



Written by and for the Guppies,
a chapter of Sisters in Crime
www.sinc-guppies.org

Inside this issue:

Editor's Note	2
Welcome New Guppies	
Upcoming Classes	3
Boas and Kick Lines	5
Remembering Bonnie	6
Guppy Small Publisher List	7
Agent Insight	8
NY Pitch Conference	10
Diverse Voices	11
Social Media	13
The Editor's POV	15
Author Interview: Charlaine Harris	17
Ipsa Facto	19
Fantasy Agent Project	20
The Flip Side	21
Keeping it Short	22
WPA	23
I Could Not Kill an Ant	25
Pantsing	26
Quasi-Pantsing	30
Virtual Assistants	31
PCA Conference	32
Calendar	33

The President's Message by Debra H. Goldstein

I think it only fitting to use my first President's column to tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a child who dreamed of being a writer, singer, or stand-up comedienne. Because she wasn't particularly funny and couldn't sing five notes in a row on key, she eventually discarded those career options. Writing was different.



Through words, she could make people laugh or react to her thoughts. She penned scripts for neighborhood shows and local children's theater and became the go-to person for party poems and skits. In college, she planned to study journalism. Instead, she majored in English and History and minored in Speech and Education. Two days after graduating college, she moved to New York seeking a job in publishing and the chance to be a *Jeopardy* contestant. Eight months later, her goals accomplished, she went to law school.

Law school changed her writing style. She became a masterful writer of dull briefs, motions, and later, as a judge, of hopefully well-reasoned opinions. Occasionally, she wrote a skit for a leadership or charity group, but the dream of writing something fun alternated between being buried or nagging at her.

Finally, threatened and encouraged by friends and family, she wrote an essay that found a home and a novel, which accidentally found a publisher. The woman thought being published was simple, but she knew she needed to improve her skills. She joined organizations, read books, took classes, and interviewed people while continuing to work full-time.

One organization she joined was Sisters in Crime. Because there wasn't a local chapter available in her state, it was recommended she join the Guppies. It was explained that the Gup-

pies originally were a group of aspiring writers who shared information and mentoring opportunities and fashioned their name from being the Great Unpublished. With time, they created such a strong sense of community that many members continued to belong long after they were published.

The Guppies were there for the woman when her first book was orphaned weeks after winning an IPPY award. They coached her in how to format and get it back into circulation to fulfill her speaking engagements. Guppy Emeralds helped her craft, polish, and eventually find homes for short stories she wrote while struggling to write a new novel. Guppies generously answered research questions on the listserv and a Guppy critique group improved the pages agents and editors might one day read. The Agent Quest subgroup edited her query letter until it was ready to be mailed. When that book was sold and published, Guppies raised their fins and celebrated with her. They also were there with words of encouragement and to kick her into action when her second book was also orphaned. Guppies beta read, made agent recommendations, and recently rejoiced with her when she signed a three-book contract.

Whenever the woman celebrated, reached out for help, or hit the bottom in believing she would be a writer, Guppies came through for her. In return, she got involved in the organizational side of the group, despite knowing she could never give back as much as she received. She only knew she would try.

THE END

Debra H. Goldstein

Editor's Note

As I was wrapping up this issue of *First Draft*, the unexpected and sad news came in that Guppy Bonnie (B.K.) Stevens had passed away. Many of you knew Bonnie—she was always among the first to welcome new Guppies and congratulate them on their successes. Outside the group, she was active in writer events and conferences (if you've attended Malice Domestic, you may have met her there). In fact, she had been about to give a joint presentation with fellow Guppy Art Taylor at the Suffolk, Virginia Mystery Writers' Festival when she collapsed last month. She also hosted a blog, [The First Two Pages](#), that was a favorite of mine—different authors appeared each week to talk about the craft of writing and their opening pages.



Bonnie and I corresponded a few times, including when I wrote an article about YA mysteries. Most people know her for her short stories, but Bonnie also wrote a full mystery novel, *Interpretation of Murder*, as well as a YA book, *Fighting Chance*. The book, published by Poisoned Pencil, became a finalist for the Agatha and Anthony awards in the young adult category. She told me she had written the book because she'd been an English professor for decades and one challenge "was finding outside reading books to recommend to boys." She decided one way to remedy that was to write a sports-oriented mystery for boys. But she hoped that girls would like it (it features strong female characters) and that it would serve as an introduction to younger readers to the mystery genre.

