THE STILETTA

VOLUME 27, ISSUE 4 **NOVEMBER 2026**

Sisters in Crime Northern California Chapter

What I Learned at Book Fairs

About eight years ago, I packed up my books for the first time and tried to market them at a book fair. The whole marketing thing confused me and I didn't sell anything--nada, nothing, zip. Fast forward to this year. I've had opportunities to host a NorCal SinC table at both the Sacramento Book Festival and the San Jose Book Festival, and another is coming up in Napa in November.



My approach to both the old and new festivals and the outcomes couldn't be more different. At the first few I attended, I liked sitting at the table (probably hiding behind the table is a better way to describe it), smiling and nodding at fairgoers. Now I interact. Not only do I go out of my way to talk to people, but I'm selling books. I've met all kinds of readers, such as the private detective who was attracted by the crime scene tape (that's our trademark decoration). He mentioned he had worked on a serial killer investigation when he was a cop. Now that was a conversation that had the hair standing up on the back of my neck. Then there was the open water swimmer who saw my book poster that included the Golden Gate Bridge and began chatting about her many swims across the chilly San Francisco Bay under the Bridge.

So, stand up and chat was the first thing I learned. The second was that you can tell if your back cover material hits the mark by how a reader reacts. I watched three different people



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President's Letter, continued

pick up *Better Off Dead*, flip it over and read. All three had physical reactions about the same place in the text. Finally, I asked the third person what had caused the reaction, and she said "when the swimmer was run over by his support boat." My back cover did what it was supposed to—suck the reader into the story. I needed to remember that. Two out of three bought the book.

The third thing I learned was to keep a bowl of candy within reach for fairgoers and the authors who share a table with me. If sales are a little slow, chocolate is a great pick-me-up.

I hope when you see the announcement of a book fair, you consider signing up. Three are already planned for next June: the Bay Area Book Festival, the Sacramento Book Festival, and the San Jose Book Festival. You don't need a new book to sell, but you do need a book or two. It's a way to meet your public and other NorCal SinC members and a way to make a little money.

Holiday Season

November starts the hustle-bustle of the two-month holiday season, as well as the yearly elections for the NorCal SinC officers. As activities in your life increase, make sure to save time for yourself . . . and keep writing.

Sincerely,

Glenda Carroll
President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Sunday, November 8, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Fall Author Showcase

The Best Bookstore on Union Square, 226 Powell Street, San Francisco, and on Zoom

It's time for our twice-a-year Author Showcase, where we have the opportunity to watch and hear our chapter members reading excerpts from their new works. Participants include:

Cara Black
MM Chouinard
Michele Drier
Heather Haven
Gordon Jack
Elizabeth Kemp
Catriona McPherson
Patricia L. Morin
Stephen M. Murphy
Rob Osler
Lisa Towles
Victoria Zackheim

Saturday, December 5, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Annual Holiday Party with MWA NorCal

Los Altos Community Center, Grand Oak Community Room
27 Hillview Avenue, Los Altos

Please join us for our annual holiday party, together with our friends from MWA NorCal. Watch your emails for more details about this event.

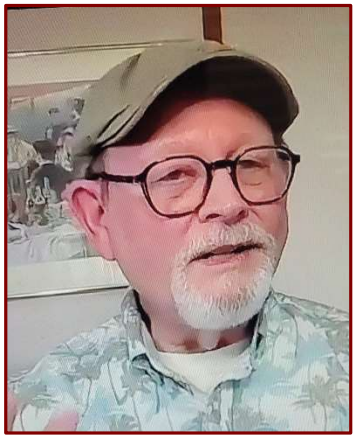


Please check our website and your email for updates and more details on our events and presenters, and for registration links for all events. https://www.sincnorcal.org/

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.

August Meeting – *Seven Reasons to Write, with William Kent Krueger*



As *God's Country,* book #22 in his beloved Cork O'Connor series, was released, (Willliam) Kent Krueger told us why he writes. He has always loved stories since his parents read to him. He loves language, insisting that "words have power, especially the right words in the right place." Writing centers him and has instilled in him an important discipline and a tremendous sense of accomplishment. He has a vivid imagination. Writing gives him hope. And . . . he can't NOT write.

Although his father thought mysteries were "the poor relation of good writing" Kent wrote them anyway, publishing for the first time at age 48. We're glad he hasn't stopped since.

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



Participants in SinC NorCal member Michelle Chouinard's entertaining walking tour of San Francisco called it an incredible and enjoyable learning experience. They cited fun, sunshine, fresh air, exercise, great company, gift bags, and fascinating historical folly, walking on landfill that covered dozens of old sailing ships and hearing their stories.

And they didn't mind being "shanghaied" at the end of the tour. One person said, "I'll never look at the Barbary Coast section of SF the same way."

In Case You Missed It, continued

September Meeting - *Find and USE your ME Factor, an Author Branding Workshop with Lisa Towles*



SinC NorCal's Lisa Towles invited fellow members to align their author brand to their personal creative purpose and the power of their craft, using her book, *The ME Factor,* as a resource. Her workshop demonstrated a well-organized step-by-step approach for presenting ourselves and our books as readers, including back cover copy and website descriptions, and introduced us to ways of using AI to create book descriptions that will entice readers.

One participant in this all-day workshop commented, "Thank you for a great day of encouragement, acknowledgment, inspiration, and practical tips in which you taught us to see the whole scope of our careers in terms of who we are as persons. Really illuminating and helpful."

