the Wall, continued

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**Number 1:** I thought about what was wrong and went back and made revisions and am humming along.

Here's what I've learned to do in order to move forward when I've hit a wall. These methods work whether you are an avid outliner or write organically. (Yes, even with the best of outlines, you can find yourself thinking that something has gone wrong.)

**Step one:** Take a critical look at what you've written so far. That means reading the book from the beginning and letting go of what you thought you had written. Then ask yourself: is this the book you intended to write?

- Is the tone what you wanted?
- Is the voice true to what you think it should be?
- Have you lost interest? Are you forcing yourself to move forward out of some sense of obligation? Or because you don't want to think of yourself as a quitter?
- Has it veered off course because it has developed in ways you didn't envision? Maybe you thought you were going to write a cozy, and it turns out you were actually writing a thriller. Or a police procedural is taken over by an amateur detective. Or a noir atmosphere has sneaked in. Or, as in the case of the book I abandoned, some dark, evil force has taken over.

**Step two:** Once you've given this some thought, consider if the problem is salvageable. This is tricky. You don't want to give up too easily, but you also don't want to continue with a project that doesn't have your heart. Even if you decide you have taken a wrong turn and aren't excited to continue, it doesn't mean you can't promise yourself to go back at some time in the future and take another look. Like with my #3 above, it may be worth tackling again—someday.

**Step three:** Consider the protagonist and supporting characters. Is there a character that isn't working? Here's where rereading with a critical eye is vital. In #2, above, about two-thirds of the way through the book, I realized I had allowed a minor character to take over the book. By the time I got almost to the end, she was in the way and had no real place in the book. I took a critical look at her and realized I had to rein her in. Instead of pages and pages, the poor girl ended up with a paragraph. After that, the book took shape. Sometimes authors say the characters "take over." I'm not a control

## Hitting the Wall, continued

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freak. It can happen. But characters can also be bullies. Ask yourself if each character has a place in the overall story. If not, they've bullied their way in and need to be restrained.

**Step four:** Does the plot make sense? If it doesn't, why not? Do you have too many subplots? Has one of them taken over from the main plot? Is the plot too simplistic? In #1 above, the problem was the plot. There were actually two plots vying with each other. And then, out of the blue, another plot chimed in. It was a mess. I gave myself a few days to consider how to make it work. And it became clear that I had started the book in the wrong place. And that actually the third plot was the most important one. It turned out that there were scenes that I had put in later that, if moved forward, could lay the groundwork for the book to develop differently. The difference is subtle but revises the emphasis.

When dealing with any of these problems, give yourself permission to step back and look at the work as a whole. There are tricks to doing this as well. I find that a "one-sentence outline" helps with that process. For each chapter, I come up with one sentence that explains what the chapter is about. It's amazing how quickly a plot hole will reveal itself or a character will intrude in a way that doesn't work.

If you're really struggling, you can also try adding to the "outline" a sentence or two about characters who are introduced in the chapter and their value in the book. And add what clues and red herrings are introduced. I know authors who use elaborate systems of color-coded cards and/or plotting programs to help them. If that works for you, go for it.

Whatever you use, the important thing is to give yourself permission to make major shifts in the work. Or, to set aside what you're working on and tackle something else for a while. Or, in the extreme, to allow yourself to ditch a project entirely – without recrimination. You're allowed, you know. I suspect every author, even the most famous, has a project or more tucked away, never to be revived.

Terry Shames writes the Macavity award-winning small-town police procedural Samuel Craddock series. The twelfth in the series, *The Curious Poisoning of Jewel Barnes*, was released on December 2, 2025. The second in the Jessie Madison thriller series, *Deep Dive*, was published in July 2025. *Booklist* calls it "A must-read thriller." Terry lives in Los Angeles. She is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and the Texas Institute of Letters.

# The Devil Made Me Do It

## by Heather Haven

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The year 2025 was the 20th anniversary of the Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries. I created the family of detectives living in Palo Alto back in 2005, centered around protagonist Liana Alvarez, better known as Lee. The anniversary made me nostalgic, and I thought back on each story. Dumbfounded, I discovered that Lee was in one dangerous situation after another in every single book.



