

THE STILETTA

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Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

Trust Your Stuff

About a year ago, my president's message centered on my lack of "oomph" when it came to writing. That eventually faded away, and I am now happily typing away on book #5 of the Trisha Carson series.

I had help getting through my writing drought. And it was baseball. As some of you may know, after I retired from my public relations job at Kaiser Permanente, I went to work for the San Francisco Giants. This was due to the urgings of my son, who already worked the games and wanted to carpool with someone. At that time, I wasn't much of an outgoing person, and I wondered how I would deal with massive crowds (which made me nervous) and potential drunks (which also made me nervous). To placate my son, I applied and they actually hired me. I worked the home games, either scanning tickets or ushering fans to their seats. I finally settled in the garden on the outskirts of centerfield, an actual garden with a busy bar in the center, vendors that used the veggies grown right there, and Adirondack chairs placed around fire pits . . . a popular spot at all games. Although you couldn't see the field, televisions were everywhere and no one missed a play.

I'd watched enough baseball either from the bleachers or my couch that I (somewhat) understood the intricacies of the game. Except for one part. I'd often seen the pitching coach walk out to the mound to talk to the pitcher who was throwing the



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President's Letter, continued

ball everywhere but over the plate. What did he say to get him back on track?

I eventually found out. The coach stared into the eyes of the pitcher, who held a glove up to cover his face so the television cameras and the other team couldn't see what he was saying. His words? "Trust your stuff." Three simple words, 14 letters of the alphabet that brought confidence back to the hurler so he could successfully finish the inning.

I often repeat those words in my head when I get stuck writing.

"I know how to do this." "I've done it before, successfully." "Glenda, trust your stuff."

I am passing this on to you. We all get waylaid and doubt ourselves. Since writing is an isolated sport, there is no one around to be encouraging. It's just you. So when you're wavering and questioning yourself, say this short little sentence. In fact, print it up and post it next to your laptop. Trust your stuff.

By the way, I learned to manage crowds without having a panic attack, and I became a pro at handling drinks and mean-spirited fans. Other ushers would call me in to go toe-to-toe with the biggest, nastiest drunks. Those troublesome sports addicts backed down. Of course, having the San Francisco police as backup helped.

Sincerely,

Glenda Carroll

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal

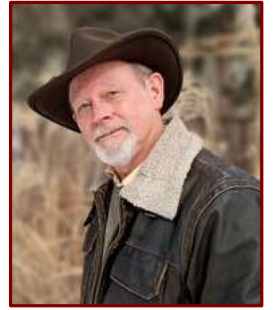


Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, August 1, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Seven Reasons to Write, with William Kent Krueger (Zoom only)

Multi-award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling mystery writer William Kent Krueger will reflect on why he is a writer and his own journey to publication. Kent is the author of 22 books in the Cork O'Connor Mystery series and five standalone novels.



Sunday, August 16, 12:00 to 2:30 p.m.

Murder, Mayhem, Fires, and Buried Ships: A Look at San Francisco's Gold Rush Shenanigans, with M.M. Chouinard

SinC NorCal invites **members only** to an exclusive, free SF crime walking tour, limited to 25. Register now with Ana Manwaring at [anamanwaring \(at\) gmail.com](mailto:anamanwaring@gmail.com). Michelle Chouinard is the author of the A Serial Killer's Guide to San Francisco Mysteries and the Detective Jo Fournier series.

Saturday, September 19 (10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.)

Find and USE your ME Factor, an Author Branding Workshop with Lisa Towles

London Nelson Community Center, 301 Center Street, Santa Cruz, CA

Align your professional author brand with your personal creative purpose and the power of your craft at this all-day workshop, which includes brunch. Lisa Towles is an award-winning crime novelist and nonfiction writer and a book coach. **For members only.**



Saturday, October 3, 10:30 a.m.

Short Stories, with Art Taylor (Zoom only)

Art Taylor, a multi-award-winning short story writer and teacher, will focus on how to craft the beginning of a short story, with gestures toward developing the plotline. There will be time in the session for you to start your own short story.

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.

May Meeting - Spring Author Showcase

At our twice-annual Author Showcase, SinC NorCal writers regaled us with excerpts from their new and recent works.



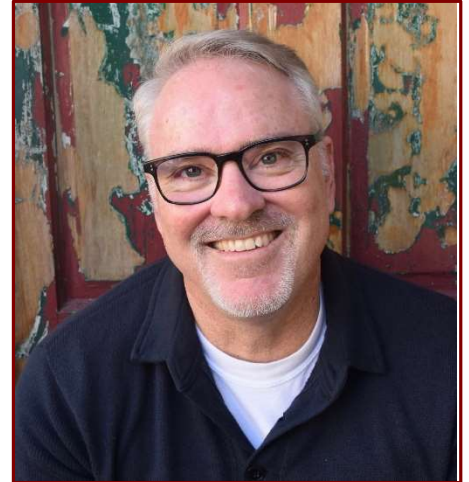
June Meeting - Reading the EKG of Your Novel: How to Use Internal and External Intensity to Diagnose Pacing Problems, with Kristen Tate

A freelance book editor and writer with a Ph.D. in English from Columbia University, Kristen Tate discussed how to determine whether your novel's shape matches the experience you want your readers to have, and how to diagnose the places where energy dips and readers might lose interest. Kristen used several well-known novels to demonstrate how to diagnose a book's "pulse" and its external (action) and internal (characters' feelings) intensity and presented a story spreadsheet as a tool for authors.

Retire at Your Own Risk: What Writing a Cozy Mystery Taught Me About Community

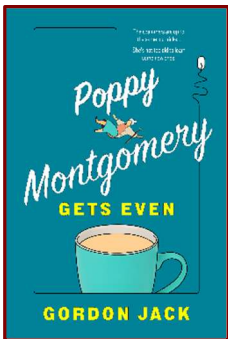
by Gordon Jack

I recently turned 60, which prompted some thinking about my life's third act. I'll be retiring soon from the school where I've taught for 35 years. My son has graduated from college and is now employed and living in another state. Writing has been a great joy (and great frustration) my whole life and something I hope to continue into my sunset years. Now, I just have to remember to get up and stretch every 30 minutes so my back and knees don't lock up.



One of the biggest questions my wife and I discuss is where we want to live when we get older. My parents moved into a retirement community because they valued social connections and accessible healthcare. My wife's parents, on the other hand, chose to stay in their home because they loved it and valued their independence. Both paths have pluses and minuses, which I explore in my debut cozy mystery, *Poppy Montgomery Gets Even*. In my novel, Poppy lives alone and is isolated and miserable. Her friend Ginny lives in a retirement home where she is surrounded by people, one of whom happens to be a murderer.

"Those are our choices?" my wife commented when she read a draft of the book.



Let's hope not.

These two settings fascinated me not only because they represent the choice many of us will have to make eventually, but because they embody common tropes found in detective fiction.

The detective is often a loner, living independently from others. Think Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Philip Marlowe, Kinsey Millhone. We don't know why these characters ended up alone.

Their personalities just aren't suited for community service. Can you picture any of them mentoring underprivileged youth or volunteering for beach cleanup? They work cases and end the day with a cup of tea or shot of whiskey. My mother-in-law would make a great detective.

The victim, on the other hand, usually lives in a community. Think every mystery ever written. Victims' lives are messy. They piss off the wrong people or witness an act of cruelty. They have something someone else wants or want something someone else has. Sometimes, as in the case in my novel, they stumble upon a criminal conspiracy. It's not all choir practice and book clubs.

Retire at Your Own Risk, continued

So would you rather be a detective or a victim?" my wife asked. We were still talking about senior living options, I think.

Of course I'd rather be the detective. That's why I write detective fiction. I like working alone and solving cases. Also, who wants to be murdered?

But the detective's (and the writer's) life can be solitary and depressing. One of the things I worry about with retirement is the loss of daily connection with people, even when they annoy me. This is what I imagined when I wrote about Poppy. She's a bit prickly when it comes to people, placing them in one of two categories: loser or bully (she's self-aware enough to know she falls into these categories as well). She's the perfect detective, except she's so isolated the only crimes she experiences are the daily indignities she suffers being an 80-year-old woman.

When she meets Ginny in a water aerobics class, she finally makes a friendly connection, which is what pulls her into the victim's orbit. You see, Ginny lives at Xanadu, a retirement community that feels like a return to middle school with social cliques determining where you sit in the cafeteria and what parties you get invited to on the weekend. There's also a murderer killing women who are using the online dating site Senior Moments to meet eligible bachelors. Ginny is on this site, and Poppy doesn't want her to be the next victim.