October Meeting – *How to Craft the Beginning of a Short Story, with Art Taylor*



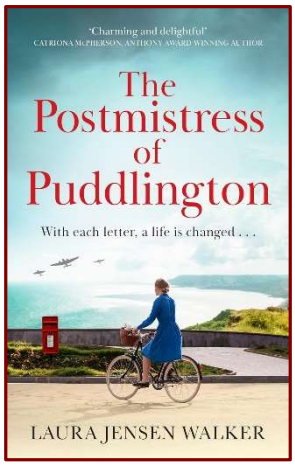
Multi-award-winning short story writer Art Taylor encouraged us to capture and keep the attention of our readers from the first page of a short story, using examples from other writers' stories. It was a master class in how to pique curiosity and interest, raise questions, and get readers to turn the page. He examined two key areas of concentration—prose and plot--touching on dialogue, narration, description, exposition, and interiority.

Art also offered participants the opportunity to write a couple of paragraphs, making sure they included the who, what, when, and where, and he made helpful comments and suggestions. Art also recommended favorite books on the subject and provided his slides to all who registered for the presentation.

Writing in a New Genre
by Laura Jensen Walker

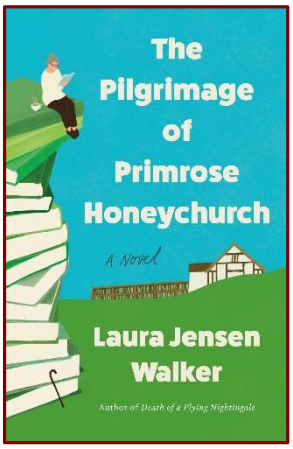
I never planned to write "book club" fiction (aka women's fiction), but then, I never planned to write mysteries either. Nor did I plan to write chick lit or humorous non-fiction; it just sort of unfolded that way. (Catriona McPherson dubbed me "a genre butterfly.")

I did, however, hope to write a historical novel one day. I got the hint of an idea for a semi-epistolary historical novel while stationed in England with the Air Force in the late seventies. That book, *The Postmistress of Puddlington,* which changed greatly from my initial idea and is near and dear to my heart, came out in August.



What prompted the idea for my book club fiction debut, *The Pilgrimage of Primrose Honeychurch*, which just came out, was discovering in my late sixties that I'm neurodivergent. (Neurodivergent means people whose brains develop or work differently from typical brains.) My entire life, I've struggled in certain areas and felt stupid for not being able to understand certain things. Like math, anything remotely technical, and with the advent of computers, technology. I was a straight-A student who excelled at English—reading and writing were/are my passion—but when math entered the picture, I was lost.

I've also had sensory issues since childhood, mostly related to food, noise, and textures, which made me an odd duck. It was a relief to learn—finally—there's a reason I am the way I am. (Another thing I learned is I have dyscalculia. Think of it as numbers dyslexia.) And thus, the idea for Primrose Honeychurch was born: a solitary, curmudgeonly senior with sensory issues who prefers books to people. I set my 70-year-old character, who'd always been called an odd duck, off on a journey of discovery.



I also sent Primrose on a literary pilgrimage to Hay-on-Wye, Wales, dubbed "the town of books," because of its wealth of bookshops, a place I've yearned to go for years. (It's the top item on my bucket list.)

People always ask, "What's your favorite book of the ones you've written?" I used to give the standard reply—"that's like asking a mom who's her favorite child—it's impossible to choose." Now, however, I'd say *The Pilgrimage of Primrose Honeychurch* and *The Postmistress of* Puddlington *are neck*

Writing in a New Genre, continued

and neck (with *Death of a Flying Nightingale* close behind). I enjoy and have a lot of fun writing cozy mysteries such as *The Alphabet Sleuths,* but with *Primrose* and *Puddlington,* I went deeper.

Readers have always said my books make them laugh. Now, with these two "double-P" novels, they're saying I made them cry. Sweet music to my ears.

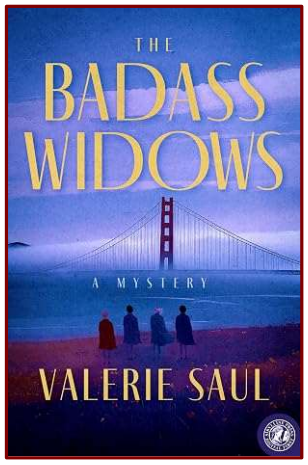
Laura Jensen Walker is the award-winning author of more than 25 books, including the Agatha-nominated *Murder Most Sweet*, the Lefty-nominated *Death of a Flying Nightingale*, the semi-epistolary *The Postmistress of Puddlington,* which has been called "a must-read for fans of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*," and her book club fiction debut, *The Pilgrimage of Primrose Honeychurch*. A confirmed Anglophile, Laura lives in Northern California with her family, where she drinks tea and dreams of England. Visit her website at www.laurajensenwalker.com



Beyond the Stereotype:
Writing Older Characters with Agency
by Valerie Saul



No matter how hard we try, we all have unconscious stereotypes. As writers, we try to avoid ethnic, religious, or gender stereotypes in our characters. And if we don't, you can be sure that someone will call us on it. When I was drafting *The Badass Widows*, early critique partners pointed out that one scene might be interpreted as stereotyping a character based on ethnicity. I was rather defensive. I thought I knew what my prejudices were, and they weren't based on ethnicity! (I am prejudiced against mean people, pessimists, and pickles.) But what about our unconscious prejudices and stereotypes? Do you know what yours are?



When I was very young, one of my playmates had bright carrot-red hair. Jimmy was the class clown, and I lived vicariously through his many escapades. This was the era when Bozo the Clown was on TV and Bozo's hair was the same color. For the longest time, I just expected everyone with red hair to be funny! You can imagine my dismay when this proved to be incorrect.