I had to face it. I like to have Lee in peril. Actually, I love it. And the more challenging the peril, the better. When I come up with a new catastrophe for her to endure in one of the books, I chortle in a way that would make Vincent Price feel right at home. When I think of another calamity, I shamelessly chortle louder.



I've stranded Lee at the top of a tree eye-to-eye with a territorial falcon. In another book, she crawls around inside a yucko garbage truck looking for a specific clue, ruining brand-new silk pajamas. In yet another, she's chased by a woman armed with deadly poison darts, then held captive by said lunatic at her own wedding, a wedding at which nothing goes right. Lee's been conked on the head, arrested for murder, trapped in an airless mine shaft, and even shot in the arm by a villain on a boat in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico during a hurricane.

What's the matter with me? Why did I do twenty years of these things to a young(ish), charming woman, whose only fault was being in my books? As I look back on it, I've been merciless.

In my latest WIP, *Cleopatra Slept Here*, Lee reluctantly accompanies her entire family, pets included, on a private plane to Egypt for a working vacation. They are to join an archaeological dig, receiving no pay but having free room and board on a beautiful ship docked on the Nile in Luxor. The goal of the dig is to discover who Cleopatra's real mother was. Apparently, they didn't have birth certificates back then.

## The Devil Made Me Do It, continued

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Once in Egypt, the Alvarez family is followed by unknown persons. Then Lee receives a warning note telling her to go back to where she belongs. But she soldiers on, looking forward to seeing ancient pyramids, temples, and museums, the sights that make Egypt one of the most magical countries in the world.

But I got in there, and in my own nasty way, made sure Lee doesn't see any of the sights. Instead, she's in and out of police stations, grappling with felons, crawling around in the ship's hold seeking a missing youth, and leading a camel chase through the desert.

Wait! Maybe I can be absolved. She does manage to see the Nile River while on the elegant Blue Nile, the ship housing the dig's personnel. On further thought, no absolution here. Lee sees the Nile a little too "up close and personal" when she has to jump in to save Tugger, her cat, thrown overboard by an unknown bad guy. Right after that, there's an encounter with a deadly Egyptian Cobra hiding in the wardrobe closet of her cabin. And then there's the – never mind. Sufficeth it to say, I've been coming up with messes for her to get into continually. Why, oh why? Well, there's only one explanation:

The devil made me do it.

Heather Haven is an award-winning mystery author. Her series include the Silicon Valley-based Alvarez Family Murder Mysteries, its offshoot, Love Can Be Murder Novellas, The Snow Lake Romantic Suspense Novels, and Manhattan's trail-blazing WWII lady shamus in The Persephone Cole Vintage Mysteries. *Murder Under the Big Top*, a Ringling Brothers Circus standalone documystery, and an anthology, *Corliss and Other Award-Winning Stories*, round out her work. You can learn more about her at <https://heatherhavenstories.com/>



# Planning, Planning, Planning . . .

## by Michele Drier

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Let's get several hundred of our closest and dearest friends together and put on a conference. Three or four days of talking "books, books, books." Sounds like a good idea--who in our crowd doesn't like talking about books and writing?

In 2025, Ana Manwaring had been asked by the Left Coast Crime (LCC) representatives if she'd like to be the chair for the 2026 convention. Ana said yes, asked me if I'd be the co-chair, and in Denver in March 2025, we were off and running. We met formally with the board to begin planning the 36<sup>th</sup> LCC in San Francisco.

Neither of us was a newbie at the conference game. I planned and attended conferences on women's and children's issues (sexual assault and childcare) in the 1970s, conferences on the arts in the 1980s (building audiences with the LA Philharmonic and San Francisco Opera), and legal services conferences in the 2000s.

Whatever the issue or theme, conferences all follow a similar schedule: several days of panel presentations, one or two keynote speakers and usually at least one all-attendee food event. Here's what I learned.