As anathema as the place is to Poppy, it's where she comes alive. Over the course of the novel, she goes from being isolated and alone to finding a family. She can't become a detective until she meets someone she cares about and wants to protect.

When I finished the book, I realized I'd been asking the wrong retirement question. What I was exploring was not the pros and cons of independent versus communal living; it was the pros and cons of isolation versus connection. The truth is, no one is happy living exclusively alone or with people. You need both environments to thrive.

"So, you want to live independently but hang out in a retirement home?" my wife asked when I shared this revelation.

Exactly.

It's the perfect solution for an introvert like me. Forced community is about as welcome to me as an ice-breaking activity. But community that arises out of shared interests and sensibilities is critical to a healthy life, even if it puts that life at risk

Gordon Jack has been a high school librarian for 30 years. In that time, he did his best to keep kids reading, including writing two young adult novels, *The Boomerang Effect* and *Your Own Worst Enemy*. Now that he's about to retire, he figured he should write for people closer to his own age, which is why he's suddenly interested in the lives of octogenarian crime fighters.

Beneath the Twist: Writing a Thriller with an Emotional Core

by Lindsay Kent



To me, every great thriller shares one essential trait: beneath the twists, revelations, and pulse—quickenings suspense, there is something deeply human at stake. The stories that linger aren't memorable simply because of what happened, but because of why it mattered. Beneath the danger lies grief, love, betrayal, longing. They stay with us by reaching past the plot and into something emotionally true. I grew up devouring this kind of fiction, drawn to stories that didn't just entertain, but unsettled me in a deeper way.

Long before I had the language for it, this was always the standard I wanted to reach. So when the idea for my debut novel first arrived, I knew the suspense alone wouldn't be enough—I would have to dig far deeper to create the kind of emotional stakes that truly endure.

A Foundation in Nonfiction

For the past 20 years, I've worked as a documentary filmmaker, telling stories rooted in real lives. Nonfiction sharpens a particular instinct: to listen closely, to notice what people won't say outright, to trace the emotional logic behind their choices. You learn to ask not just what happened, but what it felt like—and what it cost. In that sense, the foundation of storytelling doesn't change across mediums. Whether it's a film or a novel, the work is the same at its core: uncover human motivation, shape an emotional arc, and create an experience that makes someone feel something true.

But over time, I began to feel the limits of nonfiction more acutely. Reality is vast, but the frame we put around it is not. There are ethical boundaries, narrative constraints, and the ever-present responsibility to represent real people with care. Sometimes those constraints sharpen a story. Other times, they keep you from going where the emotional truth actually leads.

Fiction, I realized, offers a different kind of freedom. It loosens the grip of literal truth so you can reach for something deeper. When we encounter a fictional character, we're often more open—more willing to sit with discomfort, to question our assumptions, even to recognize parts of ourselves we might otherwise resist. There's a kind of permission embedded in fiction. It invites curiosity rather than defensiveness. It allows us to engage with difficult ideas—not as abstractions or judgments, but as lived experiences.

Beneath the Twist, continued

That realization opened a door for me. And in a more literal sense, so did psychedelics.

Lessons from the Trip

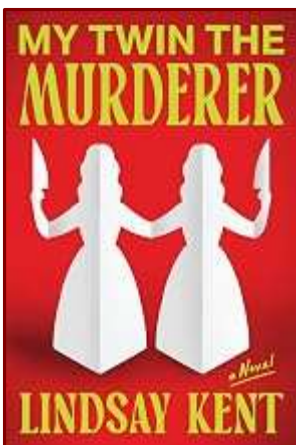
My personal experiences with psychedelics fundamentally altered how I understand identity. For much of my life, I operated within a carefully constructed framework of who I believed myself to be: my values, my roles, my history. It felt stable, even necessary. But it was also limiting in ways I didn't recognize.

My first experience with LSD disrupted that structure completely. The closest analogy I can offer is this: it was like waking up in a prison cell I hadn't known I was in. The walls had always been there, shaping my sense of what was possible, but I had mistaken them for reality itself. In that moment, I saw not only the bars, but the open door. The realization wasn't just that I could step outside—it was that I always could have. Beyond that threshold was something expansive, disorienting, and profoundly liberating: a sense that identity is not fixed, that the self is more fluid than we tend to believe.

That experience stayed with me. It informed the films I went on to make about psychedelics: *Going Furthur*, *The Split*, *Plant Medicine*. I met people from all walks of life who suffered from depression, PTSD, and addiction, and witnessed their own internal evolution through psychedelic experiences. I have immense gratitude for all I documented and learned, but after years of working in that space, I felt there were aspects I hadn't been able to fully articulate. Some ideas resist straightforward explanation. They're experiential, emotional, even paradoxical.

That's where fiction became not just appealing, but necessary.

Inspiration For My Debut Novel



My Twin the Murderer began as a concept that could stand on its own as a thriller: a story driven by suspense, layered with twists, built to keep a reader turning pages. But from the beginning, I knew the plot was only one layer. Underneath, there had to be something more intimate, something grounded in the complexities of human connection.

At its heart, the novel is about sisterhood: the ways we mirror each other, the ways we define ourselves in relation to those closest to us, and the fragile line between connection and separation. It's about suppressed trauma and addiction, not as isolated experiences but as forces that ripple through relationships and across time. And it's about consciousness itself: how our perception of reality can be influenced, manipulated, even weaponized.

Beneath the Twist, continued

In many ways, the thriller framework allowed me to explore these themes more honestly than I could in nonfiction. The heightened stakes, the twists, the shifting perspectives—they mirror the instability of memory and identity. They create a space where the reader can feel disoriented, question what's real, and, in doing so, engage more deeply with the emotional core of the story. No psychedelic trip necessary.

Because for all their potential, these experiences are not inherently safe or simple. They can illuminate, but they can also destabilize. That duality—healing and harm, insight and confusion—felt essential to capture. In the context of a thriller, it becomes not just a philosophical question, but a source of tension.

At its core, this book is built on one belief: the most powerful mysteries are never just about the secrets outside us, but the ones buried within. Because the greatest tension doesn't come from what we have yet to discover about the world—it comes from what we fear discovering about ourselves when the illusion finally falls away.

Lindsay Kent is an award-winning filmmaker turned fiction writer whose work explores the luminous edges of consciousness and culture. Her films include the 2014 documentary *Going Furthur*, retracing the arc of MKUltra and America's counterculture; the Gaia docuseries *Plant Medicine*, set at an Ayahuasca retreat center in Costa Rica; and the acclaimed comedy short *The Split*, about life with (and without) an ego. Now returned to her first love—fiction—Kent blends a filmmaker's eye with a psychonaut's curiosity, blurring the boundaries between science and spirit, cinema and literature. Her debut psychedelic thriller, *My Twin the Murderer*, the first installment in a new novel series, was released June 20, 2026. Across mediums, her work shares a singular aim: to bridge reality and the beyond through stories that are accessible, entertaining and transformative. More at TheHallucinarrator.com.



The Psychology of Serial Killers

by Ellen Kirschman



In the interest of self-disclosure, I must admit that I've never met a serial killer or had a date with one, although I'm still not sure about my ex. The following information is based solely on a review of the research.

It is my hope that research* will (1) help deepen your understanding of what motivates someone to become a serial killer, (2) expand the clues your fictional investigator may be looking for, and (3) throw some light on the challenges fictional clinicians face researching and treating this statistically rare and difficult to access population.

New Developments in Research

- The McDonald triad—bed wetting, fire-setting and cruelty to animals—once thought to be a predictor of serial killer behavior, is no longer considered reliable. Current research now defines this triad as a profile of high stress and a cry for help.
- There is no single serial killer personality. Varied motivations include sexual gratification, gaining power over others, exacting revenge, thrill seeking, or seeking financial gain.
- Categorizing serial killers as organized or disorganized is too simplistic. Behavior exists on a continuum (a planful killer may lose control during the murder). New findings suggest that organized serial killers may be motivated to control others, while disorganized killers are likely to be motivated by the need to control their internal chaos (emotions, impulses, psychoses). Organized serial killers often have better social and work skills that allow them to hide in plain sight. In contrast, disorganized serial killers more often suffer severe childhood neglect, social rejection, developmental problems and psychiatric symptoms. They are likely to be impulsive, reactive, unable to control violent urges, be psychotic, or have severe thought disorders.
- What makes a serial killer is more complicated than a simple nature/nurture argument. Many factors come into play: biological, social, developmental and psychological (and some that have yet to be discovered).