The truth is, we're pattern-seeking creatures, and it doesn't take much evidence for us to "see" a pattern. No doubt this helped us survive in more primitive times. If you were mugged by someone wearing a cowboy hat in a dark alley, you might avoid dark alleys and cowboy hats for good measure! Eventually you'd realize how absurd that reaction was. Hopefully before anyone noticed you flinching at every cowboy hat that walked by.

Here's another example: Have you been taught "leaves of three, let them be"? It's catchy, but there are way too many plants with leaves in groups of three to be a practical warning. In short, we have to learn to distinguish between useful patterns and ridiculous ones.

As writers, we face an important challenge: creating characters who are believable but also a little unpredictable. Readers are more likely to believe that an older man is an international business-

person than a babysitter. They're more likely to believe that an older woman is a grandmother than a CIA agent. Should we take the easy path for ourselves and our readers? It's hard to resist, and sometimes we do it unconsciously.

We know better than to cast the only person of color as the household help. Are we making a similar mistake with older characters? If we take the path of least resistance, we perpetuate persistent, demoralizing stereotypes. People of retirement age may live another 20 to 30 years, and they are just as diverse as any other age group. But you might not know that from the way they're portrayed in many books and movies. Too often, older people are made invisible in life and are similarly absent from popular stories. When they do appear, they're supporting characters or, worse, victims. They rarely have agency or three-dimensional character development. Instead, they are the mean mother-in-law, the crotchety neighbor, or a frail and feeble-minded person at the family dinner.

When we write older characters who fit familiar stereotypes because they seem easy to believe, we reinforce society's limited expectations. Readers of every age may continue to "see" that narrow pattern and mistake it for reality. Do you want to make it more difficult for older people to have rich lives? Please don't.

Here's a suggestion: Do some research. The holidays are coming--why not interview some older people in your orbit? Ask them open-ended questions and then really listen. There's a tendency to talk right over anyone over 60. Don't just be patient, be curious. You might be surprised at how varied, how daring their lives are. I know people in their seventies who are entrepreneurs, fencing champions and kindergarten teachers. Sure, some of us struggle to find purpose, fight loneliness and stay healthy—just like people of every age. But many older people lead fascinating, passion-driven lives.

As writers, we draw on experience and imagination to create our characters. From what I read, we aren't paying enough attention to the real lives of older people, and we aren't using nearly enough imagination. We can perpetuate society's stereotypes about people of "a certain age" or we can broaden society's expectations inch by stubborn inch.

Consider writing older women who rescue people in the wilderness, ride motorcycles, or design software. Let your older men write poetry, climb mountains, or knit sweaters. Do it even if you've never met anyone like that. Because they are out there.

Beyond the Stereotype, continued

Valerie Saul had an unconventional career in hearing healthcare in the US, New Zealand, South Korea and Singapore. A voracious, omnivorous reader, she now writes stories about feisty older women when she isn't rowing a shell on San Francisco Bay. Her debut novel, *The Badass Widows,* was published by Sibylline Press in March 2026.

Memories of Bouchercon 2026













Memories of Bouchercon 2026, continued











The Stories Found Me
by Lindsay Kent

The stories found me once my own story grew dark.



Both of my houses were heavy with screaming matches. The kind of tension that cuts like a blade, sharp enough to make you careful with every word. As a child, resilience is as natural as breath, something you don't name or analyze, you simply do. It reinforces your heart and keeps you going, even when things are falling apart around you.

I retreated, as children do, and when I retreated it was always to my room, my small space of refuge, and to the stories waiting there. *Peter Pan*, *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, *The Giver*, *A Wrinkle in Time*—my tiny heart and city-sized soul fed on the balm of fantasy, on the fertile soil of ancient and modern imagination, and in those worlds I was lifted, carried, held, saved. Like Bastian in *The Neverending Story,* I could always be found hunched under a blanket with a book in my hands, reading feverishly as if I'd die without finishing, as if the act of reaching the last page was the only thing keeping me tethered.

My mother noticed that hunger for storytelling early. When I was seven, she bought my sister and me a digital typewriter, a strange and magical little machine that I can still hear even now, its four-part hum filling the room when I'd rush home from school and flick it on, the blue screen stuttering awake like a portal. Afternoons disappeared in that playroom as my fingers dumbly jabbed at the keyboard—no one ever taught me how to type, and honestly, I still type like a lunatic with only three fingers today—while I wrote stories of talking raccoons and faraway lands, of aliens and princesses, romance and courage, whole worlds where danger could be met head-on and the rules made sense.

By the time I was twelve, I was reading at a college level, and my father noticed my frustration at being handed the "kiddie" versions of famous books such as *Beowulf*, stripped down and toothless. In a rare moment of awareness to my struggles and interests, he bequeathed me his recently finished James Patterson masterpiece, *Kiss the Girls*, and I devoured it in three days. It was clearly not written for a pre-teenage girl, but I was hooked immediately, and thrillers became my

new habit as I plowed through anything my parents had on their shelves, as if I was mining for something deeper than entertainment, something that felt like escape, like survival.

It's strange to remember now, all these years later, how sweet and simple and necessary it all was, because at some point our rigid school systems and the demands of adulthood zap all the joy and playfulness from these endeavors. So many of us fall in line and do as we're told, only to catch a glimmer, a shadow of that earlier time halfway through life, when the "line" begins to fall painfully short of what we wanted to feel while we were alive. It was that flash that brought me back to fiction, along with a seemingly endless dead-end in my decades-long career as a documentary filmmaker.