Those of us who came in contact with her came away impressed. Former Guppy president and friend Kaye George writes about what Bonnie meant to her and the mystery community on page 6.

There are many great columns and articles in this issue of *First Draft*, but I am especially proud of a yearlong project that we began with the November 2016 issue—Diverse Voices. Gigi Pandian wrote that first column and in every issue we've had a different author talk about what diversity means to her.

Thanks to Raquel V. Reyes, Norma Huss, Kellye Garrett, and Ellen Byron (in conversation with Jenn McKinlay). In this edition, Susan Van Kirk talks about why one of her main characters is a biracial woman in a mostly white town—and how that character bubbled out of her subconscious.

The idea for Diverse Voices stemmed from a Sisters in Crime summit report on diversity, equity, and inclusion, but in these times I find it even more important to talk about these issues. Some of those who have written the column volunteered; I asked others to write about their experiences and characters. Some of the authors weren't sure, when they began, what they would say and how they would say it. It's a touchy issue. In the end, though, they were all eloquent and made wonderful points. I'm proud to be part of a community that cares about these issues and, through fiction, addresses them in the wider world.

Hope you enjoy this issue.

Lourdes

New Members

Welcome new and returning members:

Lyuba Adams
Cathy Akers-Jordan
Jaimie Bergeron
Sharon Boehlefeld
Shari Cain
Suzanne Deveney
Samantha Donisi-Hamm
Rose Donovan
Felicity Douglas
Marie Everett
Gay Gale
Mary Gale
Ramona Gault
K.P. Gresham
Kathleen Hellman
Elizabeth Hyland
Jen Sinclair Johnson
Hilton Jones
Mary Kathan
Yetta Lautenschlager
Deborah Leiter
Lisa Lundquist
Terri Mercer
Linda Mocilnikar
Korina Moss
Annika Pfluger
Cynthia Salihi
Jane Scheffres
Carolyn Stein
T.K. Thorne
Penelope Thoma
Tammy Vaughter
Alexandra Vogel
Nina Wachsmann

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Elaine Douts
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Carolyn Rowland
Susan Van Kirk
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GuppyPrez@sinc-guppies.org
MoneyGuppy@sinc-guppies.org
NewsGuppy@sinc-guppies.org
WebGuppy@sinc-guppies.org
ListGuppy@sinc-guppies.org
ClassGuppy@sinc-guppies.org
Anna@annacastle.com
Manuscriptswaps@sinc-guppies.org
GupCrit@gmail.com
MembershipGuppy@sinc-guppies.org
GuppyAdvisor@sinc-guppies.org

First Draft Staff

Editor: Lourdes Venard
Columnists: Julie Ciccarelli, Nancy Eady, Beth Green, Christina Lorenzen, Carol Newhouse, Keenan Powell, Elaine Will Sparber
Contributors: Beth Schmelzer, Susan Van Kirk
Proofreaders: Sharon Owen, Rosalind Villers

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Upcoming Guppy Classes by Elaine Douts

Our four remaining classes of the year are evenly split between craft and technical expertise. Look for highlights of our 2018 courses in November's *First Draft*.

Christine Fairchild presents the First Fifty Pages, a course designed to help sell your novel to agents and publishers by enticing them with your perfected opening scene. Those pages are crucial to determining whether your novel will make the cut and go on to become published.

Katherine Ramsland, a forensic psychologist, helps the police in a variety of ways, from profiling killers to evaluating witnesses. When Katherine presented a fascinating program at the Writers' Police Academy, I asked her to teach for us. Her case-load is writer's fodder and her knowledge will provide that edge of authenticity to your manuscripts. This course will be held on Facebook.

