

THE STILETTA

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MAY 2026

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

When You're a Newcomer

I really can't remember when I joined the Northern California Chapter of Sisters in Crime. I think it may have been ten or eleven years ago. I wasn't sure what to expect from this and other writing organizations. I had only read that membership looked good in a bio. That first year or two (this was before Covid), I attended writing events and slowly began to meet other mystery writers. They weren't what I expected. I thought I would be on the far-outside of the organization since I didn't know anyone and my first book of the Trisha Carson series was unknown to everyone but me and my relatives.

But people were friendly and encouraging, no matter where they stood on the writing scale—from those working on their first draft to others known nationwide. When I join an organization, I really join it. By that I mean, I want a job, something to do. That's how I've learned to connect.

After a few years, I was elected vice president with no thought of moving on to the presidency. As vice president, my main job was producing the spring and fall author showcases, and I thoroughly enjoyed coordinating the readers with the bookstores and their books.

Anyone who knew me growing up would be shocked to see me standing relaxed in front of any audience and speaking. I was the girl that knew the answer in class up through college but never raised her hand. If a teacher called on me, my vision went black, a curtain came down, and everything around me disappeared (true story.)



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President's Letter, continued

Fast forward twenty or thirty years to my professional job as a public relations manager for the Patient Safety Department, Kaiser Permanente. My boss asked me what I wanted to learn or get better at. My answer: public speaking. She immediately gave me a speaking engagement in front of Danish and Norwegian doctors visiting Kaiser's Oakland Regional Offices. I prepared, rehearsed, and rehearsed some more. The day of the presentation, things went smoothly. However, I used a colloquialism like "hit it out of the park." I stopped for a minute and asked if they understood what it meant. No one did, so I explained the baseball reference. While I chatted on, I realized that it wasn't the baseball reference they didn't get, it; they didn't understand anything I was saying. That cracked open the door with me and public speaking. What threw the door off its hinges was another speaker standing backstage next to me before we went out to talk to an audience of over two thousand. He said, "Most people remember the absolute best and worst speaker, but for the rest of us in the middle, we are totally forgotten." Once I heard that, I never worried about speaking in front of a group again.

I'm writing about this because you never know what people have gone through to get where they are now. I encourage you to take a chance along this writing journey and in Sisters in Crime. We always need people to help, so when you hear about a volunteer position coming up, raise your hand. You'll be glad you did.

Sincerely,

Glenda Carroll

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Sunday, May 17 - 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Spring Author Showcase

Book Passage, 51 Tamal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera and live on Zoom (no recording)

At our twice-a-year Author Showcase, SinC NorCal members with new books or stories will read an excerpt, and you might even win a prize!

Here are the authors who are participating:

Susan Alice Bickford

D.Z. Church

Carmela Dutra

Vinnie Hansen

T.E. MacArthur

Ana Manwaring

Brad Parks

Sheldon Siegel

Robin Somers

Lisa Towles

Saturday, June 13 - 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Reading the EKG of Your Novel: How to Use Internal and External Intensity to Diagnose Pacing Problems, with Kristen Tate

Zoom only



Kristen Tate is Editor of *The Blue Garret*. She works with authors who are ready to find their readers, providing the editing, help, and encouragement you need to get from rough draft to finished book. You'll leave this presentation with a story spreadsheet template you can use to graph the intensity of your own manuscript so you can evaluate how well your internal and external arcs are working together, determine whether your novel's shape matches the experience you want your reader to have, and diagnose the places where energy dips and readers might lose interest.

As always, there will be no July event.

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.

February Meeting - Annual Meet & Greet Featuring Lisa Towles: From Demographics to Devoted Reader



Award-winning crime novelist Lisa Towles presented her 3-step strategy for lasting engagement with readers: analyzing reader reviews, observing community interactions, and studying individual reader accounts. She discussed techniques for creating and using reader personas to target specific audiences, highlighting the importance of being both visible and memorable to readers. She demonstrated how to use manual research and AI tools for these profiles. The discussion included practical examples from recent books and platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, with emphasis on authentic marketing that aligns with an author's unique personality.

March Meeting - Catriona McPherson: Clues and Red Herrings

Catriona McPherson, who has won multiple literary awards for her crime fiction series and standalones, delivered a workshop on planting clues and red herrings in mystery writing. She shared techniques for hiding clues in detailed descriptions, humor, character perspectives, and subplots, emphasizing the importance of matching clue complexity to the story's pacing. Catriona indicated that clues should be introduced early, repeated, and tied to the plot, while red herrings should serve the story's broader narrative. She also discussed the role of unreliable narrators and the dangers of head-hopping in third-person perspectives. The workshop concluded with a discussion on creating standalone mysteries and the balance between plotting and pantsing in writing.



In Case You Missed It . . . , continued

April Meeting - James L'Etoile: What Writers Need to Know About What Happens in Prison



James L'Etoile had 29 years of experience in the Folsom prison system—as associate warden, hostage negotiator, and director of the California parole system—before retiring to write award-winning crime fiction. In his presentation he demystified what happens behind prison walls, offered tools to ensure accuracy in writing fiction where the prison system is part of the plot or setting, and affirmed the importance of focusing on character. James covered the differences between jail, state prison, and federal prison, as well as topics such as security, custody, privacy, convict culture, crime in prison, correction officers, daily prison routines, parole vs. probation, even prison tattoos. He also discussed how TV and movies often get it wrong and offered resources to help writers avoid that danger.

April Meeting - Jane Friedman: Plot Twist: Why Writers Are the Protagonists in Publishing's Future.

Publishing industry expert, educator, and author advocate Jane Friedman discussed the evolving role of publishers in the current book market, explaining how traditional publishers have lost some of their power to influence consumer sales while self-publishing has grown significantly. She highlighted examples of prominent authors who successfully partner with traditional publishers while maintaining self-publishing elements. Jane also covered the challenges publishers face in today's fragmented media landscape and discussed emerging trends including subscription services, influencer partnerships, and AI-driven adaptations. She answered questions from attendees about identifying publishing scams, advice for debut authors, and strategies for marketing to specific reader communities.



Welcome to the Machine

by Lisa Towles



You don't see the bars of the cage; they're invisible. You can't sense how low the ceiling is above you because you're not looking up. Your eyes--tired, strained, bloodshot with dark circles--can only look six feet ahead of you, to your manager, the team that relies on you, an unending stream of deliverables. Problem #1 arrives in your inbox, another you hear about by accident in the kitchen, a third and larger problem involves your entire division, not to mention the impending merger with a small, agile, innovative startup likely to upend any chance of career growth. The cage bars multiply without notice, hardening into rebar, blocking your view, closing you in.