My projects consisted of many "almosts," years of writing and pitching and directing and shooting while stories were happening in real time, only for the powers-that-be—the non-creative gatekeepers of media—to say, politely and predictably, "No, thank you. Do you have anything about murder? Or perhaps a celebrity scandal?"

Covid also wreaked havoc on my work on a travel series, and suddenly I was home, going crazy like everyone else, restless and untethered, until something cracked open.

I picked up the cello, and I started writing screenplays. My identical twin is an award-winning screenwriter, and her encouragement helped me stifle the self-doubt long enough to actually put my heart into fiction, to try without flinching. I wrote many shorts, one of which we turned into an award-winning film, *The Split*, along with a couple pilots and a feature film. One of those pilots was a story about MKUltra and the psychedelic underground, about the infinite ways duality shapes and fractures our world, told through the eyes of yin/yang identical twins. I pitched it as an episodic TV series first—no dice—and finally my sister said something that shifted everything: "you have so much to share here—why not try it as a novel?"

At first, the imposter syndrome screamed, loud and familiar, but then I realized something genuinely exciting, something almost electric in its simplicity: I could write this book, complete it, and never have to pitch it to anyone. Never have to ask permission, never have to wait for a green light. Sure, an agent would be nice, but self-publishing exists now with occasionally tremendous results (I did self-publish, by the way), and the whole process became an exercise in patience and endurance, in overcoming a mountain of self-doubt.

The Stories Found Me, continued

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, and she is working on the second installment, *My Twin the Witch*. 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 .



to our newest members
(joining SinC NorCal from
July 1 to September 30, 2026)

Ellen Byron
Amy Z. Chan
James Arthur
AJ Olsen
Andrea Stewart

The Supernatural as Psychological Metaphor
by Pat Morin



As writers, we sometimes encounter experiences that seem to reach beyond the material world. Intuition, the state of flow, and the strange sensation of experiencing our own lives from a distance can feel as though they come from somewhere outside us. We may call these experiences psychological, spiritual, or supernatural, depending on how we understand them, but the feeling itself is often difficult to explain,

Picture yourself at a party you never wanted to attend. You drift through the rooms, saying little, until you meet someone you know and begin a conversation. Then something shifts. A small part of you continues speaking, while a larger part seems to step back, hovering above the room as if carried there by an invisible force. An unexpected feeling creeps in, and a whisper rises inside your mind: Leave. You follow the warning and go home, only to learn later that a fight broke out after you left, and someone was hurt. Was it luck, intuition, or the universe somehow telling you that you were not supposed to be there when it happened?

Psychology offers several ways to understand experiences like this, including the observing self, flow, and dissociation. None requires the presence of angels, yet people who describe these states often reach for supernatural language. They speak of a presence, a helper, or a voice that seems to belong to them and yet feels strangely separate from them. Perhaps this is because the conscious self does not always seem to be the part in control. We participate in our lives, but we also observe them, and sometimes the observing self seems to know something before the conscious mind can explain what it knows.

I have experienced this myself, and I suspect many other writers have, too. The warning that tells us to leave a room may have an ordinary explanation. Our brains register more than we realize: a tightening jaw, a laugh that comes too loudly, a subtle change in someone's expression, or a shift in the atmosphere that we cannot quite name. We absorb these details without consciously

assembling them into a conclusion. What emerges as a whisper may be the mind delivering a message that the conscious self has not yet learned to read. Still, knowing this does not necessarily diminish the experience. The feeling of being guided can remain powerful even when we understand that the guidance may have originated within us.

Across cultures and centuries, people have found different names for this mysterious relationship between the conscious self and something that seems to stand beyond it. The Greeks spoke of the muse, while the Romans understood a person's genius as a guiding spirit associated with that individual's life. Religious and spiritual traditions have described angels, ancestors, and guardian spirits who offer protection or direction. Carl Jung used the term synchronicity to describe meaningful coincidences that seem connected by something other than ordinary cause and effect. These traditions differ in what they believe is happening, but they share an interest in experiences that make us feel connected to a source of meaning larger than our conscious intentions.

This is not exclusively a writer's experience. A gas station attendant working through a sudden rush may discover that every movement falls into place, as though someone else is guiding the work. A musician may lose awareness of time while playing, a surgeon may move through a difficult procedure with extraordinary concentration, and a writer may find that a character begins to speak or act in a direction the writer never consciously planned. In each case, the person remains engaged in the task, yet the experience feels less like deliberate effort and more like being carried by something. Psychologists might describe aspects of this as flow, a state of deep absorption in which action becomes fluid and self-consciousness recedes. The person doing the work is still there, but the usual sense of directing every movement or thought has loosened its grip.

For writers, this experience can become particularly intimate because the work involves inhabiting other minds. We invent characters, give them histories, and imagine their fears and desires, yet there are moments when they seem to surprise us. A character says something we did not expect, makes a choice we had not planned, or moves the story toward a truth we had not consciously recognized. We may later explain the moment through memory, imagination, and the unconscious mind drawing connections beyond our immediate awareness. But while it is happening, the experience can feel as though the character has taken on a life of their own. We are creating the scene, yet we are also discovering it.

The Supernatural as Psychological Metaphor, continued

I experienced this while writing *Moloch and the Angel*, in a scene where Moloch suddenly appears beside Dr. Anna's bed with a smirk. I was so deeply immersed in the moment that when Moloch appeared, Dr. Anna and I seemed to gasp at the same time. The reaction felt immediate and involuntary, as though I had not merely imagined her fear but had experienced it alongside her. For that instant, I was both the writer creating the scene and the person caught inside it. I was not consciously directing every detail or telling myself how Dr. Anna should feel. Instead, I felt her sudden panic as if it were my own, and the distance between us collapsed.