When I was writing a cross-genre novel, I took **Sally J. Walker's** Writing From the Genre Out, given by another writing organization. The course expanded my knowledge of various genre requirements. I knew mystery, but what I didn't know was that each genre has its own conventions, which if missing will blow readers out of your book. If you are considering writing a mystery/romance/paranormal/horror, etc., do yourself a favor and take Sally's course.

Retired federal agent **Julia Hunter** provides her expertise in investigative techniques. How does the Department of Justice solve human trafficking, global counterfeiting, cybercrimes, and art theft cases? Julia will provide answers to your questions. Although the course is titled Investigative Techniques 2, you may register without having taken the prior course. This course was designed from questions asked by Guppies in the previous course.

First Fifty Pages with Christine Fairchild September 3–16

Now that you have a manuscript you want to submit to editors, agents, or even contest judges, you must be sure your FIRST 50 PAGES meets the criteria these gatekeepers are seeking. Come learn why they reject manuscripts and how you can polish your manuscript sample so you can beat the odds. Or just prep your pages to self-publish and learn the strategies that bestselling authors use.

This workshop will not only help you polish your first 50 pages, but it will teach you how to think like an editor so you write/edit stronger manuscripts in the future. You'll learn how to make characters, dialogue, and hooks read like a bestseller. You'll also get these tips/tricks to make the rest of your manuscript sparkle:

- 1) First page do's and don'ts
- 2) Power hooks that engage
- 3) World building mastery
- 4) Character development seeds to plant early

Class policies

The Guppy Chapter subsidizes the cost to our members for every class. Subsidies range from \$5 to \$20 per student per class. Even so, if you have trouble paying for the cost of a class, we have a scholarship fund available for one class per year. For more information, please contact our treasurer, Karen Duxbury, at moneyguppy@sinc-guppies.org.

Please read our class policies before you register for a class at <https://sincguppies.wildapricot.org/Classes-FAQ>. If you have questions, insights, or criticism, please email me at any time at classguppy@sinc-guppies.org.

Head over to <https://sincguppies.wildapricot.org/events> to see more of our classes.

- 5) Dialogue that engages and sells itself
- 6) Critical story elements you must establish by page 50
- 7) Key turning points to keep readers turning the page
- 8) Scene-writing techniques that improve pacing/tension
- 9) Genre requirements to meet
- 10) Layering story/character arcs

Christine Fairchild works as a book doctor and teaches writing and editing classes to authors and fellow editors. She is a regular guest lecturer at the University of Washington, Seattle, and speaks at many writer conferences. She's published two books to help authors improve their craft ([The Editor Devil's Guide to Characters](#) and [The Editor Devil's Guide to Dialogue](#)), as well as a contemporary romantic suspense series set in New York, *An Eye For Danger*. She stays busy editing and critiquing client manuscripts and is finishing edits to her own WWII women's fiction.

Forensic Psychology for Writers with Katherine Ramsland October 1–14

Participants in this course will learn about aspects of forensic psychology that are useful for mysteries, true crime, thrillers, and psychological suspense.

The discipline of forensic psychology concerns any arena in which the investigative or legal system requires knowledge or service from a psychologist or psychiatrist. These include consulting on criminal investigations, assessing threats of violence, developing theories about criminal motives, and conducting relevant research.

This course starts with an overview of the most common areas of forensic psychology before focusing on those areas that aid with plot, character, and conflict: death investigations and a criminological analysis of extreme offenders.

Continued on next page

Upcoming Guppy Classes, continued

Forensic Psychology will look at:

- For the court, forensic psychologists are most often asked to evaluate defendants' competency to participate in the legal process or their mental state at the time they committed an offense. This will be useful after arrest for any suspect in your novels who requires evaluation. Some key plot points can arise from this area.
- Psychologists appraise behaviors such as faking a mental illness, body language during confessions, overt and covert deception, or acting suicidal. There's a lot of room here for layering characters and creating conflict. Think about some high-profile cases, like Jodi Arias or Casey Anthony!
- As a consultant, a psychologist might assist a forensic artist to produce an accurate facial reconstruction or help a trial lawyer select jury members. These are unique areas. *Runaway Jury* was based entirely on jury consulting.
- One of the most interesting areas is assisting coroners and medical examiners with ambiguous death determinations. This involves suicidology, which is its own special niche. Many novels work around mysterious circumstances surrounding a death, and data from suicidology can be quite useful.
- Then there's behavioral profiling, which many writers use. It's important to know what goes into interpreting behavioral clues at crime scenes, as well as how this can be used in court (or not). This area also depends heavily on the psychology of different types of killers.
- Psychologists might also have some presence in emergency service fields such as fire control and corrections. They might consult on special unit (SWAT, Tactical Response Team) evaluations or assist in mass disaster training and counseling.