The Psychology of Serial Killers, continued

- There are recurring factors found in some but not all serial killers: childhood trauma, psychopathy (lack of empathy, lack of remorse, shallow emotions, shallow charm, repeated anti-social acts), fantasy, narcissism (grandiosity, compulsive need for admiration, fantasies of power and control, lack of empathy, profoundly emotionally insecure), biological and neurological incidents (head injuries, frontal lobe dysfunction, deficits in impulse control, skewed risk/reward processing, neurodevelopmental disorders).
- Childhood trauma includes physical, emotional, sexual abuse, neglect, family violence and broken attachments. Trauma is a risk factor, not a predictor of future behavior. Most abused children do not become serial killers,
- There is a high correlation between high ACE scores (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and criminal behavior. As ACE scores increase, so does violent offending, arrests and recidivism. [ACE Questionnaire](#)
- New areas of study focus on fantasy development. Researchers are finding common patterns of violent fantasies that develop years before an actual murder. Your serial killer may have spent extensive time, starting at a young age, imagining scenarios of violence, domination, control, or revenge.
- Next steps in research: (1) Exploring how a person moves from fantasy to murder and (2) developing interventions to disrupt this path.

Author's note: Not all psychopaths (currently called anti-social personalities) and narcissists become serial killers. Some become politicians. It is my hope that the only serial killers you meet in life are those you created.

*Excerpted from my contribution to a presentation made with author James L'Etoile for the Public Safety Writers' August 2026 Conference.

Ellen Kirschman is a retired police and public safety psychologist. She is the author of *I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know*; *I Love a Firefighter: What the Family Needs to Know*; *Counseling Cops: What Clinicians Need to Know* (with M. Kamena and J. Fay), and the five-book Dot Meyerhoff Mystery Series. Ellen is happy to consult with members of Sisters in Crime.

Finding My Flock at My First Sisters in Crime Showcase

by Carmela Dutra



Walking into the Sisters in Crime Northern California Spring Showcase at Book Passage in Corte Madera, I realized something almost immediately: I wasn't the nervous first-time author anymore, but I was definitely still the new kid on the block.

Hot Wings and Homicide is my second traditionally published cozy mystery, so technically I've graduated from "debut author" status. Yet every genre has its own community, its own familiar faces, and its own traditions. While I'd spent years attending events as an award-winning indie children's author and illustrator, this felt different. I wasn't just introducing readers to my books; I was introducing myself to an entirely new author family.

The showcase brought together ten mystery authors, each sharing a little about themselves, reading a brief passage, and celebrating their latest releases. Of course, selling books is always exciting—we all hope readers discover our stories—but I found the conversations to be even more valuable.

Between readings, I had the chance to chat with authors whose books I've admired, swap stories about our writing life, laughing over the wonderfully quirky realities of creating fictional murders, and discover just how generous this community is with encouragement and advice. There was no sense of competition. Instead, there was a shared understanding that we're all cheering for one another.

One thing that struck me throughout the afternoon was how many Sisters in Crime members came simply to support their fellow authors. They weren't there because they had a book to promote or a panel to participate in. They came to listen, to applaud, and to celebrate one another's accomplishments. As someone who firmly believes that authors should support authors, that meant a great deal to me.

Watching the audience beam with pride as each writer stepped up to the microphone was every bit as rewarding as taking my own turn. Even though many had only just met, I found myself

Finding my Flock, continued

genuinely excited for each author as they shared their stories. I wanted readers to connect with their books just as much as I hoped they would connect with mine. That spirit of generosity was contagious, and it beautifully reflected the values that Sisters in Crime is known for: advocacy, equity, inclusion, and community. As the newest face in the room, I never felt like an outsider. I felt welcomed.

Of course, meeting readers was equally rewarding. Seeing someone smile as they discovered my Bay Area food truck mysteries or hearing what drew them to cozy mysteries reminded me why I write in the first place. Every conversation was a chance to connect, whether someone left with one of my books or simply added it to their ever-growing to-be-read pile.

As authors, it's easy to measure an event by sales numbers. But looking back on my first Sisters in Crime showcase, that's not what stands out most. What I'll remember are the introductions that became conversations, the conversations that I hope will become long-term friendships, and the overwhelming sense that this is a community built on lifting one another up.

Books brought us into the room, but it was the people who made me want to come back.

I'm incredibly grateful to Sisters in Crime of Northern California for the invitation and to Book Passage for hosting such a wonderful afternoon. For this "new kid" in the mystery world, it wasn't just my first showcase. It was the beginning of feeling like I'd found my flock.

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.

The Stain

by Victoria Zackheim



I recently walked into my kitchen and discovered a large stain on the counter. Had I placed a hot pan there? Not likely. Spilled bleach? Definitely not. I wiped, scrubbed, gently scoured . . . nothing helped. And then I lifted my arm and noticed a change in the shape of the stain. I had been trying to remove a reflection of light coming through the kitchen window. I laughed and then wondered if this would have happened had I been younger. And then I did what any dedicated essayist would do: I recognized this as one of those mysteries of an aging life that I needed to remember, so I'm writing about it.

I recall a conversation with my daughter when she was 15. I was sharing my golden nuggets about life, the importance of making the most of our gifts, following our dreams. And then I delivered the never-to-be-forgotten line: One thing I don't want is to be an old woman looking back on my life and regretting all the things I never accomplished. There was a lengthy silence. What was she thinking? Had I impressed her? She looked at me, her lovely face generating a touch of pity, and she replied, "It's too late, Mom, you're already old."

I was 42. She is now 50. And yes, she does remember that discussion. And should she not, her teenage daughters remind her. It's family lore.

Perhaps that is why I'm thinking of a book. Not to share an endless list of my experiences—witty, tragic or otherwise—but to explore, with the help of friends. Some of them are writers heralded nationally and internationally, and they are never without thoughts and opinions and suggestions about aging. And some of them write about it. A bit of philosophy, a smattering of psychology, a tasty helping of juicy experiences, everything intended to keep readers up late, turning pages and excited about what's coming next.

Do you ever feel so energized that you cannot wait for the day to begin? Or . . . do you sometimes feel like one of those inflatable toys that you punch and it bounces back, but the "bounces back" part is no longer working? Joy, energy, depression, lethargy. We all feel it, all of it, at one time or another. So, if I actually wrote a book about aging, it would be about family dynamics, dreams, health, sexuality, politics, and a heavy dose of exploring not what we've accomplished in the past, but what awaits us in the future. This future—not the hereafter.

The Stain, continued

When I realized that I was trying to clean away that reflection of light, I laughed. Silly me. And then I wondered if this would have happened ten years ago . . . or five . . . or yesterday. We talk about searching for glasses that are perched on our head, putting car keys in the refrigerator. Forgetting the name of a friend. I've tried to answer the phone with the TV remote or turn on the TV with my cell phone.

I have finally come to that age where I realize that aging gracefully relies on accepting myself. I'm no longer concerned about changing people; I try to focus on where I can make a difference. Get Out the Vote phone calls, postcards, signing petitions, making donations. I have no obligation to listen to marketing pitches on the phone. I believe in entitlement. I'm entitled to live my life the way it works best for me; I've earned that right: I hang up without an explanation.

My mother said I was a late bloomer. Perhaps, but does age matter? Please tell me why a man of 80, fit and productive and libidinous, is viewed as a marvel, while a woman of 80, fit and productive and libidinous, is viewed as a source of humor.

So, yes, I am an older woman. But I do not want to be an old woman . . . at least not the kind of old woman whose primary joys in life are sleeping through the night and discussing my bowel movements with friends.

I had to give up the thought of being "middle-aged" when my children became middle-aged. I'd like to think that "older" suggests a continuum . . . there's always someone older than I. Carol Channing lived to 97. That gives me another 17 years to write, fall in love, manage crepey skin and liver spots, learn to make pasta on one of those machines . . . and find the perfect dress for walking the red carpet at the Oscars.

I recently asked friends how they felt about aging. Susana said she didn't have any debilitating ailments, so she was finding aging fun. She's 82 and submerged in neuroscience research around cognition. She's also a cancer survivor, has tumors in her lungs, a pacemaker, and lost her husband. And yet, for her, aging is . . . fun.

Regina, 82, a world traveler and bird watcher, believes that aging involves mourning the loss of physical and mental abilities. The trick is to be happy with whatever you have and realize you're not alone.