I call this experience *psychic distancing*: the shifting relationship between the writer who observes and the character who experiences. Ordinarily, some distance separates us from the people we create. We can step outside a scene, revise a line, change a character's response, or decide what happens next. Yet when immersion becomes complete, that distance can seem to vanish. We are no longer simply watching a character react; we are reacting with them. The observing self and the participating self appear to merge, and the scene unfolds with a force that feels greater than conscious control. I cannot say that anything supernatural occurred while I was writing that moment, but I can say that the experience felt as though I had crossed a threshold between imagining another person's fear and actually inhabiting it.

Perhaps this is one reason supernatural metaphors have endured in stories. But the challenge is not necessarily to choose between explanation and wonder, but to allow both to exist without confusing one for the other. We need not conclude that an angel whispered a warning at the party, just as we need not believe that a supernatural presence entered the room when Moloch appeared beside Dr. Anna's bed. We can acknowledge that intuition may arise from unconscious perception, that flow can loosen our sense of deliberate control, and that writing can bring us so deeply into a character's experience that the distinction between creator and creation briefly dissolves. At the same time, we can recognize why these moments have inspired stories of muses, guardian spirits, and unseen helpers throughout human history. Such figures may express, through metaphor, the feeling that some of our most meaningful experiences arrive from beyond the part of ourselves we ordinarily recognize as being in charge.

Return, then, to the you at the party, now home and hearing the news of the fight. Return, too, to the you at the desk, startled by a character's sudden fear, wondering how a scene that was imagined could feel so real. Neither must decide whether an angel or an instinct whispered leave, or whether a supernatural presence briefly entered the room. What remains is the experience of having been both participant and observer, both the one who moved through the moment and the one who seemed to stand outside it, watching with a knowledge that had not yet reached the conscious mind.

The Supernatural as Psychological Metaphor, continued

What you know is that for a few minutes you were both the one who walked and the one who watched, and that the watcher knew something.

Patricia L. Morin is a licensed clinical psychotherapist with 40 years of experience exploring human behavior, identity, and the darker impulses of the mind. An award-winning author of four mystery short-story collections, she brings psychological depth and clinical insight to her paranormal thriller, *Moloch and the Angel*. She is also a San Francisco Bay Area theatre critic and a member of the American Theatre Critics Association. Her fiction explores the fragile boundaries between perception, fear, and the supernatural.

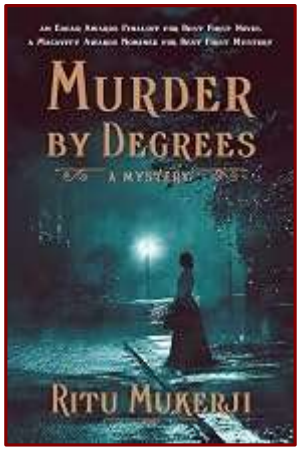


World Creation in Historical Mysteries
by Ritu Mukerji



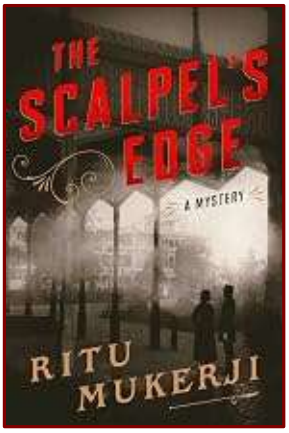
World creation is such an important part of historical mysteries. I think of setting like a theater set that needs to materialize long before the characters come in and the story unfolds. I often see the scenes in my novels as cinematic images, and I imagine myself in the world of the books long before I write a word. This is as much for me as it is for my reader. I want readers to feel immersed: what would it look like, smell like, feel like to walk down a narrow cobblestone alley in 1876 Philadelphia?

Murder by Degrees and *The Scalpel's Edge* take place ten years after the end of the Civil War. My protagonist, Dr. Lydia Weston, is a doctor and anatomist at Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, one of the first medical schools for women in the United States. I am a doctor and had been a medical student in Philadelphia, but I knew little about these trailblazing women, so it was thrilling to have these real-life characters to draw inspiration from.



It was also a fascinating moment in American medicine. The Civil War had brought new developments such as ambulances and surgical triage on the battlefield, and the advent of anesthesia in the 1840s. At the time the books take place, it was very much a dark and shadowy world of 19th century medicine. Lister's theory of antisepsis had been recently introduced but had not been widely adopted, so doctors often went straight from the operating theater to examine patients on the ward, their coats caked in blood and grime. In a city like Philly, with many medical schools, graverobbing was a common practice to procure cadavers for the anatomy lab. Many wealthy cemeteries hired guards to prevent this from happening.

World Creation in Historical Mysteries, continued



In *The Scalpel's Edge*, a surgical demonstration at the 1876 World's Fair goes horribly wrong, and a doctor is accused of murder. For this book, I created a world within the world—the Centennial Exposition was like a city unto itself, a place where innovation met greed, vice and murder.

I use history as the starting point for my imagination. I love to spend time in archives and libraries, reading and paging through diaries and letters, poring over old maps and guidebooks. I carefully construct the world because I see myself as a guide to the past and a translator of 19th century medicine, which is like its own language. I think of world creation as casting a spell for the reader, to be immersed down to the smallest of details. If something is off, then the spell is broken.

Once the world is carefully constructed, then I have the freedom to play–to be creative with narrative, character, story. This is the best part—layering in red herrings and plot twists and structuring a twisty, atmospheric mystery. And like many mystery writers, in the worlds I create, criminals are held accountable and justice is served—that is not always true in the real world.