Sometimes, in the early morning before even the coffee is made, before cars line every spot in the garage, you can find them. Senior Vice Presidents and the CEO--arguing, roaming the halls, slamming doors, clipped voices, expensive shoes running upstairs. Their offices are grand and airy, walled in windows with views of mountains and bridges, oceans and vistas, espresso machines no one uses, plush chairs no one sits in. An illusion of comfort, of style, luxury and elegance, while sweaty senior managers gulp down Tums in their cubes, hungry for Fridays, desperate for a kind word or a whole day without a mistake.

News arrives in company-wide emails, always at eight o'clock sharp. A merger, like it just happened yesterday but had been in the works for three years. A round of layoffs ripe with apology but listed on a spreadsheet with code names and phased levels. The systems of power live in leveled spheres, positioned as invisible Venn diagrams with interlocking rings of influence, fear, and carefully managed information.

I spent years inside those rings. At one company I was valued, mentored, seen--and I thrived. At another I had no path forward, no room to innovate. They wanted conformity, not contribution. So I left--not for freedom, but for a larger cage disguised as a fantastic opportunity. More elaborate systems, more invisible architecture, more carefully managed fear. Individuality isn't given, grown, or celebrated in these worlds. It's shamed. Crammed in a drawer, stuffed under the desk. You learn to perform the company--to live it, breathe it, bleed it--while the quietest, most insidious thing imaginable happens: you begin to disappear. One more day of this and there'll be nothing left.

So you escape the only way you know how . . . you write books. Books about corruption rings and whistleblowers silenced before they can speak (*Codex*). Books about secret societies and the hapless souls who stumble into their orbit and can't get out (*The Ridders*). Book after book about the

Welcome to the Machine, continued

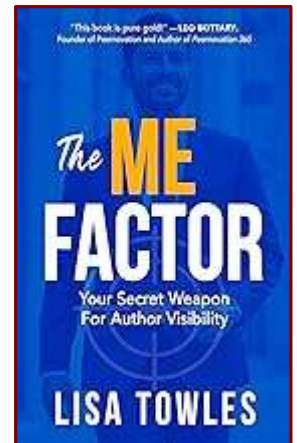
visible systems, the invisible ones, the psychological machinery that grinds people into compliance, where vulnerabilities are weaponized and silence is the price of survival—because in that fictional world, finally, dangerously, gloriously, you can be seen. The YOU that's been hiding has somewhere to live.

I didn't choose these themes consciously. They seeped in through years of absorption—the atmosphere of fear, the carefully managed information, the unspoken rules everyone followed without anyone naming them. I wasn't taking notes. I was just surviving. And then one day I was writing, and there it all was on the page with a precision I couldn't fully explain.

The machine had taken something. Writing gave it back.

I see the same pattern in how I market my books. Pretending to fit in is easier than fighting for legitimacy. Blending in feels safer than exposure. And exposure IS scary, with no guarantee of return. But allowing your true self to be seen—your actual voice, your real obsessions, the experiences that made you the only person who could write your book—means never again living inside a cage.

That turned out to be my ME factor. It might be yours too.



Lisa Towles is an award-winning crime novelist and book coach. Her nonfiction book, *The ME Factor: Your Secret Weapon for Author Visibility*, is available now.



My First Left Coast Crime Convention

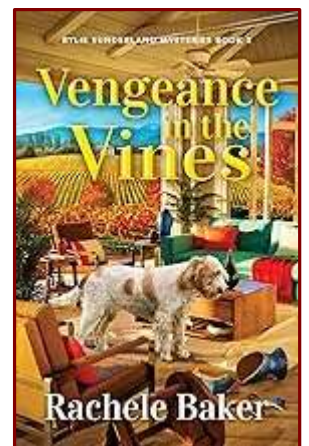
by Rachele Baker

I had so much fun at Left Coast Crime in San Francisco. It was my first time attending this convention. I've attended Bouchercon and Malice Domestic in previous years, but I have to say that Left Coast Crime was my favorite convention so far. Unfortunately, I didn't register early enough to get on an author panel, but I tried to get involved in as many other events as possible.



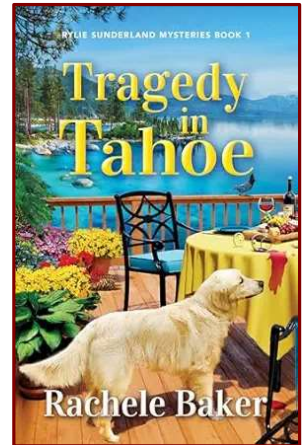
I was teamed up with Nicole Maggi for Author Speed Dating. I was a little apprehensive about being teamed up with a thriller author since I write cozy mysteries, but it turned out that it wasn't an issue. People at the tables had different tastes in books, so some of them were interested in my books and some of them were interested in Nicole's books. It all worked out.

Nicole and I handed out swag to the nearly 144 people that we talked to during Author Speed Dating. I gave each person a packet containing two beautiful custom bookmarks created using paintings I purchased from local artists of Lake Tahoe and the Napa Valley for the backgrounds (with permission from the artists), my author business card, and either my blue and silver swag pen or a wine glass charm with pretty beads that I made to highlight the Napa Valley wine country setting for book #2 in my Rylie Sunderland cozy mystery series, *Vengeance in the Vines*. I was nervous that I'd forget my pitch so I brought a hard copy for backup, but after delivering my pitch two or three times, I was very comfortable with it. In fact, after listening to Nicole's pitch a bunch of times, I probably could have delivered hers, too! All in all, it was fun and a great way to get our books in front of readers.



My First Left Coast Crime Convention, continued

After the Author Speed Dating event, I took copies of each of the first two books in my Rylie Sunderland cozy mystery series to the Book Room. I was hoping that some people would be interested in purchasing my books after all the pitches I'd just delivered. I was pleasantly surprised when I sold several copies of book #1 in my series, *Tragedy in Tahoe*, very quickly and had to bring more copies down from my hotel room to re-stock the Book Room's supply.



At the New Author Breakfast, I sat at a table with debut author Adrian Andover (the author of *Whiskey Business*). He later won the Lefty Award for Best Debut Mystery. Adrian has a very upbeat and cheerful personality, and I enjoyed getting the chance to chat with him. Interestingly, one of the debut authors at the New Author Breakfast SANG her book pitch. I thought that was very brave of her.



I joined fellow cozy mystery author Paula Charles to co-host an Author-Reader Connection event that we called "Pawsitively Cozy with Chips and Guacamole." We took four readers over to Cholita Linda Latin American restaurant in the historic Ferry Building across the street from the Hyatt Regency where the convention was held. The weather was perfect, so we sat outside right on the San Francisco Bay. Paula and I provided chips, salsa, and guacamole for the table. We handed out swag to our guests and enjoyed chatting and hanging out with them.

I had a wonderful time at the SinC NorCal meetup in the Eclipse Bar at the Hyatt on Friday night. It was great to have the opportunity to chat with so many people that I rarely get to see or talk to in person.