The Stain, continued

Anne was 84 when she delivered the manuscript of her novel – I think it was her 110th – and was working on the next when she fell ill. I recall her story about a book tour in France. A lovely hotel, elegant. . . but a very narrow bathtub. Getting in? Easy as pie. Getting out? Well, she could not. And there was no phone nearby, no one within earshot. So, she contemplated her possibilities. Panicking was not one of them. Not wanting to die in the tub, she emptied it. Good, drowning was now out. No hand grips, nowhere to get traction, no hoisting-the-body possibilities. So, she very carefully and painstakingly got herself turned around, until she was able to get onto all fours. . . and then pretty much did a Fosbury flop onto the bathroom floor. Later, when I asked her about aging, she laughed. “Thank heaven for magnifying mirrors! I can see my face well enough to put on my makeup, which is a very sobering experience. You have to be brave to grow old and still give everything your best shot!”

Aviva celebrated her 91st birthday. (Notice I didn’t say “turned 91,” because that sounds too much like fruit going rotten.) She recently gave up doing Zumba twice a week. She believes old age is absurd . . . and has its advantages. She can tell a gorgeously handsome and sexy man that he’s gorgeous and sexy without his thinking she has ulterior motive . . . even if she does. And she never has to hoist her luggage onto the overhead bin. A far different attitude than that held by her late husband, who believed that old age is a shipwreck.

Pat is 94, twice nominated for the Nobel Prize for her work with children internationally, and her organization to promote peace. Drop-dead beautiful as a young woman, drop-dead beautiful today, she gets around in a wheelchair, but her mind is as active and engaged as when she was 60. She knew she was getting old when people praised the agility of her body parts rather than the whole package. “Aging started with my skin,” she told me. “Then it gravitated towards my hair. . . what’s left of it.”

Which brings me to the subject of hair. Some of us tossed out the dye and went gray – what I prefer to call silver – long before it was fashionable. I inherited this silver mop from my genetic soup; the wrinkles and extra pounds were my own doing.

Liz is 80ish, a silver-haired artist who works non-stop. She said, “I really hate it when people say, ‘Ooh, I love your hair. You’re just so cute.’ One woman even gave the tip of my nose a playful tap.” Liz is under five feet, perhaps 90 pounds, opinionated and sometimes obstinate. You don’t tap her nose. Ever. She went on . . . “I used to pick up hitchhikers in the ‘70s and take them home and

The Stain, continued

have sex with them. I wanted to tell that to the bitch, but I settled instead for ‘Thanks, you're too kind.’”

I’ve published my seventh anthology. My first mystery novel came out last month and I’m well into writing the first sequel. I’m also working on a novel about something that happened in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in the early 1970s. I’m a freelance editor for writers of fiction and nonfiction. And I’m awaiting word on my new novel. I also teach Personal Essay in the UCLA Extension Writers’ Program. I work at least six days a week, often eight to twelve hours a day. I’m not bragging, although it may sound like that. What I’m doing is explaining what an elderly woman looks like. Yes, even a late bloomer. Energized. Excited. Sometimes a bit smug. Sometimes . . . a bit too smug. And increasingly aware of age. Not the coming of age. Not the ravages of age. But the never-far-from-reach reminders that I am, in the eyes of many, old.

Mary is 90 and has undergone cancer treatment. She told me, “I’m sorry I have nothing profound to say about aging and death. I stopped thinking about it when I realized that the very fact of being born is a death sentence.”

And then my dear Frank: “Anyone can get old. All you have to do is live long enough.”

Is being born a death sentence? Do we have to live a long life in order to know what it is to grow old? I realize that my life will come to an end. Perhaps tomorrow, or years from now. As for sleepless nights? Who can sleep when Chapter Four in the new novel isn’t working? Or the final scene is dragging and sure to disappoint? Or . . . one of my students has written a piece that’s in dire need of revisions, but refuses to accept suggestions to improve it?

Or friends are dying, and I’m helpless to change that . . . or heal them.

I see life as what happens when I’m awake, which makes wakefulness a precious time. Time to work, to read, to write about these mysteries we face as we age. Time to contemplate the night, the silence, the stars, all the while making deals with the universe that I will do my best . . . and please, in return, let me live long enough to see my grandchildren as adults, to know who they have become. That they are happy with their lives. And if they are not, I want to be there to listen and support...to give them all the love I’m able to give . . . and do for them whatever I can. No matter how old I am.

The Stain, continued

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 Erry's Daniel Pitt series, published by Random House/Ballantine April, 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>



Learning the Ropes: How I Became a Deckhand

by Lou Cook

Outside the Sailors' Union of the Pacific, the time is 7:45 a.m. I haven't been up this early in months, not since I joined the ranks of the unemployed. It is April 2003. For six months, I have been sending out resumes, searching for my next commercial interior design job. The tail end of any downturn is when architectural firms are hit the hardest, as past projects are finishing up and new ones are not easily found. Such is the case at the end of the dot com bust.



At the corner of Harrison and 1st Street, it's a cool morning with high clouds. The light breeze is humid. We are four blocks from the San Francisco Bay, on the steps of the stately, elegant union hall, at this time still the king of Rincon Hill. We await the unlocking of the glass entry doors.

A handful of men mill about. I wonder what has brought each of them here today. Are they all looking for work, too? I wonder what else happens in this building, besides the deckhand training class I am here to attend. I am the lone female, 67% awake after my 20-minute bike ride to downtown, my brain not ready yet for human interaction. Normally at this time I would be warm in bed, still asleep or hoping for more sleep before yet another day of sending out more resumes.

We loiter with the expectation of the hall doors opening at 8:00 a.m. Desultory conversation floats by. I can't tell if any of these men knew each other before this morning or if this camaraderie sprang up as a way to mark time.

The truck driver drove down from Ukiah. For the day. A trip of 115 miles, one way. My 20-minute bike ride shrinks to molehill insignificance.

An inspection of and discussion about the new parking meters ensues. They have a digital time readout rather than the tried-and-true printed dial. The new meters aren't working. Does anyone know why? Do they have to get "turned on" somehow?

"They do," someone opines. Nobody knows when. At the least, this is inconvenient, but worse is the potentially expensive ticket for the person who has appointments and cannot wait around for meters to be turned on.

Arrayed on the broad, shallow steps are two personal-size Playmate coolers and two red backpacks. One cell phone is extant. This is right before cell phones get big. Pagers are on the way out, but I don't know that. I plan to get a pager. They are cheaper than a cell phone, and

Learning the Ropes, continued

communication is key. As a result of joining the Inlandboatmen's Union, I will need to be reachable for those deckhand jobs that come up last minute. I figure to get a cell phone, just not right yet. However, pagers are so far on the way out, they are almost impossible to locate. Sooner than I expect, I own my first cell phone.

It nears 8:00 a.m. The "stand and chat" group edges toward the center door of the many doors arrayed across the grand building entry. A paper sign is taped on the center door: Use This Door.

I am a silent sitter on the cold stone steps, off to the side of the center doors. A fellow sitter a few feet to my right watches the group hover near the doors and mutters to himself " . . . think it's a rock concert, or somethin." I agree silently. It is too early to be so eager.

It figures that at least some of these people are here for the same reason I am—the 3-1/2-day deckhand class. To join the Inlandboatmen's Union of the Pacific and work as a ferry or tugboat deckhand, you need to pass the class. To be in the class this morning, you would have visited the union hall in the past year or so and had your name and contact information written down on a page in a notebook. This is The List. The List keeps track of interested potential deckhands.

I capitalize The List because of the way it is mentioned. As in, "Are you on The List yet?" Or "You have to get on The List." The List is step one in the process of working on ferries or tugboats on inland waters. At the hall, you sign up and are told that the union will mail out letters to the top 100 names on The List a month before the class. When is the next class? There is no set time. Letters are sent out from zero to three times a year. When jobs become difficult to fill because not enough people show up to the union hall for the daily Job Call, The List is opened. Letters sent out. A very small percentage of the 100 ever show up at 8:00 a.m.

And here we are, on this April morning. Later I learn that some waited eight or nine months or more. I know of one person who waited a year and a half before receiving a letter. And then there are a few who hardly wait at all. My wait was six months, much of it spent in my hunt for commercial interior design jobs and/or Auto/Cad drafting work. The dot com bust did a number on such jobs. My 15 years of experience means nothing.

8:00 a.m. The two center glass doors are unlocked. We sitters follow the eager standees inside. Those of us here for the class are directed to a very large, double-height room. Our footsteps echo off plaster walls and terrazzo floor. This is the Sailors' Union of the Pacific hiring hall, also used by the IBU. Against the left wall is a very wide whiteboard and a long standing-height counter. Before the very large windows in the far wall is a collection of tables and chairs. We take seats at the beat-up tables by the windows.