Dr. Katherine Ramsland has been involved in many aspects of forensic psychology, from clinical evaluations to research to death investigations. She holds graduate degrees in forensic and clinical psychology, criminal justice, and philosophy, and teaches at DeSales University in Pennsylvania. She does training for law enforcement and attorneys.

She has published more than 1,000 articles and 48 books, including *Psychopath*, *The Sex Beast*, *The Ivy League Killer*, *The Forensic Psychology of Criminal Minds*, *The Human Predator*, *Inside the Minds of Serial Killers*, *The Devil's Dozen: How Cutting-edge Forensics Took Down Twelve Notorious Serial Killers*, *Inside the Minds of Mass Murderers*, *The Criminal Mind: A Writer's Guide to Forensic Psychology*, and *The Mind of a Murderer: Privileged Access to the Demons that Drive Extreme Violence*. She writes a regular blog for *Psychology Today*, and has consulted for *Bones* and *CSI*. She has also participated on numerous documentaries for CBS, ABC, A&E, ID, Discovery, E!, WE, and Court TV.

Writing from the Genre Out with Sally J. Walker October 15—November 11

Mystery, romance, science fiction, fantasy, horror, action-adventure, inspirational, historical—any genre of fiction begins with the expectations of the readership. This innovative workshop will examine genre criteria and teach you how to mix and match your characters and plots for cross-genre sales. Let a multi-published author motivate you to move from simple storytelling to mainstream appeal to literary quality.

Session One: Overview of Genre Expectations and “New Stories”

Session Two: Researching for Focus and Outline

Session Three: Character-Specific Genre Needs

Session Four: Mystery, Juvenile Needs

Session Five: Inspirational, Historical, Western Needs

Session Six: Action-Adventure, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror Needs

Session Seven: Humor, Romance, Mainstream, Literary Needs

Session Eight: Targeting Your Market

Sally Walker's published credits include literary, romance and Western novels, a nonfiction essay collection, several creative writing textbooks, stage plays, poetry, and many magazine articles on the craft of writing. Sally has 31 screenplays written, several under negotiation at various studios, and a novel-to-screenplay adaptation on her plate. She keeps to a strenuous writing schedule and still has time to work as editorial director for The Fiction Works, supervising acquisitions and subcontracted editors, and as script supervisor for TFW's affiliated Misty Mountain Productions. For more information on her works and classes, go to her website at www.sallyjwalker.com.

Investigative Techniques Part 2 with Julia Hunter November 12—25

Immerse in the world of investigations from the perspective of a federal agent. No amateurs in this course—it's 100 percent the real deal. You'll delve into crimes involving human trafficking, international intrigue, global counterfeiting, art theft, and cyber-crimes (different material from the main class). We'll also expand on agency missions and explore how historical crimes were solved.

Attendance in Investigative Techniques I is not a prerequisite. Please note the instructor is not a published author and this is not a writing craft class. It's offered as a special interest resource by a 25-year veteran retired agent.

Julia has a bachelor's and a master's degree in criminology and is a computer forensics examiner. Her website is at www.alaskasky.net. Note: Due to travel in certain countries, the website does not emphasize her law enforcement background for safety purposes.

Boas and Kick Lines by Elaine Will Sparber

Releases and Contracts

Karen Borrelli, aka Trixie Stilletto, is pleased to announce that her first mystery, *Do Grave Harm*, is available at major retailers beginning today, Sept. 1. *Do Grave Harm*, a Blue Bald Falls Mystery, features a protagonist who is a cancer patient. All proceeds in October, which is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, will be donated to metastatic breast cancer research.