But there are many things to balance. As someone who loves to do research, I love putting in all the fascinating bits of history, but things have to be let go (and that is where a good editor comes in). In the end, it is about creating a propulsive story that keeps the reader turning the pages. And in the world I create, justice can be served.

Ritu Mukerji is a doctor who has been captivated by crime fiction for as long as she has been a reader. Her first novel, *Murder by Degrees*, was nominated for an Edgar award and a Macavity award for Best First Novel. Her next book, *The Scalpel's Edge*, will be published in spring 2027. She lives in Marin County with her family.

Member Profile: Elizabeth Kemp

Fortieth in a series to introduce our members to each other



Elizabeth Kemp is a Bay Area native whose first novel was published in late 2025. Her personal interests include lap swimming, pickleball, hiking, golf, horses, and (very recently) mahjong.

Stiletta: Elizabeth, please tell us about your education and how it led to your career.

Elizabeth Kemp: When choosing a major in college at USC, I selected journalism because I'd especially loved my time as yearbook editor in high school. I still kept my toe in the more creative waters, though, with an English/American lit minor. I recall one class in particular where we were assigned to read *Blood Shot* by Sara Paretsky to discuss the female protagonist in a mystery novel. Let's put a pin in that for a moment. When it came time to find a job after graduation (and return to the SF Bay Area), I entered the world of high-tech public relations. I then somewhat sealed the deal with my chosen career trajectory and earned an MBA to learn more about marketing. While busy writing press releases and marketing materials, though, I frequently longed for something more creative and fun.

Stiletta: What made you decide to try your hand at writing a novel, and especially a crime fiction novel?

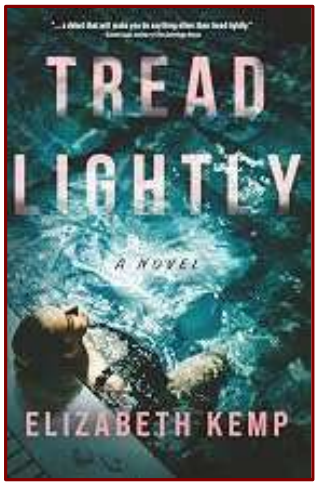
EK: My grandmother was an avid reader, and my earliest influence on the wonderful world of mystery. One Christmas, she gave me a boxed set of Nancy Drew's first ten books (my brother received The Hardy Boys' equivalent). Agatha Christie soon followed, and I was officially hooked. Fast forward to having children and deciding to become a stay-at-home mom, I found myself jotting down story ideas for my own mystery novel on scraps of paper while waiting at school pickups, soccer and dance practices, etc. *Tread Lightly* was the result of those ideas. It is truly my first novel; I've never had another manuscript sitting in a drawer.

Member Profile: Elizabeth Kemp, continued

Stiletta: What resources helped you move away from technical writing to pursue creative writing as a career?

EK: When I started turning my Post-it notes into paragraphs into pages, I soon realized I needed a refresher in creative writing versus the more structured who-what-when-where-why-how approach to writing that had become engrained. During COVID, I signed up for an online course with Stanford Continuing Studies called Jumpstart Your Novel. It was a game changer. I started to build my writing community, attended the SF Writer's Conference to learn more about craft, shared my work with critique partners, and continued to sign up for writing courses that would help strengthen my manuscript. This included webinars from Sisters in Crime. When registering for my first one, I recall clicking around the SinC site to learn more about the organization and was awestruck to learn that Sara Paretsky was the key founder. It was a kismet moment!

Stiletta: You describe your debut novel, *Tread Lightly*, as a domestic thriller. How does it fit the category of domestic thriller?



EK: *Tread Lightly* is a community-focused domestic thriller, similar to books like Jamie Day's *The Block Party*, and Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies*. The latter was actually my original inspiration for *Tread Lightly*, because of its tight-knit elementary school setting, drama among PTA members, and just a splash of death. Instead of focusing on a single troubled marriage inside a home like more conventional domestic thrillers, community-focused ones hone in on an entire micro-community. But selecting a genre can be tricky, and it's ultimately the market that decides. For example, I've had recent success with two contests, and both have categorized my work as suspense (vs. mystery or thriller). Perhaps the book marketing gods have spoken.

***Stiletta*:** How much of the inspiration for the characters and story comes from your own experience and interests? Is there an Ireland connection?

EK: They say to write what you know or, as I like to add, what you're interested in learning more about since you'll be spending a lot of time finessing a manuscript. I love to lap swim, and find great solace in the activity, so having my protagonist Tierney enjoy that outlet felt like a nice fit. In addition, my favorite course in business school was a negotiation class, so I decided to explore further and make Tierney a former hostage negotiator. As for the Irish component, my maiden name is Kennedy, and I have roots in Ireland. Aside from family stories of the region, it was a trip to Dublin (where I joined my husband on his work trip) that provided an immersive experience. We toured Trinity

Member Profile: Elizabeth Kemp, continued

College with our girls, and I watched how people and the Garda moved around the city—it was a heavenly visit.

***Stiletta*:** Tell us about the process of completing your manuscript and finding the right publisher and editor.

EK: When I completed my first draft, I exchanged beta reading with a few critique partners. I then engaged a talented developmental editor I had met at SFWC, Heather Lazare, to make sure it was as polished as possible before querying agents and small presses. I made more refinements, and even did a second round of edits with another wonderful editor, Stephanie Kelly, for some fresh perspective—and to make sure I didn't blow my shot. After a handful of full manuscript requests from agents that resulted in polite passes, I grew impatient. One of my writer friends was in the same querying phase I was and mentioned Sibylline Press. I loved learning how they only published the work of women over 50 (quite badass!) so I submitted my manuscript and crossed my fingers. I was thrilled to ultimately receive an offer of publication.