My First Left Coast Crime Convention, continued

A little to my surprise, I really enjoyed the old black and white movie titled *After the Thin Man* on Movie Night. It occurred to me afterwards that it was actually a cozy mystery since there was no on-screen violence, sex, or swear words. In fact, the husband and wife slept in separate beds. It was very entertaining.

On Saturday afternoon, I attended the Close Encounters event hosted by Diane Schaffer called “The Mystery of Zinfandel: A Detective Story.” Diane is a marvelous storyteller. She took what could have been a very dry subject and made it fascinating. Getting to taste a few different Zinfandels after Diane’s presentation was a nice way to round out the event.

I teamed up with fellow cozy mystery author Victoria Kazarian to co-host an Author Table at



the Lefty Awards Banquet. Our centerpiece was a small four-book bookrack for the first two books in each of our series: my Rylie Sunderland Mysteries set in Lake Tahoe (book #1) and the Napa Valley (book #2) and Victoria’s Laughing Loaf Bakery Mysteries set in the mountains above Santa Cruz. I found some cool vintage postcards with pictures of the settings for our books that I laid out on the table around our bookrack centerpiece. We raffled off our books at the end of the banquet and signed them for the

winners.

In keeping with the theme of the northern California settings for our books, Victoria created little check-off sheets of northern California tourist attractions that she passed out to each of our guests for them to check off all the places they’d been. The person who’d been to the most northern California tourist attractions won a pair of vintage sunglasses. The winner was the husband of one of the authors at our table. Although the sunglasses were clearly meant for a woman, he put them on anyway, to our great amusement.

My First Left Coast Crime Convention, continued

My favorite panels were “Finding Your Flock with Chicks on the Case,” “From Page to Screen,” “Setting as Character,” “Mary Sue and Me: Are You Your Protagonist?” and all the panels with the Lefty Award nominees.

I thoroughly enjoyed my first Left Coast Crime and would highly recommend it.

Rachele Baker is a veterinarian and mystery author in northern California close to Lake Tahoe and the Napa Valley where the books in her Rylie Sunderland cozy mystery series take place. She drew on her many years of experience as a practicing veterinarian to develop the main character for this series, Rylie, who is also a veterinarian. Rachele’s golden retriever Savanna, who passed away some time ago, was the inspiration for Rylie’s golden retriever Bella. In her free time, Rachele enjoys exploring northern California wine country, Lake Tahoe, and areas along the California coast such as Mendocino, Monterey, and Big Sur. Some of her favorite things include freshly brewed coffee in the morning, walks in nature, and, of course, golden retrievers.



SinC NorCal Member Benefit: Zoom Video Archive by Susan Bickford

SinC NorCal members have a wonderful benefit in our archive of Zoom-recorded events. You can find a list of these and the links on our webpage under the Members Only tab (<https://www.sincnorcal.org/members-only/>). From there, click on Recorded Meetings (<https://www.sincnorcal.org/recorded-meetings/>). You will be prompted for your ID and password. Scroll and have fun!

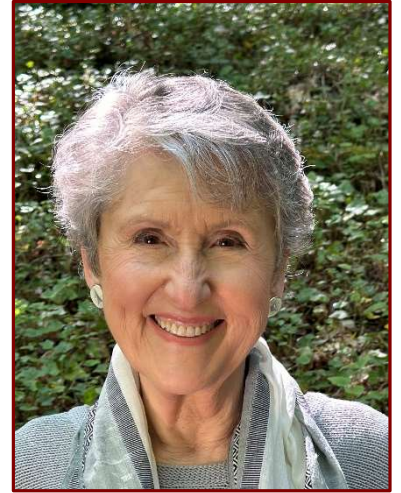
If you would like to review a list of all of our events first, you can click on Events on the home page and select Previous Meetings (<https://www.sincnorcal.org/previous-meetings/>). It is a good reminder of all the great events we have put together over the years.

A Close Encounter with Creativity: Authors Reveal Their Hidden Worlds by Victoria Kazarian and Diane Schaffer



Victoria Kazarian

What are Close Encounters? A fascinating feature of Left Coast Crime 2026! Imagine an entire room set aside for authors to talk about the passions that influence their writing. Seven NorCal members jumped at the chance.



Diane Schaffer

Members Autumn Harrison and Jenn Hooker read from the *Stone's Throw Anthology*, a yearly compilation of twelve stories received from authors based on prompts for every month of the year. Going into its fourth year, the *ST* crime fiction and noir anthology is a companion book to *Rock and a Hard Place Magazine*. To find out more about the monthly themes and submission dates, go to <https://www.rockandahardplacemag.com/stones-throw-submissions>

Vinnie Hansen did a reading from *Crime Writer*, her 2025 novel. Going on a police ride-along is a way many of us crime writers learn about police procedures. But what happens when the cop you're riding with is murdered on your ride-along? That's what happens to Zoey Kozinski, the book's writer protagonist. In the aftermath of the murder, Zoey finds herself running for her life, as she's plunged into the world of illegal cannabis farming.

In her presentation, "Why We Like Our Crime with Cookies," Susan McCormick focused upon the enduring appeal of a cozy mystery, such as her latest in her San Francisco Cozy Murder Mystery series, *The Fog Ladies: Date with Death*. She discussed the elements and evolution of cozies – and she served delicious cookies.



A Close Encounter with Creativity, continued

Robin Somers, author of *Eleven Stolen Horses* and *Three Marys*, spoke about the plight of wild horses in the American West, a cause close to her heart. Robin's current Wild Horses series brings attention to the cruel practices used to limit the wild horse population on public lands. A member of American Wild Horse Conservation, Robin told us about current methods for protecting the wild horse population and highlighted better, more human methods for dealing with overpopulation



Michael J. Cooper took us on an intriguing time travel journey to the Middle East in the declining years of the Crusades. The fourth novel in his award-winning series *The Rabbi's Knight*, introduces a forbidden romance between a knight and a beautiful Muslim woman, while mystery surrounds the discovery of a lost manuscript and the secrets of the Temple Mount. Michael's deep historical understanding gave this story impressive gravitas.



The origin of Zinfandel grapes, source of some of the best California wine, is a complete mystery. Where did these grapes come from and what makes them so unusual? Diane Schaffer, 2025 Lefty Best Debut Mystery nominee for *Mortal Zin*, told us the interesting story of Zinfandel's introduction to California and gave us a sensory experience of the smell and taste of this unique wine.

We'd also like to mention some of the other presentations that might direct our members to an expert they need. Will your protagonist be picking a lock? Matthew F. Porter showed us basic tools for lockpicking and how to approach various types of locks. Do swords or knives make an appearance

A Close Encounter with Creativity, continued

in your novel? Sword master Dale Berry is an expert on historical as well as contemporary blades. Fun fact: For millennia, the strongest swords were made from iron found in meteorites.

This year's Close Encounters room, brainchild of LCC founders Lucinda and Stan Surber, was a wonderful place for authors to share the interests that drive their writing. We hope we get to see Close Encounters at future LCCs.