In planning a convention, one of the first items to address is who the audience is and what they expect to experience. The two most important areas for a crime fiction convention are craft and fandom. Craft is more interesting for the writers in our midst, while fandom lets aficionados meet, hear and greet their favorite authors. This decision will affect who will be invited to be speakers and guests of honor.

Then, we need to decide where to hold it. Some conferences move from city to city each year, such as Left Coast Crime and Bouchercon, and some remain in one place, such as Malice Domestic. The venue choice involves ease of travel (a large enough airport) and facilities (hotels, restaurants), as well as the attractions of the host city.

We've picked a hotel--now comes the negotiation for actual rooms. Sleeping rooms based on attendance per day. Meeting rooms, common areas, maybe a bookseller, maybe lunch or dinner.

## Planning, Planning, Planning, continued

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Once these are ironed out, we can relax, right? No, here's where "the devil in the details" is particularly important.

Will we have speakers or panels? We'll need enough meeting rooms for these.

Will we have a food event? Lunch or dinner for all attendees? Left Coast Crime bases their overall attendance figure on the size of the hotel's largest ballroom, as the Saturday night awards banquet is open to attendees. When I planned smaller conferences for the legal services non-profit I was managing, we hosted a keynote speaker lunch sandwiched between morning and afternoon panel sessions.

Then, registration. What will the price be? We need to take into account all our costs including hotel (except for the sleeping rooms--those costs are paid by the attendee), food and beverages, visual and audio needs (microphones in every panel room, projectors for video), interpreters (ASL, foreign language), signage, flyers, conference programs or other handouts, storage and drayage (moving books around) and fees or swag for speakers and guests of honor.

Once we have the estimated total costs of the convention, how many registrants will we need to break even? As an aside, some of my previous conferences have actually been fundraisers for the presenting organization. If we anticipate 500 attendees, the cost per person will be appreciably more if you actually only register 400, so we need to do historical research on the size of earlier conferences on this subject. We will work up a schedule, including when (or if) the registration fees will change. Most conferences will have slightly lower Early Bird registration in order to get income in the door to offset early charges such as printing or advertising.

And now, staffing. Who is going to sit at registration and hand out IDs and packets? Who is going to take care of the speakers and guests? Who will ensure every panel room is monitored so the panel doesn't run overtime? Who will move the signage so that every panel room has a list of the panels scheduled there for that day? And who will spend at least the day before the conference opens printing name tags and preparing envelopes for the attendees, including their food preferences? For one large conference (1,800 attendees) I supervised a crew of six volunteers rounded up at the last minute to stuff and alphabetize these envelopes at midnight on the day before registration opened.

## Planning, Planning, Planning, continued

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In the end, though, all the work, worry and angst are worthwhile. At Bouchercon several years ago, the planning committee was overwhelmed, and there were glitches and frayed nerves. But as the closing ceremonies wrapped up, I looked around a ballroom with more than 1,000 people and realized they'd seen none of the glitches and fray. They were just happy they'd spent the time and money to come, hear, and be near their favorite writers. It was eye-opening.

Ana and I are confident that this year, LCC San Francisco Schemin' will be the same, a four-day event on the waterfront for 500 or so writers, readers and fans of mystery and crime fiction, coming together to celebrate our mutual love of murder and mayhem.

*San Francisco Schemin' the 36th Left Coast Crime convention, will take place at the Hyatt Regency on the Embarcadero from February 26 through March 1, 2026. One Guest of Honor is Robin Burcell, and Toastmaster is Leslie Karst, both members of SinC NorCal, and many of us will be serving on panels. For more information: <https://leftcoastcrime.org/2026/index.html>*

Michele Drier is a fifth-generation Californian. During her career as a newspaper reporter and editor, she won awards for producing investigative series. She was also Executive Director of California non-profit organizations serving women's programs, domestic assault programs, legal services for seniors, and the arts. After retirement, she turned to her first love, writing, and is now working on her 19th novel. Michele is past president of SinC NorCal, Capitol Crimes, and Guppies and co-chaired Bouchercon 2020.