We are: nine men and two women—aged 20-something to 40-something.

Learning the Ropes, continued

The windows have not been cleaned recently. They provide an uninspiring view of a crude dirt parking lot and some downtown buildings. We don't know it, but the grey light from these north-facing windows will soon be blocked by a tall, flashy apartment building that will dwarf the union hall and crowd out what little light and view there is.

The class moves into gear about 8:30. There are three latecomers: one at 9:05, a middle-aged man, snarled in traffic. The second, a younger man, arrives at about 9:10. He slides quietly in, saying nothing, inadvertently choosing to sit in the instructor's chair. He is informed of the fact and slides into a nearby chair. That one is also taken, though at that moment it is empty because the meter feeders are out at the meters, which are now "on."

I watch the silent comedy as he tries another meter-feeder's chair, and then finally selects one which has not been claimed. A man pops in about 9:30, with a stage whisper to the instructor that he called ahead to say he would be late.

The latecomers get the handouts and the class continues.

It is announced that in the future, latecomers will be kicked out immediately. We are training for a job where the "office" sails off on schedule. Lateness is not tolerated. It will get you fired, and the first place to be on time is this class.

On this Monday, we total 15 students and three instructors. Two of the people I had thought were students are actually instructors. The eldest of the three instructors runs class in a relaxed yet shipshape style. This is Chuck. I learn later that he designed the class because more and more people without any maritime or boat experience were joining the union.

We begin with pages of vessel terminology. Although I haven't done any sailing recently, my boating background is useful. I know these words. Throughout the week, we will spend a lot of time on fire classification, fire safety, fire prevention and fire extinguishment; learn to tie three basic knots; and get introduced to the life of the sailor through stories and examples.

Chuck's best tip of the week: a good crew makes your day a joy; an **shole on the crew makes the day torture. Don't be that **shole. Some years later, when I bid on a crew where Chuck is the lead deckhand, I learn that for me, Chuck is a good crewmate. But not everybody would agree. A crew is like a bunch of chemicals: some compounds put together will naturally blow up. Strife on a crew makes life terrible. But then, a day on the water is always better than a day chained to a desk.

Now and then, the other two instructors pipe up with comments or get up to play their own scenes. The echoey hiring hall makes it a challenge to hear. This union hall is home to several

Learning the Ropes, continued

unions. People in between deep-sea jobs come here to hang out with their friends, play cards, and watch for deep-sea jobs to be posted on the giant whiteboard against the wall. They resent being asked to pipe down and send us a lot of side-eye.

We watch the 10:15 IBU job call. The “casual” IBU members, those without steady jobs, come in to “bid” for the jobs called in by the boat companies around the bay that hire IBU crews. High card gets the job. A casual deckhand will substitute for the regular crew member, who is out for one of various reasons: sick, on vacation, or out on injury are the most common.

You start in the union as a D Card, at apprentice wages and on the bottom of the shipping list. Above you are the A, B and C shipping cards. The hours you work build up into “deck time.”

With 720 hours of deck time, you join the union as a full book member and get your C Card. As you build up your deck time, you move up the shipping list. High shipping cards can work fairly steadily through the winter months when jobs are scarcer.

After lunch break, the class goes down to the docks. Excitement! We prowls around boats that are not in service. We study vessel layout, draw locations of fire safety equipment and rescue gear. We work with the m.o.b. (man overboard) equipment and practice tying up the lines. We go below to explore the engine room: two huge engines—just one of them as big as my first car; two generators; steering gear; various valves, pumps, batteries, electrical panels, wiring, and pipes.

We get further introduction to sea life and hear more sailor stories. I am entranced by it all.

Deck-handing is definitely not for everyone. By Tuesday, people have begun to self-deselect, including the truck driver. Our group has shrunk to eleven. The class moves to the library, a smaller room not tortured with echoes. It is much easier to hear. On Wednesday only eight students show. Thursday, the last day, is the half day. We now number seven: two females, and five males. We take the written test and prove we can tie our knots. Everybody passes.

At the Inlandboatmens’ Union office, we join the line for registration with the union. We pay our first dues and get our D Cards. Each card is numbered. A date stamp shows when dues were paid. We can now bid for jobs at the daily job call. In the end, only two from my class stick it out and get steady work: me and one guy. We end up working together fairly regularly.

After registration, there is one more class section. Labor union history. Mostly this is a video. The people deeply involved with unions speak of the importance of unions for working people. Union rights are being eroded every year, but remember: unions brought us the eight-hour workday, two-day weekends, sick pay, holiday pay and much more. People died for union rights.

Learning the Ropes, continued

In 2003, spring is a good time to join the union. 'The Season' is just starting. The Season runs roughly May through October. Ferry boats are added to handle the summer tourists, and boats are chartered for summer parties. This means more jobs available for us casual deckhands.

As I started my new life, I figured, if deck work is scarce or if I find don't like it, I can always go back to the drafting and design world. But I never did. I never even considered it. To be sitting in front of a computer again, day after day, I couldn't face it. Working outside, crossing the captivating San Francisco Bay, rain, fog, stars or shine, suits me better than any other job I ever had. The petty humors of humans recede in the sweep of time, weather and beauty of the bay.

On my very first job, my lead deckhand, who previously worked in a bank, passed on to me something his uncle, also a mariner, had told him. "Sooner or later, all the crazies show up down at the wharf."

"Fabulous," I thought, as I wiped down handrails and benches wet with dew and occasional 'deposits' from the sea gulls. "I'll fit right in!"

This was the beginning. Langston Hughes, Jack Kerouac, Jack London, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, and Richard Henry Dana, Jr., who wrote *Two Years Before the Mast*, all went to sea. Anyone who has ever sailed anywhere can attest that being at sea provides time to stare at the water and think. Decking allowed me the time and material to write my first novel, *Murkey's, A Rabbit Noir*, starring the Rabbit, Bunz Bunzini. Curiosity for the Bay grew into love, as I wove bay history into this waterfront tale of Rabbit mayhem and Moose marauders. Recently, I retired. I miss being on the bay every day, but my time is happily filled with finishing up *Guys and Donuts*, the prequel to *Murkey's, A Rabbit Noir*.

Lou Cook has lived on both coasts but views the West Coast as her home. Her love of the San Francisco Bay and its history are woven into her essays and novels. For over 20 years, sun, fog or rain, she sailed with the best on the Bay, working on the ferries as a deckhand.



Cannabis Crimes

by Vinnie Hansen

I was last stoned from a contact high at a Jethro Tull concert in the Forum. That should adequately date me. So, in my novel *Crime Writer*, when I plopped my protagonist's tiny home on the edge of an illegal cannabis grow, I had catching up to do. As they say, write what you know, OR know what you write. I plunged down the research rabbit hole and came up with more fun facts about weed than I could use in my book.

Did you know that Californians consume a whopping 3.8 million pounds of marijuana a year! Put that in your pipe and smoke it. In 2015, a study found among those 12 and older, 15% had used marijuana during the previous year. By 2025, a different study found that 37% of adults had used cannabis in the prior three months. If you think someone is high, there's a good chance you're right.

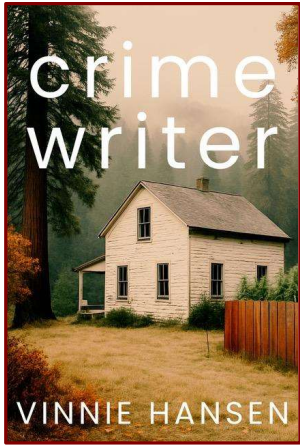


Federally, cannabis is illegal. The recent modifications to its Schedule 1 drug classification (alongside heroin), haven't changed that fact. It is, however, legal in 24 states, including California, of course. Yet, in 2024, roughly 60 percent of the cannabis sold in California was of the illegal variety. Why? Legalization has meant commercialization. The CannaBIZ is tough and competitive. In Santa Cruz County alone, six marijuana operations went belly up in the 2021-22 fiscal year. In California there are currently more surrendered or inactive licenses than active ones.



The politics of the new industry have created this reality. When proposed, the law to legalize intended to restrict the size of grows by issuing permits for only five acres. However, they did not restrict the number of permits one could get. People with deep pockets and/or connections bought multiple permits and squeezed little guys right back to growing illegally. Like an illegal grower I interviewed, my character Harvey does not have the temperament to deal with bureaucracy and politics.