Stiletta: I'm curious about both the enigmatic title and the evocative cover design of *Tread Lightly.* Did you choose those yourself or did the publisher make suggestions?

***EK*:** I came up with the title *Tread Lightly* a few years ago while journaling (I practice Julia Cameron's morning pages technique). It seemed like the perfect title for a book about a former hostage negotiator who not only moves through life with intention but loves to swim. As for the cover, Sibylline's art director, Alicia Feltman, designs all of the company's covers. I was given the opportunity to share ideas on visual elements, and then she worked her magic. She nailed the mysterious mood and the colorful, eye-catching design perfectly—it's easy to spot on a shelf across a crowded bookstore.

Stiletta: What did you enjoy most about promoting your book?

***EK*:** Although intimidating, the most enjoyable aspect of book promotion has been the opportunity to discuss *Tread Lightly* on local television. My daughter works in media relations for a high-tech company and thought it would be fun to pitch her mom for a spot. She was successful with KRON4 News' LIVE! in the Bay, and helped me prep (thank God!). The host was so kind, asked thoughtful questions about the book and my writing, and made me feel like a real author. And, fun fact, the day before my segment, I received some great advice from fellow SinC members via the Groups.io

Member Profile: Elizabeth Kemp, continued

portal—most notably, to have fun and sit up straight. Big thanks to Victoria Zackheim for that last one!

Stiletta: Can you tell us what is next in your pipeline—a sequel or something else?

EK: I'm currently working on the sequel to *Tread Lightly*, which will be an international thriller. No spoilers here, but careful readers of my first book just might be able to surmise where Tierney is headed next.

Stiletta: What advice do you have for aspiring crime fiction authors?

EK: My best advice is to read as much as you can, and explore how other authors made you feel when reading their books. There's a classroom in between those pages, and deconstructing what didn't work for you as a reader is just as valuable as what did. It's also important to develop your own personal board of directors—for receiving advice and constructive feedback. For example, don't invite your stepsister into your circle as a reader if she has a history of making you feel silly for even wanting to be a writer! Find your people, those who lift you up (objectively), and ask them for guidance on projects. Lastly, it's important to get out of your writing chair and observe life. My best ideas come while out for a walk, or noticing what's happening in places around me—like the way two people interact in a coffee shop and imagining what they're saying. It can spark a fabulous scene or storyline. Strangers are great fodder for a novel!

Stiletta: What benefits have you received from membership in SinC NorCal?

EK: The greatest benefit thus far has been inspiration. Numerous NorCal members have written multiple award-winning books and, in some cases, series. It took me years to write my first novel, so seeing their successes makes me feel hopeful that I too could become a career novelist. Another benefit has been kindness. Specific shoutouts in that camp go to Diane Schaffer and Robin Somers for saying yes when I asked them to blurb my book; to Vinnie Hansen, Brad Parks and Mary Keliikoa for helping make my first panel at my first LCC so darn fun, and to Margie Bunting and Ana Manwaring for introducing themselves during events and warmly welcoming me into this community.

Elizabeth Kemp was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.

Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

Murder at Hotel Gloriosa by Victoria Zackheim was released on September 15 by Level Best Books.

The inaugural issue of the *Short Mystery Fiction Society Mystery Magazine*, released digitally on September 30, includes a reprint of Vinnie Hansen's story, "I Want to Be Your Boyfriend.' A print issue will follow.

Laurie R. King has an anthology coming out February 3, 2027 from Bantam. *Mary Russell's Ghost and Other Stories of Suspense* has new and reprinted stories about Russell and Holmes, along with tales from other worlds.

Justice Bent, Stephen M. Murphy's new Dutch Francis legal thriller, will be released on November 18 by Indies United Publishing Group, LLC.

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.

Death Comes as a Footnote by G.M. Malliet, book #8 in her St. Just Mystery series, will be released in hardback by Severn House on December 1. St. Just's fiancee, Portia, takes center stage, solving this mystery set at a writers' retreat in the Cotswolds.

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

Stephen M. Murphy will be reading from his new Dutch Francis legal thriller, *Justice Bent,* at Books By the Bay in Sausalito on Tuesday, January 19 at 6:00 p.m.

Training to be Delivered

Margaret Lucke has three presentations to writer groups coming up in the near future:

Member News, continued

"Master the Building Blocks of Your Story: How to Write Powerful Scenes" for Grand Canyon Writers, a chapter of SinC, on Saturday, November 14 at 9:30 a.m. Pacific time via Zoom. Everyone is welcome.

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"The Art of Suspense" for California Writers Club Berkeley Branch on Sunday, November 15 from 12:30 to 4:30 p.m., at l4 Glen Avenue, Oakland. Contact Margaret at margaret@margaretlucke.com for further info.

"Dialogue: Giving Your Characters Their Say" for the Palm Square Writers Guld on Friday, January 15 at 1:00 p.m. via Zoom. Contact Margaret at margaret@margaretlucke.com for further info.

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Charlotte Stuart took first place for the Daphne du Maurier Kiss of Death Award in the category of Published Cozy Mystery/Suspense for *In$urance Blues*, book #3 in her A John Smith Mystery series.

Cindy Sample's *All's Faire in Love and Murder* is a finalist for the Silver Falchion Award in the Best Comedy category.

G.M. Mallet won first place in the humor category of the 2026 *Writer's Digest* competition for her entry, "The Tides We Seek," a sendup of a bad film proposal. Winning entries will appear in the November/December issue.