# Old Love/New Writing Partner

## by Ana Manwaring

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Imagine my surprise in the fall of 2023 when I received an email from an old boyfriend from 31 years past. It was the last week of NaNoWriMo, and I was rushing to make my 50,000 words. We'd ended badly—what could he want? I replied I'd talk to him in December. But the message got me thinking about Fernando. I realized that, after writing *Saints and Skeletons*, the memoir of my time exploring Mexico with him, I didn't feel any more rancor. My heart had healed. In fact, I was curious about him.

We connected on WhatsApp a couple weeks later, and he told me a story I couldn't believe. He'd moved to the port city of Veracruz from Mexico City when his brother was murdered . . . by doctors.

He filed a lawsuit. Someone tried to kill him. *Say WHAT?* Was this real or was my poor Spanish misunderstanding?

I write about corruption and crime in Mexico, so this fit right in, yet I hadn't written a standalone novel and had little experience writing from a male point of view. But, always game for a challenge, I said, "This story would make a terrific thriller." Fernando said, "Let's do it."

It took eight months of improving my Spanish before I was ready to start writing. We spoke daily, hashing over the story, while I took notes, asked questions, and translated with Google until I understood.

I made three trips to Mexico to view the locations, meet some of the people involved, and encounter first-hand some of Fernando's experience with funerals, lawyers, and government hospitals, even the hooker bar that appears in the novel. In September 2024, we started work on the outline. By the time of NaNoWriMo with 28 chapters outlined, we started writing, developing a routine whereby Fernando wrote his true experiences in Spanish and sent them to me, chapter by chapter, per our *borrador* (outline). I used Google and Word to translate (both super inadequate, so now we use *Piloto*). I read the entries, making notes, and during our calls, we discussed the chapter and what we might do to fictionalize it.

## Old Love/New Writing Partner, continued

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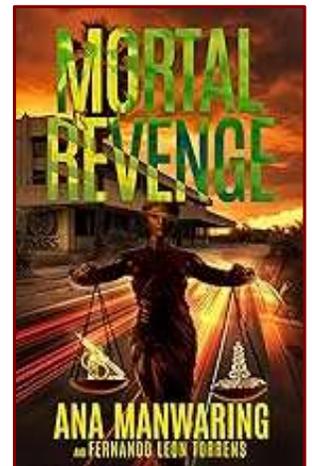
Fernando explains that *Mortal Revenge* tells the story of how a group of government hospital doctors hired a former judicial policeman to run him down after he took out a lawsuit against the head of the hospital for malpractice, which the D.A.'s office changed to murder. The head doctor had murdered his brother with the help of colleagues and Fernando's sister-in-law. "My brother hadn't been a very nice person, and they both had scores to settle with him. Now, they wanted to murder me to avoid going to prison." He detailed the culture of corruption in Mexico for me: the authorities are not reliable at any level. "If there's money passing under the table, you're going to win whatever it is you want. Even if you're a murderer." In real life, the lawsuit has not been adjudicated as of January 2026. "I can't buy my justice. In the book, the culprits are sent to jail and are required to pay substantial fines to the protagonist. I'm hoping Alex Deltoro's win turns out to be my win."

I used my NaNoWriMo time to write the chapters, building the fictionalized plot into the facts. I then translated it into (bad-WORD) Spanish and sent it to Fernando so he could critique it the next day – for 42 chapters. Sure, we argued and brainstormed, compromising where necessary, but mostly he deferred to me. At that time his writing was at high school five-paragraph essay level. He says, "Learning how to put a book together from a writing teacher was fantastic. I enjoyed the process, although the language barrier complicated things a bit. Ana speaks Spanish, but I don't speak English, and the specialized terminology in the book, especially regarding the law and legal system, often created challenges. I think it was a giant headache for her." I'd say more of a pain in the rear, but only for the hundreds of hours sitting in the chair!

On January 21, 2026, *Mortal Revenge, a Literary Titan Gold Book* by Ana Manwaring and Fernando León Torrens, was published by Indies United Publishing House LLC and is available on Amazon.

We're currently writing another book, Fernando's memoir, working title *Public Health*, about his battle to eradicate the plague of dogs living on the streets of the country, and researching for the *borrador* of a thriller exploring the theme of Russian spies in Mexico.