Victoria Kazarian writes two series: the Laughing Loaf Bakery cozy mysteries which take place in the Santa Cruz Mountains and Silicon Valley Murder, a police procedural series which takes place in the affluent fictional community of Monte Verde in Silicon Valley. Before taking on writing full time, she has worked in high tech, taught high school English, and even run her own artisanal bread bakery called The Laughing Loaf. She's thrilled to be doing what she's always wanted to do – write mystery fiction. <https://victoriakazarian.com/>

Diane Schaffer is the author of the Mortal Zin mystery series set in Santa Cruz County, CA. The initial novel, also titled *Mortal Zin*, was nominated for Best Debut Mystery 2025 by Left Coast Crime. The second installment, *All Dues Be Rendered*, will launch in 2027. When she's not writing, she's hiking, river kayaking, or reading a good mystery novel. She now splits her time between Santa Cruz and Ashland, Oregon. <https://mortalzin.com/>

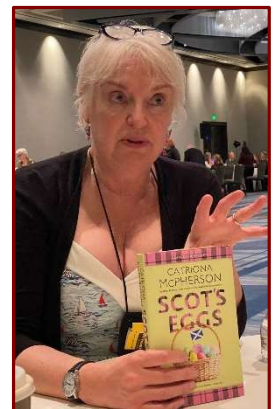


More Memories of Left Coast Crime 2026

Thanks to Michele Drier and Ana Manwaring for making it such a memorable event!



Memories of Left Coast Crime 2026, continued



Memories of Left Coast Crime 2026, continued



To Write Is Human, to Edit is Divine

by Michal Strutin



Whether fiction, nonfiction, or poetry, every writer needs an editor. I'm biased, since I made my living as an editor for about three decades at national magazines, newspapers, and radio. And my book acknowledgements are full of praise for those who edit me. Writing is something of a collaborative art.

In preparation for this past February's Left Coast Crime conference, those of us on the Blue Pencil Editing Panel discussed the types of editing authors need to know about. Not necessarily in the following sequence, they are proofreading, copy editing, line editing, and developmental editing. Sometimes you'll see terms describing even more granular types of editing, but these four are basic.

A brief description of each:

Proofreading fixes typos, missed punctuation, and any incorrect or inconsistent formatting, say, inadvertently switching typefaces from New Times Roman to Ariel within the body of the text. Proofing catches the small, seemingly "invisible" mistakes that make you grind your teeth when you see they dodged you and made it into print.

Copy editing corrects grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and consistency in, say, noun-verb combinations. For example, the editor makes sure the writer has not switched from past to present tense inadvertently or switched first person to third person. Another example: I'm delighted to use semicolons when appropriate, but they seem best suited to nonfiction and out of place in fiction. Here's where a style guide helps. Generally speaking, use the *Chicago Manual of Style* for books, fiction, and nonfiction, and the *Associated Press Stylebook* for newspapers and magazines. Your local library may provide online access to style guides for registered library patrons.

Line editing focuses on style and flow. It concerns sticking to a consistent style so that the reader is not jolted from a hard-boiled 1940s voice to twenty-first century terms and back. Line editors make sure the authorial voice remains consistent even when characters' voices differ. Line editors look to nudge the rhythm and flow of the prose into patterns that are in tune with the author's "voice."

To Write is Human, to Edit is Divine, continued

And they look to break up lengthy dialog with a brief action or narrative observation. Or suggest ways to perk up a leaden paragraph.

Developmental editing encompasses the big picture. Are the first few pages dynamic enough, either physically or psychologically, to win the reader's attention? Does the plot unfold well? Are the main characters three-dimensional and do they develop enough to match or – better yet – drive the plot? Are transitions smooth? How about pacing and transitions, both within scenes and from scene to scene? Do info dumps appear? If so, break them up and feather the necessary ones throughout the manuscript? Does the story sink in the dreaded, so-called “muddled middle?” Does the mystery writer hold back just enough information to keep you turning pages?

During my years in journalism, all editing happened fast. As an editor for a monthly magazine and daily newspapers, you don't have time to drink your tea and muse over the most perfect synonym. When I switched to books, especially fiction, I was startled to read that, for example, *Cold Mountain* went through seven edits. I lived in Cold Mountain country then and loved the book. Seven edits? What? That's months, maybe even years.

Writers have different processes for getting from idea to finished manuscript and where to incorporate an editor's help. Yours may be quite different from mine. Here's the shortest version of my process:

1. **Rough outline**, both plot and character development.
2. **First draft**: Try to keep going, no deep editing. Although I try not to stop, research sometimes sends me down a rabbit hole. When I can't think of the precise verb I want, I simply type VERB or NOUN, as the case may be. Sometimes I can't remember the name of a minor character, so I simply type NAME and look for the name in the second draft.
3. **Second draft**: not a polished manuscript to send to a publisher, but polished enough for beta readers to be able to help you improve your story.
4. **Beta readers**: Choose them from your genre. For me, two writers and one reader provide the first edit by eyes other than mine. Editors must avoid the Third Rail of Editing: trying to fix another's

To Write is Human, to Edit is Divine, continued

manuscript by writing in your own voice. A good editor is invisible, sculpting the author's words and using the author's voice to better the text. Also, as an editor, be kind. Make succinct suggestions, not demands. You are a writer's advocate, helping them create their best writing. For the writer, there's always a few "gulp" moments. You knew that paragraph dragged, but . . . "did she have to cut so much?"

If, as an editor, you feel a sequence or character description needs more, note what and how much in your editorial notes to the writer. Help the writer rectify the parts where their voice has gone astray, more information is needed, or the plot needs forwarding. with notes on the side.

In my writing and in editing others, I'm devoted to active verbs. I do full-text searches for all iterations of "to be" verbs and, where appropriate, change them to more active, interesting verbs. Although, when characters use a "to be" verb in dialog, I don't fight them.

You, the author, won't agree with all beta reader comments. When two or three beta readers mark or mention the same problem, I pay close attention.

5. **Third draft:** integrate the most helpful suggestions of your beta readers' comments, including additions, if necessary, and making seamless those sections where you've cut copy.

6. **Professional editor:** you can pay for the full menu of proof, copy, line, and developmental edit or go for the big-picture developmental edit only. Before sending to a professional editor, make sure your manuscript is as polished as possible.

7. **Fourth Draft:** Incorporate or delete what you believe works best from what your editor has recommended. That's the least number of drafts for me. Usually, I have two more "finals" after that. You may have more or less, and in different order.

If you have time and want more surety, read your manuscript out loud or use the Read Aloud feature in Microsoft Word's Review tab.

Some final tips for editing yourself or someone else:

- Keep the story arc at top of mind.