Laurie R. King has been named the Lifetime Achievement Award Guest of Honor at the 2028 Bouchercon in Indianapolis.

Shortlisted for Chanticleer International Book Awards: for the Clue Award (thriller, suspense, and crime fiction) , Ana Manwaring and Fernando León Torrens for *Mortal Revenge*, Karen A. Phillips for *A Deadly Hook*, and Susan McCormick for *A Room at the End of the Hall*; for the Mystery and Mayhem Award, Rachael Samberg, who writes as Violet Moorhen, for her manuscript *Haringey House Detectives.*

Pat Morin's book *Moloch and the Angel,* a psychological paranormal thriller, has been awarded a Library Titan Award.

Tread Lightly, Elizabeth Kemp's debut novel, has won Best Suspense Novel in the 2026 Pacific Book Awards and is a finalist in the 2026 Kindle KBR Book Awards (suspense/horror category). Winners of the latter will be announced in early November.

Question of the Quarter
(10-year anniversary)
It would surprise people to know that I . . .



I took my first flying lesson at age 80 . . . and it was thrilling! Not only because I wanted to pilot a plane, but because I needed to prove to myself that I could still take risks. Among them? Writing! ***Victoria Zackheim***

I hated creative writing in high school and college. I didn't understand at that time how my creative mind worked. I'm a pantser writer and was unable to outline a story or write to a teacher's prompt. ***Alec Peche***

I was a professional wedding photographer for ten years. And let's just say I have epic stories. The kind that may someday find their way into one of my books although, of course, they'll be fictionalized. But then again, you know what they say: truth is stranger than fiction. Before that, I worked in my father's auto body shop, where I learned body work, how to maintain vehicles, and even how to pinstripe classic cars. So if one of my characters ever needs to make a car disappear, fix a suspicious dent, or add a really classy stripe job to the getaway vehicle, well, I have ideas for that, too. And before that, I worked as a housecleaner and caterer with my cousin, including catering weddings (more drama there), Which taught me another important lesson: the richer the house, the more interesting the dirt. It's safe to say some of my previous jobs belong in cozy mystery. Some of them might already be there. And others . . . I'm still deciding whether to fictionalize. ***Carmela Dutra***

I once planned to be a comic book artist. Not the writer, but the artist. I had my own comic planned for when I found a company, like DC or Marvel, that would bring me on board. Turns out, I'm a decent artist, but not quite the level of quality needed to create comics and graphic novels. No shame in that. Turns out I'm better (I think) at writing. ***T.E. MacArthur***

I have been put in handcuffs. OK, OK, it's not what you think. During my bachelor's program in Professional Studies, each of us had to give a lesson on our profession. Two cops paired up to teach all of us how to apply handcuffs. Students were paired off in sets of two. One student applied handcuffs to the other, then vice versa. The takeaway: It's really hard to apply them. That little flick of the wrist you see on TV or IRL—oh, it's real, but it takes a lot of practice to get there. If it were up to any of us to apply them, the bad guy would get away while we fumbled around. And, they are designed to be uncomfortable, very uncomfortable. No way to avoid that. ***Elena Smith***

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a ballerina. ***Glenda Carroll***

Question of the Quarter, continued

I once saved a life. During my sophomore year of college, I came down with the flu and was very, very sick. It was January and daytime temperatures were in the -20s, but at night it went down to -40. I was so heavily congested and sleeping in a musty dorm room. I woke up with my chest hard as a brick, unable to breathe in or out for long seconds at a time. A friend found me in the bathroom and insisted we go to the infirmary. I never would have made it alone. We walked up a steep hill and found a student passed out in a snow drift outside his fraternity, wearing a sports coat, loafers, and no socks. We literally kicked him awake. He was so drunk, he could barely walk, so we watched him stumble into the fraternity before we continued. At that time of night with no traffic, -40 degrees, plus underdressed, plus buried in the snow, plus drunk as a skunk—he probably would have been dead very soon. Sometimes when I wake up at 3:00 a.m. and feel overwhelmed by all my bad decisions and behaviors, I remind myself that the guy survived thanks to my friend and me. ***Susan Bickford***

I was a semi-pro mountain bike racer in my late 20s and early 30s. ***Robin Stuart***

I once won a woman's off-road motorcycle Trials Competition. ***Nannette Rundle Carroll***

I studied to be an astronomer/astrophysicist at university until a statistical physics course "shot me down." (Or rather, shot down that dream.) Interestingly enough, both my youngest brother and my son are Ph.D.-certified-and-employed astronomers. Isn't life strange! ***Ann Parker***

I spent nine years in the Army, including two in the Mojave Desert at Ft. Irwin. ***Susan McCormick***

I have a bachelor's degree in dance. ***Ellen Kirschman***

I was a debutante back in the 60s, which still surprises me. I made my debut in "society" by walking down a red carpet with a line of young men dressed in tuxedos standing on either side. We wore long white gowns and had to curtsey to our parents and the governor of the state of Florida at the end of the red carpet. I had a bouffant hairdo and looked more like Annette Funicello in one of her Beach Party films than I care to think about. Please don't let this get around the neighborhood. ***Heather Haven***

My secrets are secret for a reason. ***Vinnie Hansen***

I had to register with the US Department of State as an agent of a foreign government. That statement, while true, makes the situation sound more cloak-and-dagger than it really was. I had to register because I was employed in the foreign affairs office at the Canadian embassy in Washington, DC. My registration process created a minor kerfuffle because one of my references was the wife of a high-up FBI official, which meant it might need special handling. ***Margaret Lucke***

All about YOU!

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

Please contact 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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