Our new work is going much faster. My Spanish is vastly improved, and we're going to try out instant translation earbuds—and I've learned more than I may have wanted about the Mexican legal system. Fernando has learned his lessons, too; he's turning into a fine wordsmith.



## Old Love/New Writing Partner, continued

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Writing *Mortal Revenge* has been both a challenge and a pleasure. Almost 34 years after leaving Mexico, I have the marvel of Fernando all over again—not a second chance romance. Now we are truly friends and partners—writing partners. My hope is to continue writing until there are no more stories of crime, corruption, and murder left in Mexico. *Like that's going to happen!*



*Fernando and Ana THEN*



*Ana and Fernando NOW*

Ana Manwaring writes crime thrillers that dwell at the crossroads of corruption, survival and vengeance. Her latest, *Mortal Revenge*, plunges readers into the port of Veracruz, where power and family secrets collide under the weight of violence and betrayal. Drawing from her fascination with Mexico, her books include the JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures, the Dafne Olabarrieta Mexico Mysteries, and a memoir of living in Mexico, *Saints and Skeletons*. Ana teaches creative writing, writes poetry, and produces North Bay Poetics monthly. <https://anamanwaring.com>



## Member Profile: Stacie Grey/Daisy Bateman

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

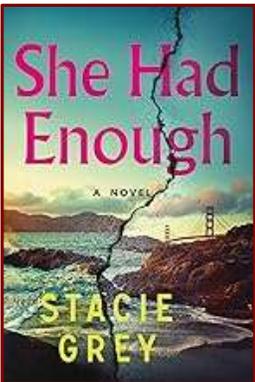
A debut author in 2020, Daisy Bateman has already released two cozy mysteries under her real name and two standalone psychological thrillers under her pseudonym, Stacie Grey, with another slated for publication in 2026. She detailed her rocky road to publishing (imprint closing!! COVID-19 delays! ) in “A Long and Winding Roller Coaster” in the August 2020 issue of *The Stiletta*, and now it’s time to learn a little more about her and her success as a crime fiction writer. Daisy lives with her husband and dog in Alameda, CA.



**Stiletta:** Please tell us about your education and your “day job” in biotech research.

**Stacie Grey/Daisy Bateman:** I did my undergrad at Caltech, which is somewhat known for science and engineering and not at all for the humanities. My writing education has come almost entirely from reading, and a couple of night classes I took after I graduated—no glamorous credentials here! In my day job, I mostly work with therapeutic antibody drugs, using various biophysical techniques to measure their binding properties. About as different from inventing fictional murders as you can imagine!

**Stiletta:** What inspired you to write cozy mysteries?



**SG/DB:** I think it was the humor that drew me to cozies, as well as the possibility of working various cheeses into the story. I really like cheese.

**Stiletta:** What motivated you to switch from cozies to thrillers? Please tell us what to expect (no spoilers, of course) from your upcoming release, *She Had Enough*.

**SG/DB:** I loved my cozies, and the cast of characters I developed in them, but there were a lot of other areas of the mystery field that I wanted to explore, ones that were a little darker and more suited to the standalone structure. *She Had*

## Member Profile: Stacie Grey/Daisy Bateman, continued

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*Enough* is one of those – set in San Francisco after the city has been devastated by a major earthquake, it's about the way some people can slip through the cracks and why it's important to not give up on doing what's right.

**.Stiletta:** What do the protagonists of your three “She” thrillers have in common?

**SG/DB:** Aside from the obvious (they're all young women who are thrown into dangerous situations by mysterious deaths) I would say that the main things that connect them is that they are driven by a desire for justice, and smarter than most of the people around them. Not infallibly so – in reality, deciding to investigate a series of murders as an amateur would be pretty dumb. But they're all observant, deductive, and able to read when a situation is too dangerous to be risked, which is something I find important in a protagonist.

**Stiletta:** You have a film/media representative, in addition to your agent. Is adapting your work for the screen something you aspire to do?