To Write is Human, to Edit is Divine, continued

- Advance the story: mark lengthy sections that do not advance the story for your Dead Darlings file. Does anybody ever return to their Dead Darlings files? I did, once, for a two-sentence description of a shrimp boat.
- Give characters depth and forward motion, physically or psychologically.
- Choose one POV per scene; no head-hopping.
- Avoid info dumps. Feather in background. Dialog can provide a place for bits of backstory.
- Tighten or cut “baggy” sections.
- Break up long flights of dialog with an action or a narrative observation.
- Be aware of pacing: if too many long paragraphs might wear the reader down, break them up, maybe with dialog.
- Make sure unusual words you use are from the correct time period; e.g., you don’t want to use 1970s slang in a 2020s setting, unless it’s in the mouth of a really old character. Check that unusual words in your manuscript were used in the time period you’re writing about. Do a search: your word + etymology.
- We’re writing mysteries, so add tension to most of your scenes and end with a page-turning image, sentence, hint, etc.
- Check all transitions to make sure they segue well.
- Limit descriptions of place unless they forward the plot or atmosphere of the story, Too long? Edit artfully.

Regarding exclamation points, see #5 of [Elmore Leonard’s 10 Rules for Good Writing](#). My favorite in his list: “Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.”

Editing can be so satisfying, especially when—without seeming to have changed much—you’ve given wings to a story or even a sentence. Stephen King said: “To write is human, to edit is divine.” King’s *On Writing*—including the above quote—is one of the best such books I’ve come across. Another good choice is Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*.

Deceit in the City of Masks, Michal Strutin’s first book in her 16th-century mystery trilogy, will be published in March 2027 by Sibylline Press. Book #1 is set in Venice. Books #2 and #3 are set in Istanbul and Spalato/Split, Croatia, respectively.

Kluckin' Good Mysteries: Building a Series Around Food, Family, and Chaos

By Carmela Dutra

When I first started writing my food truck mystery series, I knew I wanted three things at its core: food, family, and just enough chaos to keep things interesting. What I didn't realize at the time was how naturally those elements would work together to create not just a story, but a series readers could return to again and again.



In my series, food signifies more than flavor or atmosphere. It's the setting. A food truck is inherently dynamic. It moves, it adapts, and it brings people together in a way that feels immediate and alive. Food truck culture in the Bay Area is its own vibrant ecosystem of festivals, brewery pop-ups, late-night crowds, and loyal regulars who track their favorites on social media. There's a sense of urgency and energy to it. Lines form quickly, orders fly in, and a very thin margin separates success and disaster.

That environment creates the perfect stage for a mystery. With every new location comes a new mix of customers, personalities, and potential conflicts. From a craft perspective, it's a built-in engine for story: shifting settings, rotating suspects, and constant opportunities for things to go wrong. A food truck isn't just where my story happens; it actively shapes it.

Family, however, is where things get complicated in the best way. My protagonist, Beth, runs the truck with her twin brother, Seth, which means every decision comes with history, emotion, and the occasional argument over who's actually in charge (and who is older). Writing siblings allows for both efficiency and depth. They know exactly how to push each other's buttons, but they'll also show up when it matters most.

For me, that dynamic is personal. The twins in my series are loosely inspired by my grandmother and her identical twin sister. Growing up, I watched the way they interacted, the rhythm of their conversations, the unspoken understanding, and the occasional friction that only comes from a lifetime of shared experience. I also drew from my own relationships with my sister

Kluckin' Good Mysteries, continued

and cousins. Twins run in both my family and my husband's, so creating a twin-led story felt like a natural – and fresh – twist on the traditional lone sleuth.

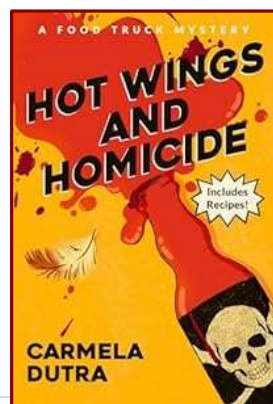
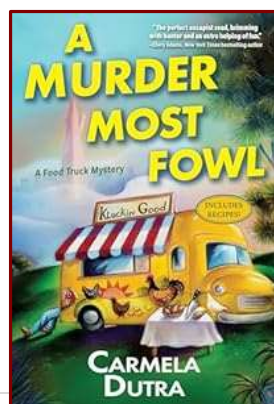
And then there's the chaos.

Disruption is the chaos in cozy mysteries, not grimdark stakes. A perfectly planned festival goes sideways, and a customer now becomes a suspect, transforming a routine day into something much bigger. The key is to balance: enough disorder to keep the plot moving, but enough familiarity to keep readers grounded. In a series, that balance becomes even more important. Readers come back for the characters and the world, but they stay for how those elements are tested in new and surprising ways.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned is that these three elements – food, family, and chaos – aren't separate. They overlap constantly. The prep station might be where a family disagreement occurs. A chaotic situation poses an unexpected threat to the business. Sharing a meal might reveal a crucial clue. When the threads weave together, the narrative becomes unified and vibrant.

At the end of the day, a strong cozy mystery series isn't just about solving a different crime in each book. The goal is to build a world that readers desire to revisit, a place that resonates with them despite the chaos. For me, that world smells like fried chicken, sounds like sibling banter, and is always just one bad day away from total chaos.

Carmela Dutra writes cozy mysteries steeped in food, family, and Bay Area flavor. Her Food Truck Mystery series debuted with *A Murder Most Fowl*, praised by *Kirkus Reviews* and *NY Times* bestselling author Ellery Adams. Her second novel, *Hot Wings and Homicide*, was praised by *Library Journal* as "perfect for foodies." She lives in the Bay Area with her family and pets.



This Business of Writing

by Heather Haven

There are a lot of things that go into being a successful author, that is, being read by readers,

If you're writing for yourself and hiding your work in a closet, then just ignore me. But I would say, don't do that. The written word is meant to be read. But for some writers, if they're the only ones reading their work, it's fine with them. That's what a diary is all about. BUT if you're not writing a diary, for heaven's sake, get that work out there.

Easier said than done, I know. You can be the best writer in the world and the most talented. But if nobody knows your work exists, you're screwed, pardon my French. And thus, we enter the world of the writing business.

I have been a writer for as long as I can remember. As a kid, I wrote lyrics to songs and short stories. Really short stories. *Pluto lost his collar. Pluto found his collar. Pluto was happy. Pluto went home.* I was eight. My first paying job was at 17 years old for the *Miami Beach Sun*. I wrote a weekly column on the comings and goings of the tenants in a large condo complex. I got \$25 a week and was beside myself. I was a paid writer!

After college, I moved to Manhattan. During the day my writing consisted of plays, ad copy, and acts for performers. At night I would work Broadway behind the scenes in the wardrobe department. It was a settled world for me as a writer, and one I loved. But it wasn't quite enough. Something was missing and I didn't know what. Then I met Norman, who was a jingle singer/performer. We got married and went on with our New York City lives. But what was exciting when you're 20 can become tedious when you're 40.