Cannabis Crimes, continued



Green was supposed to be the new gold, but legal cannabis is taxed: excise tax, cultivation tax, manufacturing tax, and local sales tax. Add to that the cost of storefronts and personnel. Legal cannabis is expensive, creating a thriving black market for cheaper illegal marijuana. Plus, someone has to supply those 26 “dry” states. Market forces have caused some legal growers to sell out the back door into the black market.

Even though I had to educate myself about the cannabis industry, setting many of my scenes on an illegal pot farm proved to be a great choice for the plot of *Crime Writer*. Illegal grows are by necessity isolated. No one wants law enforcement around, even when things go horribly wrong, as they do in *Crime Writer*. Isolation and secrecy were great for putting my protagonist in danger and creating tension.

As a bonus, illegal grows are not the only crime associated with cannabis. The industry is rife with potential to explore in crime fiction. Since federally, marijuana remains illegal, its use, sale, and possession remain crimes as far as the US government is concerned. While the federal law is generally not enforced in states where cannabis is legal, it’s a different matter if a farmer wants to take advantage of “dry” state markets. One of the characters in my book is indeed producing old-fashioned brick weed to ship out of state. Money is the motive, of course.

Legal growers want to see the competition of illegal growers stamped out. Both legal and illegal growers are struggling to survive, which means there’s plenty of friction between the two groups to exploit in a work of fiction.

They also both face theft. Field bandits, which come into play in *Crime Writer*, range from a solitary vagrant digging up a plant to organized bands invading a field. The organized gangs also strike retail cannabis stores. Here in Santa Cruz, eight burglars broke into a legal cannabis business. The owner, alerted by an alarm, arrived before the police, allegedly opened fire with a semiautomatic rifle, and rammed his car into the getaway vehicles. The suspects escaped, but the business owner faces felony gun charges.

Retail theft gangs have become so common, they have their own acronym, ORC, Organized Retail Crime. They often target upscale stores and merchandise with high resale value. Cannabis is one of those items.

Cannabis Crimes, continued

Cannabis and crime. The perfect combo for *Crime Writer*, now available wherever fine books are sold.

Still sane(ish) after 27 years of teaching high school English, Vinnie Hansen has retired and plays keyboards with ukulele groups in Santa Cruz, California, where she lives with her husband and the requisite cat. She also writes fiction. A Claymore and a Silver Falchion finalist, Vinnie is the author of the Carol Sabala mystery series, the novels *Lostart Street*, *One Gun*, and *Crime Writer*, as well as over 70 published short works



to our newest members
(joining SinC NorCal from April 1, 2026 through June 30, 2026)

Shelley Adina Bates
Susan Baughman
Sarah Bobson
Susie Hara
Bruce Janigian
Lindsay Kent

James L'Etoile
Bruce Miller
Brad Parks
Valerie Saul
Jay Siegel

Member Profile: Lynda McDaniel

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



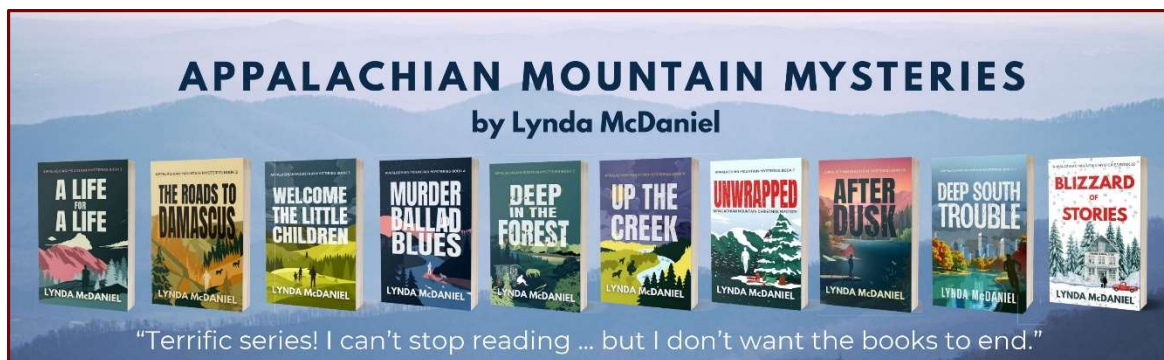
Lynda McDaniel, originally from Cleveland, OH, has lived all over the United States and has recently settled in Novato, CA. Lynda is the author of 21 books, including her Appalachian Mysteries series and a nonfiction series, in addition to more than 1,200 articles for major magazines and newspapers.

Stiletta: When and why did you first start writing?

Lynda McDaniel: Although it was decades ago, I can still see the driveway lined with tall pines and sun-dappled daffodils. I'd found the Campbell Folk School, an amazing center for art, craft, and music (and featured in my novels as The Hickson School of American Studies). My creativity blossomed there, and eventually the director asked if I'd like to learn public relations. To be honest, I should have answered, "What's that?" Instead, I said, "Sure," and took to it like ink to newsprint. I haven't stopped writing since.

Stiletta: Please tell us about your nine-book Appalachian Mysteries, starting with *A Life for a Life* in 2016, and how they were influenced by your years living in the North Carolina mountains.

LM: I write my Appalachian Mountain Mysteries to share stories from my back-to-the-land experience in the North Carolina mountains some 40 years earlier. After I'd moved away to the big cities of Washington, D.C., Seattle, and the Bay Area (I like variety!), I never forgot how the mountain people changed my life for the better. I also wanted to shed some positive light on this maligned area of the U.S.



Member Profile: Lynda McDaniel, continued

I also want to spread more kindness and friendship in a world that's turned on itself. Sure, these mysteries include crimes and some violence, but underlying each book is a strong sense of caring for one another.

I've kept writing these mysteries because of my readers. They tell me they love the characters, especially Abit Bradshaw. In the first book of the series, *A Life for a Life*, Abit had a supporting role, but I listened to their comments and made him the protagonist in the rest of the series. I also enjoy developing new characters, many of whom are inspired by people I met in the mountains.



Stiletta: Almost all of the books in the series have Mollie the Wonder Dog as a character. What is Mollie's role in the series, and what was your inspiration for the character?

LM: Mollie was my dog for four years. I wish it had been 40. I've loved every one of my dogs, but I have to admit that Mollie was the best. Maybe she was my favorite because she was taken from us way too early. Whatever, I decided to make her live forever in the Appalachian Mountain Mysteries. (Don't bother to do the math from when she first came to live on Abit's farm to now. It's impossible, but I'm sticking to it!) My Mollie was every bit as fun and loving and smart as Mollie in the series.

Stiletta: Will there be more Appalachian Mysteries?

LM: This year marks the 10th anniversary of Abit Bradshaw and Della Kincaid teaming up in Laurel Falls, N.C. to fight for justice. Of course, they've been in my head for longer than that, but the publication date for *A Life for a Life* is August 16, 2016. Funny, it seems longer. I can't imagine life without them.

Ten years to the day this month, I'll publish the tenth book, *Blizzard of Stories*, a collection of short stories. Over the years, I've developed many new characters, and while they served their purposes well, even I didn't know much about their backstories. So it seems fitting for the tenth novel to feature short stories delving into their earlier lives.

The structure for the book involves a blizzard blowing through the mountains. At various times throughout the storm, characters arrive at series HQ--Coburns General Store--seeking shelter. They are welcomed with a blazing woodstove and hearty food, but to earn their keep they need to tell a story from their past that involves a mystery. The results are as varied as the quirky gang huddling around the fire.

Member Profile: Lynda McDaniel, continued

Stiletta: Tell us a bit about your pre-writing career(s).

LM: I started writing at such an early (adult) age that there isn't much "pre" to talk about. While at the Folk School, I not only learned how to write articles and press releases, I wore many hats. I registered and greeted students who came from all over the U.S. to learn mountain crafts, music, and dance; organized events and workshops; and launched the annual Fall Festival that still thrives today. The Folk School was such an enriching experience!

Stiletta: What made you write your nonfiction Write Faster Series? Please tell us a little about the three books in that series and the recognition you received for writing them.

LM: Early on, I personally struggled with self-confidence in just about everything, especially my writing. When I finally realized what a waste that was, I wanted to share some insights to help others. For example, I'd met hundreds of people who wanted to write, but they thought they were lousy writers because their first drafts were so bad. Of course, no one handles this better than Anne Lamott, but I focused on writing in the workplace because that was where I saw so much squandered potential. As a result, I had the good fortune to teach and coach at various companies such as Microsoft, Visa, Wells Fargo, and Boeing.

My first book in the series, *Words at Work*, shares a dozen of my own trepidations and failures in hopes of showing readers they're not alone—and what a little perseverance can deliver. *Words at Work* is about learning how to tap into your deepest thoughts and present them in an organized and compelling way. It's about thinking big and writing big. I was thrilled when it won the National Best Books Award in Writing & Publishing.