**SG/DB:** I would love to see any of my books adapted for the screen. For one thing, I like money. And it would be thrilling to see my work brought to life in a different medium, even though that would inevitably mean losing some creative control. In fact, I've thought about trying to adapt one of my own books into a stage play – I just need some free time, and to learn how to write a play.

**Stiletta:** From your interviews, it sounds like you are a pantsier rather than a plotter. Is that changing as you progress in your writing career evolves?

**SG/DB:** I would say that my approach is neither plotter nor pantsier so much as chaos. I start every book with a rough plot outline – who the protagonist is, what they want, who's the killer and what's their motive, and a general idea of the setting and its specific challenges. (For example, in my upcoming book, *She Had Enough*, the earthquake that puts the action in motion also prevents law enforcement from following up on the first death, and the overstressed system means that other things fall through the cracks later.

**Stiletta:** You say you write from a “close third person” perspective. Please define that term and tell us why you have chosen it.

**SG/DB:** Essentially, it's the same level of access to the point of view character's thoughts as first person, but “she said” instead of “I said.” I like the level of distance it gives, and I also I like to include short sections from the POVs of other characters, so the transitions aren't as jarring. But mostly, I just

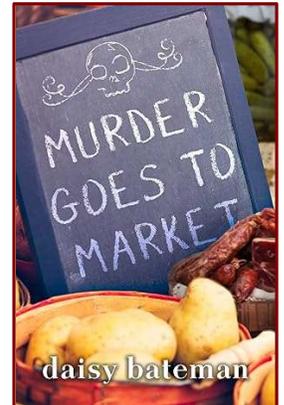
## Member Profile: Stacie Grey/Daisy Bateman, continued

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do it because it feels right for the stories I've been writing. In the future, who knows?

**Stiletta:** You and Laurie Sheehan have done presentations at SinC NorCal holiday parties about cheese and wine pairings. How did you become a cheese enthusiast, and has it played a part in any of your books?

**SG/DB:** As I mentioned above, cheese definitely played a part in my Marketplace cozy series – not necessarily as a centerpiece item, but because the setting is a craft foods market, it was an obvious choice to make one of the vendors a cheesemaker. (It's possible that I researched that part more than some other aspects of the books.) As for why I like it, well, cheese is delicious. Why not have some?



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

**SG/DB:** The greatest benefit I've gotten from being in SinC is the community it offers. I joined many years ago, way back at the beginning of my writing/publishing journey, and the friends and mentors I've found in the organization have been very important to my growth as a writer.

**Stiletta:** What advice do you have for anyone who is thinking about beginning a career writing mysteries?

**SG/DB:** Read a lot; write a lot. Write what you want to read, not what you want to have written. Rejection is the norm, no matter what level you achieve, so work on developing a rhinoceros skin. Don't go into it believing that you are great, but that you can be.

Stacie Grey/Daisy Bateman was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

# Member News

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## *New and Upcoming Releases*

*Death Times Seven*, the seventh and last in Anne Perry's Daniel Pitt series, will be released on April 14 by Ballantine Books. Anne died after having written the first nine chapters and Victoria Zackheim had the honor of completing the novel (see article beginning on page nine).

Lisa Towles' latest E&A Investigations thriller, *Switch*, is the third and final book in her acclaimed series and was published on September 30 by Indies United Publishing House, LLC. Watch the Book Trailer [here](#).

Ann Parker announces that the eighth in her Silver Rush Series, *The Secret in the Wall*, is now available as an audiobook.

*Murder, Local Style*, book #3 in Leslie Karst's An Orchid Isle Mystery series, will be released by Severn House on April 7.

*Three Marys*, book #2 in Robin Somers's The Wild Horses Mystery series, will be released by Sybilline Press on March 3.

Diana Chambers announces that she will return in February from France, where she has been researching/writing her second Julia Child novel (title TBA), set in postwar France where Paul is working with the Marshall Plan while Julia discovers French food and cooking! Their story is set against the Cold War, as the Soviets continue their push toward Western Europe – including France.

## *Public Appearances*

For those of you who will be attending Left Coast Crime in San Francisco this year, be sure to look for the many panels on which your fellow members will be participating. The panel schedule is now available on the LCC website.