We were tired of wondering where our next job was coming from, which goes with the territory of being in the theater. We moved to California for some stability. Norman became an English teacher, and I ran the Faculty Recruiting Department at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. We have never regretted the move, but his singing and my writing never completely left the scene. Wherever you go, there you are.



This Business of Writing, continued

Once in the Bay Area and without the backing of the New York Theater District, I was temporarily lost. But eventually, the entire world opened up to me. I decided to try writing a novel, something I would never have considered before. I finished my first novel by getting up early and writing from 4:00 in the morning until I went to work and then when I came home in the evenings. Ah, youth! But that was twenty years ago.

Ready to publish, I realized publishing was going through a transitional period. To put it mildly. Ah, the ramifications of the internet! Publishing houses began eliminating genres in order to stay alive. Or going out of business entirely. Agents were forsaking their clients and opening their own online publishing houses. Everything became different. But all the time I was learning. I was learning the good, the bad, the preposition, and the proposition.

I went with two online publishers, great people, but they didn't give my books the care I thought they deserved. I waited until publishing rights were given back to me, then I struck out on my own. This was when there was a stigma attached to self-publishing. If you self-published, it meant you weren't a good enough writer to have a traditional publisher. I avoided the looks of sympathy and derision from my peers. Because somewhere inside me, I knew that if I pushed at it long enough, I could have the career in writing I wanted. And on my own terms.

When you self-publish, the various aspects of getting a book out there falls to you. From the first draft to the cover, to the editing, to the final product, it lands at your feet. Not to mention advertising and publicity. I took it all on. I wanted my books to be read. So, I persevered with learning the steps needed. All the time, I said to myself: Heather, you're competing with Big Boy Publishers. You need to do exactly what the Big Boys do. So I did.

I hired the best editor I could afford. Eventually, two of them. One for content, one for grammar and punctuation. I had beta readers. Not my friends who would soft-pedal things, but experts in the field who would give me the feedback I needed. I hired a publicist. In short, I was as professional as I could be.

My fellow mystery writers helped me. Mystery writers are the kindest, most giving people I know. If you are a member of Sisters in Crime, you know what I'm talking about. When I was doubtful or got into trouble, they would give me all the support they could. And often great words of wisdom.

This Business of Writing, continued

So here I am twenty years later, one of the old guard. I still learn. I hope I still grow. Newbie writers look up to me. Well, at least one or two of them. And if they ask for help, I am there, as all the wonderful writers in the past were there for me.

It's a heritage we pass down to one another, this business of writing.

Heather Haven was born in Sarasota, Florida, but isn't sure of the date because calendars hadn't been invented yet. Her first book, *How to Ride a Pterosaur*, was a huge success among the Neanderthal set, although all that chiseling in stone gave her carpal tunnel syndrome. Her checkered writing career includes newspaper columns, ad copy, theatrical plays, and comedy acts. With 18 books published, the last being *Bewitched, Bothered, and Beheaded*, her current WIP is yet another Alvarez Family Murder Mystery, *Cleopatra Slept Here*. You can find out more about Heather and her shenanigans at <http://www.heatherhavenstories.com>



**to our newest members
(joining SinC NorCal from January 1, 2026 through March 31, 2026)**

Mary Adler
Patrick Ardinger
Erin Burrell
Alicia Crumpler
Carmela Dutra
Christa Fairfield
Pepper Frost

Nicole Gaetjens
Shannon Hancock
Reece Hirsch
Nancy Kille
Jacqueline Lockett
Rob Osler
Sarah Warburton

Member Profile: Aletheia Morden

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

Aletheia Morden is originally from Brighton, England but has lived most of her life in California. How and why she landed in Los Angeles at age 19 and much more is covered in her very entertaining memoir, *The Last Indentured Servant: A Hollywood Memoir*, and she is also a writer of short stories, flash fiction, screenplays, and—yes—her first mystery, with another on the way.



Stiletta: Why did you decide to come to the United States for the first time in 1965?

Aletheia Morden: Like many of my friends, I wanted to travel but didn't have any money, I answered an ad in a British newspaper and ended up as an au pair in Hollywood to a showbiz family.

Stiletta: Please tell us about the family you worked for and what your life was like in their household in Los Angeles/Hollywood.

AM: To sum up: chaotic. Since Jerry Fielding was a TV and film music composer and arranger and his wife, Camille, had been a dancer since she was four years old, and since their housekeeper lived in Watts and the Watts riots broke out shortly after I arrived, it was a crash course in American politics--how hard people in showbiz work, how desperate creative people can be, how important and supportive a loving family can be (hers) as well as friends (hers and his, especially since he was blacklisted in the 1950s).

Stiletta: You say you weren't starstruck but is there one celebrity memory from that year that still stands out for you today?

AM: Hard to choose. Moving Camille's living room furniture around with Debbie Reynolds 12 hours after I arrived and director Sam Peckinpah (*The Wild Bunch*) pissing off the flimsy dining room balcony and shouting, "Here's to you, Hollywood" were both memorable.

Stiletta: What were the main differences between life in London and in Southern California?

Member Profile: Aletheia Morden, continued

AM: In London I worked in an office in Knightsbridge, wore suits, carried an umbrella. and went to clubs and dances from Friday night to Sunday night, with a bit of fashion shopping and a couple of naps in between. In LA, I padded barefoot around a really big house in my bikini under a shift, napped when the babies did after swimming in the pool, cocktail hour at 4:00 p.m. instead of a pub lunch, and learned a lot about family drama and disasters. No night clubbing (underage then), but family, friends, and show business associates were in and out almost 24/7, plus plenty of really interesting dinner conversation for this fly-on-the-wall person who'd been brought up with a "children should be seen, not heard" Victorian attitude. Not to mention completely different food (forget fish and chips). London was starting to rebuild and re-imagine bombed-out areas after WWII. Los Angeles' empty lots had wildflowers. And endless sunshine

Stiletta: What inspired you to write your memoir, *The Last Indentured Servant*, published in 2023, and how did you remember so much about your first US experiences so many years later?

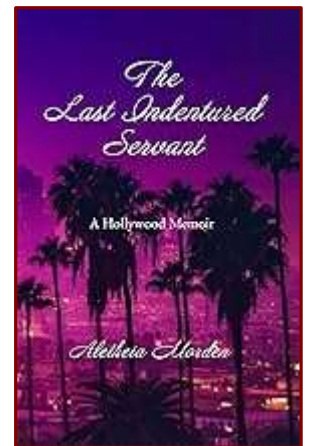
AM: I intended to for many years. People asked if I'd ever written about it, also. I have half a century of correspondence between my mother and me. She kept my letters and I kept hers. There's a lot more in those letters than in the memoir, but I couldn't fit it all in. Plus, I had a good memory; I read pertinent letters after I wrote the first draft.

Stiletta: You left LA after your one-year assignment because you were homesick. When did you decide to return to the US, and how did your career progress here?