Amy Denton's short story "The Find of the Century" was published in the July 4 issue of *Kings River Life Magazine*.

The Crate Beyond, **P.A. De Voe's** contemporary cozy mystery, will be published in September by Annie's Publishing as part of its Antique Shop Mystery series, which is set in coastal Maine.

Hollywood Homicide, **Kellye Garrett's** debut novel, was released by Midnight Ink in August. The amateur detective novel was named *Library Journal's* August Debut of the Month and received a starred review from both *Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly*. It is the first book in the Detective by Day Mystery series.

Barb Goffman's newest short story, "Crazy Cat Lady," will be published in the first issue of *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, a new quarterly short story magazine from Wildside Press. The issue is scheduled for release the first week of September. "Crazy Cat Lady" is a story of psychological suspense about a woman who comes home and immediately becomes certain there's been a break-in, even though everything looks perfectly in order.

Debra H. Goldstein has signed a three-book contract with Kensington Publishing for the Sarah Blair series. Sarah is a cook of convenience who might be scorched if she gets too close to a kitchen. The series, which will include recipes of convenience, will launch with *One Taste Too Many*. In addition, Debra's short story "A Golden Eclipse" was included in *Day of the Dark*, an anthology of eclipse stories edited by **Kaye George** and published by Wildside Press in August. The story reminds us that no matter what the event, there's someone who always wants to profit from others.

The Church of the Holy Child, the first book in **Patricia Hale's** new PI series, was published by Intrigue Publishing in August.

Smoked Meat, a novella prequel to **Vinnie Hansen's** Carol Sabala Mystery series, is now available as an e-book. Carol visits her mother in Ferndale, California, for a family Christmas get-together. It's murder, in more ways than one. *Smoked Meat* will also be included in *Sleuthing Women II: 10 Mystery Novellas*, due out this fall.

The first three Seamus McCree novels by **James M. Jackson** are now available for Kindle and Kindle Unlimited readers as a boxed set. Included is the Kindle Scout winner, *Ant Farm*; the Evan Marshall prize-winning *Bad Policy*; and *Cabin Fever*. The boxed set is available at Amazon.

Never Again, the second book in **Debra Lee's** Taken series, was published in August and can be purchased through Amazon.

Steve Liskow's short story "Death by Water" will appear in the next issue of *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*. This magazine is published sporadically, so the next issue may come out in September or October.

Naomi Brett Rourke's short story "Coyote" was published in the anthology *Straight Outta Tombstone*, released in July by Baen Books. Naomi recently joined co-contributors Jim Butcher, Kevin J. Anderson, Sarah Hoyt, and others for a mass signing in Denver, Colorado. The book made the *USA Today* best-seller list.

The Clue of the Dancing Bells by **Barb Schlichting**, the third book in the First Ladies Mystery series, was published by Darkhouse Books in August.

Awards and Recognitions

A Cajun Christmas Killing, the third book in **Ellen Byron's** award-winning, bestselling Cajun Country Mystery series, received a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*.

Sasscer Hill was named a finalist in the Carrie McCray Memorial Literary Awards, given by the South Carolina Writers Association, for the first chapter of *The Travels of Quinn O'Neil*.

Trapped, the third book in **P.A. De Voe's** YA historical China adventure/mystery trilogy, was a finalist for the 2017 Silver Falchion Award in the Best Fiction Tween/YA Mystery/Thriller category. The Silver Falchion Awards are handed out annually at Killer Nashville.

A R Kennedy's short story "Hide & Seek" won the Writers' Police Academy's Golden Donut Short Story contest. The award was presented Aug. 12 at the academy banquet.

Michelle Kubitz received first runner-up for the Claymore Award at the 2017 Killer Nashville conference for her work-in-progress, *Dragonfly Lake*, a romantic suspense novel. The Claymore Award recognizes unpublished manuscripts. Finalists are chosen through a blind judging process done by a jury of publishing and writing peers.

Continued on next page



Elaine Will Sparber is a freelance writer and editor from Long Island, New York. Her short story "Cover Story" is included in *Fish Nets: The Second Guppy Anthology*. She has also co-authored a travel book and ghostwritten two health books. You can visit her website at www.elainewillsparber.com.