Leslie Karst says: I'm thrilled to be your Toastmaster for Left Coast Crime, San Francisco Schemin', at the end of February. If you're in attendance, do come say hello, and if I'm at the bar, we'll drink a toast to each other and our amazing crime writing community!

Vinnie Hansen will be the featured guest at "Meet the Author," on Wednesday, March 26 from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. at Porter Memorial Library, 3050 Porter St. in Soquel, CA.

The book launch for Victoria Kazarian's *Death Times Seven* (Daniel Pitt series) will be held at Book Passage in Corte Madera on April 18 at 1:00 p.m.

## Member News, continued

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Victoria Zackheim will be interviewed on the *Mighty Blaze* podcast regarding *Death Times Seven* by author Caroline Leavitt on April 23 at 12:45 p.m. PST.

Elizabeth Kemp will be speaking about her debut domestic thriller, *Tread Lightly*, at Leigh's Favorite Books at 121 S. Murphy Avenue in Sunnyvale, CA on Thursday, March 5 from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. The event is free, and there are lots of great restaurants in the area, so make it a fun evening out!

### *Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!*

SinC NorCal has a plethora of nominees for Lefty awards this year. Best Humorous Mystery: Catriona McPherson for *Scot's Eggs*; Cindy Sample for *All's Faire in Love and Murder*. Best Historical Mystery: Laurie R. King for *Knave of Diamonds*; Claire Johnson for *City Lights*. Best Debut Mystery: Diane Schaffer for *Mortal Zin*. Best Mystery: Gigi Pandian for *The Library Game*; Leslie Karst for *Waters of Destruction*. Winners will be announced at Left Coast Crime in February/March in San Francisco.

Nannette Porter reports that her book *Deception's Edge* has made it as a semifinalist for the Clue Awards for Suspense/Thriller Fiction. The Clue Awards is a genre division of Chanticleer International Book Awards and Novel Competitions. The finalists will be selected from this group of authors and their books.

Leslie Karst's book, *Waters of Destruction*, has been nominated for an Agatha Award in the Best Contemporary Mystery Novel.

Lisa Towles is in the current issue of *Diablo Magazine* in a feature called "Women of Mystery, along with two East Bay authors, Penny Warner and Juliet Blackwell."

### *Training To Be Delivered*

Victoria Kazarian will deliver the following training through the UCLA Extension Writers' Program: Personal Essay I from April 1 to June 9; Personal Essay II, April 1 to June 9.

### *Miscellaneous*

Ann Parker's *Silver Lies*, the first in her Silver Rush mystery series, is the "Livermore Reads Together" book for 2026 (the first time the program has featured a local author). On Thursday, March 19 at 7:00 p.m., Ann will be discussing *Silver Lies*, the writing life, and whatever else comes up in the chat and audience Q&A at the Livermore Public Library, Civic Center, Livermore, CA. The event is free and open to the public. Books will be available to buy, and Ann will be signing as well. For more information: <https://www.livermoreca.gov/Home/Components/News/News/1445/>

## Question of the Quarter



**What author, living or not, would you most like to invite to dinner, and what would you discuss?**

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I'd invite Mark Twain (aka Samuel Clemens), serve him a hearty meal followed by cognac and cigars, and just let the master regale the table with his marvelous, witty stories. *Leslie Karst*

I'd invite Hemingway and discuss his entire life since I studied him for my master's, put him in a short story, and make him a central character in a file-cabinet murder. *Vinnie Hansen*

I've been lucky enough to have dinner with several great mystery authors over the years, including Walter Mosley, William Kent Krueger, and Louise Penny. But one writer I sadly never got to meet was Peter Lovesey, who died in 2025 at age 88. Lovesey's Peter Diamond series is one of my all-time favorites, and I've been told by numerous people that Lovesey was a great raconteur and a fun, friendly guy. I would love to hear him talk about Bath (where the Diamond series is set) and Victorian London (home to his Sgt. Cribb series), and to tell him how much his books meant to me. *Sue Trowbridge*