AM: I always intended to return, and six weeks later, I did. Plus, I was offered a part-time personal assistant job to music composer Ernest Gold (*Exodus*) and his wife, singer Marni Nixon (the 'Voice of Hollywood'), who dubbed the singing voices of many stars: Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Natalie Wood in *West Side Story*, Deborah Kerr in *The King and I*, amongst others. I went on to work at entertainment law firms and talent agencies. (Now when I really need them, all those contacts are dead.)

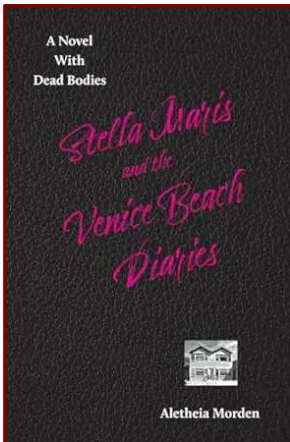
Stiletta: When did you first know you wanted to write, and when did it become your career?

AM: A writer's agent I worked for told me I should write. He liked the phone messages and notes I'd give him. In the 1980s I started thinking seriously about it. An actress asked me to write a play for her theater group. So, I did. It was performed on-stage at the local community center as well as on the



Member Profile: Aletheia Morden, continued

local cable channel. No money, of course.



Stiletta: Tell us a little about your mystery, *Stella Maris and the Venice Beach Diaries*, published in 2025, and how did your life in Venice Beach inspire it?

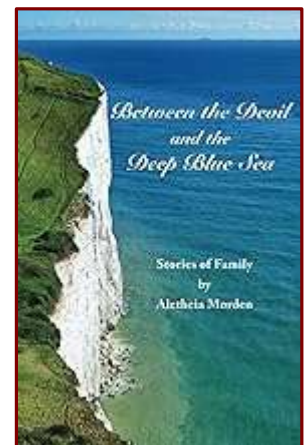
AM: I'd been hanging out with friends who lived at Billy's Apartments on the Boardwalk since the 1970s, and I finally moved there. My journals were entitled *The Venice Beach Diaries*, and I copyrighted them, fully intending to write a mystery "one day." There was always something going on, never a dull moment, and I use them as a base for Stella Maris and her life. That includes any dead bodies. It's fiction based on some facts, but those who think they recognize themselves might not want to admit it.

Stiletta: If *Stella Maris* is the first book in a series, what can we expect of the second book?

AM: Paradise can still be a bit of a nightmare with a dead body, or two. Stella gets an unexpected inheritance but is prohibited from leaving California for a while, even if she wants to go back to England. Luckily, there's more fun and sleuthing adventure with her new artist pal and fellow wine drinker, Olivia Rodriguez. Add in Olivia's two dogs to Stella's newly-inherited cat, Mr. Velvet, the ever-flirty LAPD Pacific Division cop, Sergeant Pete Martinez, plus Stella's part-time job for lawyer Harry Bernstein and that entertainment law firm upstairs with its dirty dealings, as well as the warning from psychic Beryl who advises "be careful" at a spiritual cream tea reading. and you have Stella's continuing adventures at the decrepit old apartment on the Boardwalk with eccentric neighbors.

Stiletta: Your book of short stories, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, was published in 2022. What inspired the stories in the book?

AM: Family and friends. They don't know I write about them in my journal and might not care even if they did know. Although it might cause anxiety if they recognize themselves. I used to love covertly jotting down conversations and turned on my little tape recorder under the tea table once. My mother didn't care, but my father turned it off immediately. Not before I'd recorded banter between my three-year-old and myself, though. It was lovely to listen to years later. My family aren't readers, so I'm safe putting it out there. Ditto with old friends. I've also discovered there's an advantage to publishing certain writings long after the fact: the historical context of time and place not only adds interest, but most of the people are dead and can't answer back.



Member Profile: Aletheia Morden, continued

Stiletta: Tell us about your experience at the recent Left Coast Crime in San Francisco, where you presented your mystery at the Debut Author Breakfast.

AM: : I learned you can order a lock-picking kit on the internet and practice doing it by watching *YouTube* videos. Who knew? I also learned how a librarian in Bellingham, Washington finally caught a rare book thief and that the FBI took credit for his sleuthing efforts. This was good info as I'm president of the foundation for the McCune Collection of Rare books and Art housed at the JFK library in Vallejo. (Disclaimer: I am not a librarian, although libraries have always been my go-to places.) And at the Saturday night dinner, one of the hosts, forensic handwriting examiner and author Sheila Lowe, offered a handwriting and personality sketch. Got mine recently and keeping it under lock and key.

Stiletta: How have you benefited from your membership in Sisters in Crime, particularly the NorCal chapter?

AM: I've met lots of interesting people, most of whom I'd love to have a glass of wine with and chat, as well as write books. I value the online write-ins, even though I don't turn up as often as I'd like to. People are supportive, also. Ana Manwaring's helped me a lot.

Stiletta: What should we know about you that I haven't asked?

AM: Over half a century of letters and journals are total inspiration, not that I have time to read them except when I need to confirm a memory. I even have two little diaries from 1962 and 1963 and can tell you the dates I saw The Beatles before the British invasion hit America. One 1968 journal begins in Pitman shorthand as I was in the middle of a love affair and wanted to keep explicit details from any prying eyes. Too bad that was about the last time I wrote shorthand. Too bad I can't decipher it now. I've driven across Canada and the USA. In New Mexico I belonged to a historical society for several years:--the Billy The Kid Outlaw Gang, Inc. -- and in New Orleans I joined the Anne Rice Fan Club, who were holding a blood drive in corroboration with the Red Cross outside The Courtyard of the Inn of the Two Sisters when I exited their bar one afternoon. They had lovely newsletters: red ink on black paper.

Aletheia Morden was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

Lisa Towles' new nonfiction book, *The ME Factor: Your Secret Weapon for Author Visibility*, was released by Indies United Publish House, LLC, on April 8. It has been recognized with a First Place win of the 2026 BookFest Awards in Business Marketing.

The Dead Room, a standalone psychothriller by Catriona McPherson, will be released on May 1 by Thomas & Mercer.

Murder at Hotel Gloriosa by Victoria Zackheim will be released by Level Best Books on June 23.

Carmela Dutra announces the upcoming release of her second mystery, *Hot Wings and Homicide*, the follow-up to *A Murder Most Fowl*, by Crooked Lane on May 12. When a notorious food critic – and Beth's ex – turns up dead at a Bay Area food festival, the only clue points straight to her family's food truck, leaving twins Beth and Seth Lloyd racing to clear their names before their business goes up in flames. Blending humor, family dynamics, and culinary chaos, this fast-paced mystery will appeal to fans of food-themed cozies.

Ann Parker's short story "All in a Night's Work: A Time Walker Detective Short Story" is available through the usual e-venues: <https://books2read.com/TimeWalker1>. The story is her first venue into Hist/Myst-asy (historical -mystery-fantasy) and the world of self-publishing.