The other two books, *How Not to Sound Stupid When You Write* and *How to Write Stories that Sell* are companion books with more details about grammar and how-to.

Through this series, I want readers to appreciate that writing is so much more than stringing words together. The process of writing can help clarify thoughts and uncover ideas they didn't know they had. I appreciate the boon to business that email and text-messaging can be. Quick questions, fast answers, no postage—I'm all for that! But what troubles me about all this slapdash writing is that it cuts off the creative process. Every invention, every good idea was first pondered and perfected through writing. When we write only short email and text messages, our ability to develop our thoughts shrivels, along with our ability to persuade, sell, teach, improve, guide, change, contribute, and create.

Stiletta: You have chosen to self-publish your books. What would you tell aspiring or beginning authors about the pros and cons of self-publishing?

Member Profile: Lynda McDaniel, continued

LM: This has been debated by authors far wiser, so I'll just mention some of the things I like about self-publishing (and admit to a few drawbacks).

1. I love the creative control of indie publishing. These are my books, and I know what I want to say. Of course, I have a few beta readers and a proofreader to make sure I made myself clear.
2. I also appreciate the timing of publication. No long waits to fit into someone else's schedule. For example, when I wrote the prequel novelette, *Waiting for You*, I was able to publish in a matter of a month.
3. When reader preferences change, indie authors can shift much quicker and more easily.
4. I enjoy not being remaindered. I still receive benefits and profits from books I wrote a decade or more ago.
5. Even the marketing is enjoyable for me, as it is personal and intuitive. As I understand it from my traditionally published colleagues, they need to do a lot of their own marketing as well.

As for drawbacks, print distribution for indie authors is undeniably more difficult. But with the wide-ranging opportunities in online book retailing, I don't worry about that anymore. I appreciate what publishers do behind the scenes for their authors, such as pitching books for reviews, awards, and articles. That would be nice! And, of course, there's the stigma against indie authors, though I see that changing thanks to many bestselling indie authors. What tenacity that takes; I admire them.

Stiletta: You have also done some other jobs in the publishing world and indicate you are still accepting limited referrals for book coaching, editing, and publishing. Can you tell us a little about that?

LM: I love helping writers and authors live into their dreams. As I mentioned earlier, there are so many misconceptions about the writing process; add in internal fears, and writing becomes an uphill battle. Fortunately, when I show my clients how writing really works and they allow themselves to just write (without all the stopping and starting and self-doubt), they create amazing stories and articles. One of my favorite adages I coined seems to resonate with them: "Good writing is really good editing; bad writers just stopped too soon." I also help them with indie marketing techniques if they choose to publish that way.

Stiletta: You have written more than 1,200 articles! What types of articles do you enjoy writing and for what publications?

LM: Many of these articles were for arts and culture magazines such as *Southern Living*, *Country Living*, *AmericanStyle*, *Southwest Art*, *Yoga Journal*, *American Cinematographer*, and *Chile Pepper*. Newspaper articles about art, food, and business ran in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *washingtonpost.com*, among others.

Member Profile: Lynda McDaniel, continued

My favorite assignments came from *Appalachia*, a print publication of the Appalachian Regional Commission. I'd moved to Washington, D.C. by then, and I parlayed my Appalachian and writing experiences into story assignments about unsung heroes doing remarkable things to help their region. I'll never forget Eula Hall, who built a clinic in Kentucky for coal miners afflicted with black lung disease. She started on a picnic table with two volunteer doctors and raised money by taking milk jugs down to the railroad crossing. When folks had to slow their vehicles down anyway, Eula would get them to throw coins into the jugs. Eventually she received grants and built as fine a clinic as you'd find anywhere. The people I interviewed for these stories deepened my appreciation for the region.

Stiletta: You are the founder of *Spellbound Mystery Magazine*. What should we know about it, including what types of articles it includes?

LM: To be precise, I am the Founder and Chief Suspect at *Spellbound Mystery Magazine*! Just kidding, but I like the way that lets folks know this magazine is all about fun and a little relaxation in our hyper world. I started it as an alternative to boring author newsletters (which I wrote plenty of!), and it's shifted into a celebration of indie authors and under-the-radar authors. *Spellbound's* mission is twofold: finding good mysteries for subscribers while supporting mystery authors. It comes out twice a month on Substack and features author interviews, mystery reviews, original short stories, puzzles, quizzes, and fun! We even have a short, short story contest with (modest) cash prizes. Subscription tiers are both free and paid. <https://spellboundmysterywriters.substack.com/>

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

LM: : I'm new to the organization, but I look forward to participating and helping with what needs doing. I know it takes a lot of volunteer power to make the chapter and organization as successful as it has been for years

Lynda McDaniel was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

G.M. Malliet's seventh St. Just book, *Death and the Final Cut*, is available for pre-order in paperback. It is also available for free as a Kindle Unlimited download.

My Twin the Murderer, Lindsay Kent's debut psychological thriller, was published by BookBaby on June 20. Estranged identical twins Evelyn and Vivian must face off against a murder rap, the psychedelic mafia, and each other in this twisty, mind-bending thriller.

Pat Morin's *Moloch and the Angel*, a psychological thriller about a psychic sociopath who is out to murder a psychic shrink, was released on July 15.

Sisters at an Exhibition by Claudia Hagadus Long will be released on August 18 by Sibylline Press. Sisters Zara and Lilly, intrepid sleuths of a certain age, track a possibly-fake Caravaggio, a missing curator, and a charming but evil conman.

Beyond a Reasonable Duck, book #3 in Claudia H. Long's Simpato Mystery series, will be published on October 9 by Sybilline Digital First.

The Postmistress of Puddlington by Laura Jensen Walker was published on August 4 by Severn House. Laura describes it as a semi-epistolary tale of English women on the home front doing their bit in WWII Dorset. Those women include: movie-loving vicar's daughter Violet turned Land Girl; her best friend Nora, serving as a Wren (Royal Navy); Mary, the vicar's wife and president of the WI; Minerva Winterbottom, the bohemian lady of the manor (and former suffragette); and bookish "spinster" postmistress Hester, who links them all together.

The Pilgrimage of Primrose Honeychurch by Laura Jensen Walker will be published on October 20 by Lake Union Publishing. It is her women's fiction debut about a solitary, curmudgeonly senior with sensory issues who prefers books to people. At 70, Primrose follows her dream of visiting Hay-on-Wye, the legendary Welsh "Town of Books." Only her literary pilgrimage just won't follow the plot.

A Reckoning in Mercy by T.E. MacArthur was published on July 1 by Indies United Publishing House, LCC. Injustice for the living. A reckoning for the dead. Thena calls it a classic Western ghost story, with suspense, a little mystery, a touch of romance, and coffee blend.

Poppy Montgomery Gets Even, Gordon Jack's debut cozy mystery, was published by The Mysterious Press on June 9. For more information about the book, see Gordon's article on page 6.

Heather Haven's new novel, *Cleopatra Almost Slept Here*, debuted August 15. The Alvarez family is on the vacation of a lifetime that seems to be out to kill them.

Member News, continued

New and Upcoming Releases (continued)

All Aboard for Murder, Book #3 in Ellen Byron's Golden Motel Mystery series, was released on July 28 by Kensington Cozies. *A Murderer's Guide to Mardi Gras*, book #5 in Ellen's award-winning Vintage Cookbook Mystery series, will come out on August 4 from Severn House.

G.M. Malliet has an article titled "Magdalene Duchateau: A Frenchwoman Abroad in the English Mystery" in *Mystery Readers Journal* (Mysteries Set in France, Volume 42, No. 2, Summer 2026) about her French sleuth who appears in over a half dozen short stories published in *The Strand* or in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. <https://mysteryreaders.org/journal-index/mysteries-set-in-france-2026/>

Public Appearances

Lindsay Kent invites fellow members in the area to attend the following events launching her debut psychological thriller, *My Twin the Murderer*: August 5 at 6:00 p.m., Lit Nite, La Honda, 8856 La Honda Road (free); August 6 at 6:00 p.m., Kepler's Books, Menlo Park; August 8 at 7:00 p.m., Professor Seagull's Smartshop Gallery, San Francisco; August 19 at 7:00 p.m., Clio's Books, Oakland; September 26 at 7:00 p.m., HMB OddFellows screening and book reading, 7:00 p.m. Events will include clips of Lindsay's documentary about the SF counter-culture, as well as excerpts from her new book.