I thought about famous authors it'd be interesting to chat with (Willa Cather, Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Ursula K. LeGuin, Margaret Atwood, etc.), but then I realized the author I would most like to sit down with over dinner would be gone-but-not-forgotten SinC NorCal member and friend Camille Minichino. On the menu would be her favorite "take-aways"--margherita pizza (no sauce!) from Amici's East Coast Pizza, a medium decaf cappuccino (bone dry!) from Peet's, and a little See's dark chocolate chaser. What would we discuss? Anything and everything: the state of the publishing industry, current movies and recent favorite reads, news, and politics (oh, she'd have a "lot" to say about that), science, philosophy. Those of you who knew her will recall that her interests and passions were many and varied. She's been gone almost two years now, so we'd have plenty to catch up on. I am not the only one with fond memories of Camille. You can read the NorCal SinC tributes to her in the August 2024 issue of *The Stiletta*, pp. 22-25, available on our website. *Ann Parker*

Of all the authors I've read I would love to share a meal with Lillian Hellman and Agatha Christie. They both had extraordinary success during their lifetimes and yet were working in a man's world. They broke social norms in their writing, and their popularity grew because of it, whereas other authors were shunned. They didn't seem to suffer the consequences of being a female and they wrote under their own names, although Christie did have a pen name, but that was different. I'm curious about how they did it. How did they come to such success, overcome what appeared to insurmountable odds, and enjoy their success while they were still alive. I've read a good deal about both authors, including their controversial literary works, and I have questions. Of course I can't ask directly anymore. but we can wish for a good meal and great conversation. *Maureen Studer*

## Question of the Quarter, continued

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I'd invite Jane Gardam, and I'd ask her how she develops her characters. She was an English novelist, a two-time Whitbread Award recipient, appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire, and elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her novel *Old Filth* is highly recommended! **Victoria Zackheim**

If I could invite William Shakespeare to dinner, I would do it in a heartbeat! I would ask him several things : Did you really write everything that's credited to you? How did you invent all those new words we use in the English language every day now? And lastly, would you like some fries with that steak? **Heather Haven**

I'm going to limit myself to mystery writers for my author's choice. Lately I've been rereading Anne Cleaves's novels and appreciating her skill at economical yet deep character development. I'd love the opportunity to talk with her about this skill, as well as the way she chooses a landscape/location for a series and employs both its cultural and its physical attributes in her mysteries. **Diane M. Schaffer**

I would invite Natalie Babbitt. I took several children's literature classes with Natalie while in college, and she recommended one of my stories to a publisher in my senior year. Now that I've been published. I would love to catch up with her and tell her how things have gone for me and talk about the publishing business, plus review how *Tuck Everlasting* and *Kneeknock Rise* continue to be influential and great reads. **Susan Bickford**

You're kidding—only one author? I'd like to invite Tana French and Don Winslow to talk about plotting and Nina Schuyler to talk about beautiful prose. But if I had to choose one, for today at least, I'd choose Raymond Carver. He was a drinker. Up to a certain point, that makes him a jolly guest. After that, if he hasn't fallen asleep in his soup, I'd like to know the secret of his spare prose and his razor-sharp insight into people. **Ellen Kirschman**

I'd love to spend time with Joan Didion. Not only did I think she was a terrific writer, her background in California, specifically, speaks to me. I read her fiction and her essays in *The White Album*. She talks about playing in the Governor's mansion with Pat Brown's children, about sitting in traffic on the Santa Monica Freeway, and about spending an afternoon with the Department of Water Resources while they managed water flow through our dams, reservoirs, and rivers. The first member of my family to arrive here showed up in San Francisco in 1849, and this state is bred in my bone, a visceral reaction that Joan Didion understands and speaks to. **Michele Drier**



## All about YOU!

Make the most of your membership. Your Executive Committee members are working hard to present the most interesting, educational, useful and entertaining programs to our members. We invite your participation regarding ideas for speakers, events, and potential meeting locations, as well as articles for *The Stiletta*, our quarterly newsletter.

Please contact **Ana Manwaring, Program Coordinator** (anamanwaring (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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