Michal Strutin announces that *Deceit in the City of Masks*, book #1 in her 15th century mystery trilogy, will be published in March 2027 by Sybilline Press. Michal adds: "We're working on the front and back covers and I'm finishing up front and back matter, including a framed 1525 map of the Mediterranean that I found. It's out of copyright. I'm nearing completion of the first draft of book #2, *A Spy in the Sultan's Harem*. Series title: Blood and Wool. Very visceral."

Public Appearances

The launch event for Catriona McPherson's new standalone psychothriller, *The Dead Room*, will be held at the Avid Reader in Davis, CA on May 1 at 6:30 p.m. Catriona says the book is dark, but the party will be cake, wine, and laughter all the way.

Carmela Dutra will be appearing at several Bay Area events to introduce her new book, *Hot Wings and Homicide*: Barnes & Noble San Mateo – May 15, 1:00-3:00 p.m.; Virtual "Murder She Read" Book Club (St. Joseph Public Library) – May 20; Recycled Books, Campbell (Small Business Saturday) – May 30, 11:00 a.m.-1:30 p.m.; Barnes & Noble, Gilroy – June 6, 1:00-3:00 p.m.; Book Club Visit, Recycled Books (Campbell) – June 27, 7:00-9:00 p.m.; Barnes & Noble, Emeryville – June 27, 1:00-3:00 p.m. Barnes & Noble, Burlingame – July 11, 1:00-3:00 p.m.; Barnes & Noble, Los Gatos – July 25, 12:00-

Member News, continued

3:00 p.m. Readers who stop by can enjoy fun extras, including exclusive recipe cards, chicken bookmarks, and *Hot Wings and Homicide* branded hot sauce packets (while supplies last).

Lisa Towles will be speaking to Horror Writers of America on May 4 at 7:00 p.m. on Zoom. The topic is "Audience Insights: Understanding Your Readers - Beyond Demographics to Deep Connection." <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82483972814?pwd=MtSwtKs7qaTjv9aQ14Th4MAAK4l8K0.1> Meeting ID: 824 8397 2814, Passcode: 75793

Lisa Towles will be visiting the Alameda Library Book Club on May 18 from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. at the Alameda Free Library (main library location) at 1550 Oak Street, Stafford Room A, about her latest thriller, *Switch*. No registration is required.

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Catriona McPherson won the Lefty award for Best Humorous Mystery for *Scots Eggs* at Left Coast Crime in February.

G.M. Malliet's *Graydon House*, set in WWII Cornwall, has been shortlisted in the Historical Crime category of the Historical Novel Society's annual competition. The overall winners in all categories will receive the £1,000 prize at the annual conference, held this August in Maynooth, Ireland.

Lisa Towles' book *The ME Factor: Your Secret Weapon for Author Visibility* has been recognized with a First Place win in the 2026 BookFest Awards in Business Marketing.



Question of the Quarter



When writing crime fiction, do you start with the crime or the characters?

I guess I would say that I start first with the crime, then decide which of my "stable" of characters will resolve it. Different crimes are better suited to different characters I have already created. But, when I come up with the crime, I don't always have the location. The setting will often determine which character tells the story, because each of them lives in a very different kind of "world." Sometimes the story needs to be told by a new character, especially if it is something that cannot be serialized, such as the death/ imprisonment of the main characters involved. *Elena E. Smith*

I start with the characters. These are the foundation of my story. Sometimes I even change the method of the crime as the book goes along. Not often, but it has happened. As I write cozies, whatever the method, it is never depicted on paper, only talked about. The same with sex. Fade to black, please. *Heather Haven*

For me, writing cozy mysteries, I actually start with the motive. In a small-town setting (or a tight-knit community like a food truck circle), everything is personal, so I always ask: what would someone stand to gain—or lose—enough to commit murder? Once I have that, I work backwards and build a cast of characters who could fit that motive. I usually come up with four to six potential suspects, each with their own secrets, grudges, or something to hide. That's when the story really starts to click, because the crime and the characters begin to shape each other. So while the crime matters, it's really the motive that comes first for me, and the characters grow out of that. *Carmela Dutra*

I usually start with knowing what the theme of a book will be. I generally have some kind of social justice issue that I want to address. So in my Craddock novels, I think about how that issue will impact the town and its people. From there, I go with character. It's easier to introduce characters in a series because the main characters are already in place. The crime always arises out of the interplay between characters and the issue I'm addressing. For example, in my latest book, *The Curious Poisoning of Jewel Barnes*, the crime is a result of toxic dumping. In the Jessie Madison thriller series, again it isn't necessarily the crime I'm thinking of, but more the setting in which the crime is committed and where the action takes place. In *Deep Dive*, the issue is a World War II airplane found in the treacherous seas north of Sicily. The characters, members of a dive team, converge in the setting around the question of how the plane got there and who the pilot was. The crime arises out of that. *Terry Shames*

I generally start with the characters. There are limited ways to commit a crime on paper, unless you're writing one of those 30s-type mysteries where characters are eliminated in ridiculously complicated ways. I like stories where the characters decide the plot. *G.M. Malliet*

Question of the Quarter, continued

Writing thrillers and suspense, I tend to come up with an exciting event when I start a story. Something dramatic that forces the main character into action. These are thrillers/suspense so there's usually no mystery to solve, just how to get out of the way of what is coming. The main character usually comes to me at about the same time. How that character then responds dictates how it evolves from there and arrives at the big event at the end. *Susan Bickford*

All of my books are character-driven rather than plot-driven, so I start with "what dangerous/interesting/threatening situation can I get my protagonist in this time?" I primarily write series so the protagonist's flaws and attributes are known, although there are times when she'll throw me a curve. The Amy Hobbes Newspaper books are straightforward. Amy's an editor and there's ALWAYS a murder to be solved. The Stained Glass series are more of a case of Roz tumbling onto a body. And the Kandesky Vampire Chronicles have evolved over 12 books into romantic and political tension in Central Europe. The plots get defined by the ongoing real events! *Michele Drier*

For my ongoing series, I have major characters already, so I usually focus on the "crime" or some historical tidbit (a setting, an event, not necessarily a crime) that grabs my interest. For short stories or something new, it's usually a continuation of the two: a situation (again, not necessarily a crime), after which characters quickly come to mind to populate the scenario. *Ann Parker*

In the first scene I always start with the protagonist. I want to give the reader a sense of his or her personality, making sure to include enough brief character traits to make the protagonist feel fully formed, a person you might meet and like--or not--if you met them. No cardboard cutouts. Since I write historical mysteries, I feel it's necessary to bring my protagonist out of set-in-stone history. The first time I read *Tom Jones*, one of my favorite novels, I had to plough through 50 pages of character backstory before anything happened. On second reading, I started at page 50. I learned that action is necessary. So, in the first scene I also include an inciting incident. Sometimes it's the incident at the center of the story. Sometimes it's the incident that leads the protagonist to the action at the center of the story. *Michal Strutin*



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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