A launch party for Claudia Hagadus Long's *Sisters at an Exhibition* will be held on August 21 at 7:00 p.m. at Copperfields Montgomery Village (Santa Rosa)

Ellen Byron will be at the Sacramento History Museum at 5:30 p.m. on August 14 for an event titled "An Author's Gold Country Journey," facilitated by Richard Merideth, where she'll share about the personal and professional inspiration behind her new Golden Motel Mystery, *All Aboard for Murder*.

Join Laura Jensen Walker as Catriona McPherson interviews Laura about her semi-epistolary historical, *The Postmistress of Puddlington*, dubbed "a must-read for fans of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*," on Saturday, August 8 at 4:00 p.m. at Old Haunts Bookshop, 8789 Auburn-Folsom Rd., Ste. C, Granite Bay, CA. There will be treats and prizes! Space is limited, so please RSVP to laura.oldhauntsbookshop.com.

Ellen Byron and Catriona McPherson will be in conversation at Old Haunts Bookshop (8789 Auburn Folsom Rd., Ste. C, Granite Bay, CA) at 2:00 p.m. on August 16 to celebrate the release of Ellen's *All Aboard for Murder* and Catriona's release of her latest thriller, *The Dead Room*. There will be gift card and bear plushie giveaways! Old Haunts is asking attendees to RSVP to this link: [Ellen Byron at Old Haunts Bookshop August 16](#)

Member News, continued

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Claudia H. Long's *Truck a Duck* received an honorable mention at the San Francisco Book Fair in the general fiction category. *Truck a Duck* is the second Simpato Mystery, featuring cannabis-cookie-selling nuns, food truck wars, endless duck puns, and of course, a murder.

Several SinC NorCal members have been nominated for Macavity Awards from Mystery Readers International for work published in 2025: Best Mystery Novel - James L'Etoile for *River of Lies*; Sue Feder Memorial Historical Mystery - Claire M. Johnson for *City Lights* and Rob Osler for *The Case of the Missing Maid*.

Two members of SinC NorCal are finalists for the 2026 Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award in the Comedy category: Cindy Sample for *All's Faire in Love and War* and Charlotte Stuart for *In\$urance Blues*, a John Smith Mystery. Winners will be announced at the Killer Nashville Awards Dinner on August 22 in Franklin, Tennessee.



Question of the Quarter



What is your writing kryptonite – in other words, what can pull you away from writing?

If I leave my writing room and find a mess anywhere in the house, I've got to clean. Unfortunately, if I clean up the mess in the kitchen, other messes in the house magically start to appear, and I can't get back to writing until they're taken care of. Strangely, this kryptonite *doesn't* work if I'm writing a really good scene. ***Victoria Kazarian***

A phone call from one of my grandchildren. I can easily be persuaded to have fun with them. ***Nannette Potter***

My kryptonite varies with the seasons. In summer, an opportunity to see my grandkids trumps (pardon the expression) everything else. Also, an invitation from a friend to go hiking in the winter, an invitation to grab a cup of coffee with a friend can happily fill the entire morning, so hard to get back to work after that. ***Diane Schaffer***

In short: anything can pull me away. This is particularly the case if life is not going my way, things are very hectic, or I'm experiencing physical issues of any kind. All I need is any sort of excuse. The harder thing is to claw back. Having a regular schedule, meetings like our Dropin Writing help with that. ***Susan Bickford***

When I worked 9-5 jobs, I'd go out to my car for lunch . . . and write. I'd come home at night . . . and write. When I went on safari to Africa, there was time for an afternoon siesta built into our schedule. No siesta for me. I wrote. On the bus, when we were moving from place to place, I wrote. The only thing that can "pull me away" from writing is if I make a decision to give myself a break. Even then, I get itchy if it's more than a few days. I'm a writer. That's what I do. ***Terry Shames***

There isn't much. You'll never get a novel written if you can be pulled away. So I have to answer that other than illness or a family emergency – ptui, ptui – it doesn't happen. And the "ptui" in the sentence was the sound of me spitting into the air the way my Italian ancestors did to ward off the curse of such a thing. ***Heather Haven***

Sewing projects (i.e., historical costuming). Or painting. Two creative endeavors that can reroute my artistic energy. ***Thena MacArthur***

Dark chocolate (Trader Joe's with almonds; Endangered Species with espresso). A new Scandinavian mystery episode on Roku. Any invitation to spend time with my grandchildren, in person or via assorted apps. ***Victoria Zackheim***

Question of the Quarter, continued

What can pull me away from writing? Since I write full-time and am running my little S-Corp on my own, a lot of things sure try! My writing hours are fixed, though: 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. Since I write three to four books a year, I need to stick to say a schedule. However, marketing, month-end bookkeeping, and the distant howl of social media are always trying to encroach on that time. The trouble is, they're all things that have to be done. So I use time blocks to solve the dilemma. Most important time block is for the writing. Marketing, accounting, taxes . . . they all go into the morning blocks, assisted by coffee. And social media is relegated to an evening block. *Shelley Adina Bates*

My dogs, particularly. Do I owe them a walk? Is it dinner time? Why are they barking? Why is Charley bumping my leg with her nose? But more generally, it is my hard-to-ignore caretaking personality. A call from my children, a friend in need, empty oriole feeders, plants that need watering. *Mary Adler*

Nothing can pull me away from writing once I'm in the zone. Before I get to that point, though, pretty much any "sparkly thing" can pull me way. *G.M. Malliet*

This month (July), FIFA! Such positive TV watching people of the world come together, visiting America happy and cheering and full of good will in stadiums across this country, in Vancouver and Mexico instead of the usual negativity of news reporting. The most popular sport in the world balances reality for me. (Plus good-looking men in shorts and knee socks kicking a ball up and down the playing field. And each other.) *Aletheia Morden*

This is a hard one to answer because I love to write. It is my escape and often a more interesting environment than real life. But . . . (1) I procrastinate when I hit a wall. Whether I am dealing with the flow of a short story or a section in a WIP novel, sometimes I know I am stuck, though I can't identify the reason. I step back from the work and think about it. Take a walk. Do something else that is physical. At some point, it will jump-start my thoughts again and allow me to see my scene(s) from a different perspective. One time when I was lagging in novel #1 in the Mahuenga series, my protagonist blurted out something that should have been obvious to me and turned the case in another direction—the right direction. (2) I know many people say that one should write a certain number of words per day. That doesn't work for me. I throw away too many sheets of paper. I only write when I am ready to say something, so I don't waste energy. However, I also consider plotting and thinking as a big part of my writing process, whether or not I am churning out a daily word count. *Elena Smith*

These days I rarely get a chance to write, but I did take a writing weekend a few weeks ago. I spent four days in Bodega Bay, just enough time to shore up my most recent play. It's entitled *Absence of Evidence*. It's a true crime story written in a play. During those four days I just wrote and wrote and wrote. I can say that I took four days out of my life to dedicate to writing because I rarely have interrupted time to write. *Maureen Studer*

Question of the Quarter, continued

My kryptonite is saying yes to too many outside and inside distractions that keep me from my limited time to write. I'm learning to politely say (to outside demands) that I already have plans or that my schedule is already overflowing. Then I walk away before I can be badgered into volunteering. I didn't realize how many internal distraction habits I had until I started tracking my time. Reading, news websites, YouTube craft videos, doom scrolling, and even my never-ending decluttering all seem to call my name more loudly than getting words in the page. Two books have really helped me: *Atomic Habits* by James Clear helped me organize my daily priorities. *The Daily Artist's Way: 365 Meditations for Creative Living* by the guru of creativity, Julia Cameron, gives me daily inspiration to create. Now I look at my schedule for the day and decide where my writing time will be. Having a concrete intention makes keeping my writing appointment easier. The NorCal Zoom write-ins have resulted in great progress on my WIP. May you find a way to keep your writing time near the top of your priority list. **Betsy (Janet) Barker**

I've always been boringly disciplined. When it's time to write, not much gets in my way. People used to ask me how I came by such discipline, and the answer came easily: "The power company, my landlord, the telephone company." In other words, I have bills to pay! But sure, a beautiful day begs for a walk along the ocean or through the woods. And I love to make things—from building an authentic-looking English pub in my home to creating a handy pegboard tool organizer. (What a thrill to find the right screwdriver without pawing through a tangled toolbox!) And if I'm struggling with a scene, I walk my dog or go out to dinner and let my subconscious work its magic. Invariably, I get an ah-ha. Time away is good for writers. **Lynda McDaniel**

Everything! **Ellen Byron**

Thanks to Lynda McDaniel for this question!



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