Boas and Kick Lines, continued

Delivering the Truth, **Edith Maxwell's** first Quaker Midwife mystery, has been nominated for a Macavity Award, the Sue Feder Award for Best Historical Novel. The winner will be announced at Bouchercon, to be held in Toronto Oct. 12–15.

Claire Ortalda's novel *The Psychopath Companion* was short-listed for the 2017 Del Sol Press First Novel Prize, judged by Halie Ephron.

Gigi Pandian's fourth Jaya Jones Treasure Hunt Mystery, *Michelangelo's Ghost*, was a finalist for the Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award in the Best Fiction Adult Action / Adventure category.

Michele Reed's novel *Stosh and the Devil* won first place in the Unpublished Mainstream Mystery/Suspense Category of the 2017 Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense. The awards were presented by the Romance Writers of America Kiss of Death Chapter at its "Death by Chocolate" event July 26.

The Smith family had a successful summer. Two of their books were finalists in the 2017 EVVY Competition. **Nancy Raven Smith's** debut mystery, *Land Sharks: A Swindle in Sumatra*, took second place in the Fiction: Mystery & Detective category, and the family memoir, *The Reluctant Farmer of Whimsey Hill*, written by Bradford Smith with Nancy and their daughter, Lynn Raven, grabbed a Merit Book designation in the Autobiography/Memoirs category. The EVVY Awards are handed out annually by

To submit a piece of good news, send it off-list to Elaine Will Sparber at congratsgup@sinc-guppies.org. The deadline for items is the 15th of the month before publication.

the Colorado Independent Publishers Association (CIPA) and the CIPA Education and Literacy Foundation.

Art Taylor's short story "Parallel Play" has been named a finalist for the Macavity Award for Best Short Story. It won the Agatha for Best Short Story and was a finalist for both the Anthony and the Thriller Award. The story was originally published in *Chesapeake Crimes: Storm Warning*, the Sisters in Crime Chesapeake Chapter anthology, released by Wildside Press in 2016.

The September issue of *Rio Magazine*, the premier magazine for everyone enjoying the San Antonio Riverwalk, recommends **Nancy G. West's** fourth Aggie Mundeen mystery, *River City Dead*, as the book to read. In *River City Dead*, Aggie and SAPD Detective Sam plan their first rendezvous at a San Antonio Riverwalk hotel—a vacation from crime and a reset for their tumultuous relationship. Mischief and murder intervene. *Rio Magazine's* August issue included an article about the series and the author's ties to Riverwalk. In addition, on Sept. 11, Nancy will participate in a panel discussion of "How to Turn a Mess of Pages into a Book" at Twig Book Shop in San Antonio.

Remembering Bonnie (B.K.) Stevens by Kaye George

I woke up Tuesday, August 15, to find an email from Debra Goldstein telling me she had seen Dennis Stevens' very early morning post: he had lost his wife that night. Bonnie Stevens was working on a short story workshop to be given with Art Taylor when she collapsed. Dennis had sent me an email the night before saying she would be in touch when she felt better, but she didn't make it through the night.

It's appropriate that I write a piece about her for the Guppy newsletter since she first contacted me about joining our group. That was probably just coincidence. She came to get my signature at the table at Malice Domestic where I'm sure I was wearing a Guppy pin or badge. When she said her name was B.K. Stevens, I got so excited! I'd been reading and loving her stories in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* for years. I asked if she was THE B.K. Stevens, the short story writer, and



Bonnie (B.K.) Stevens

she modestly admitted that she was. And that she wanted to join the Guppies!

That was our great, good fortune. She was truly a treasure, a top talent in the mystery field, as well as, eventually, a personal friend. She was as giving as she was gifted.

Our families sat together at the Malice banquet a couple of times. I was honored that she chose my table one year. I eagerly chose her table another year and got to meet not only her husband, but one of her daughters.

Just this month, she volunteered to boost my most recent publication on her blog—The First Two Pages—every Tuesday of

August, helping out a fellow mystery writer. Her death is a great personal loss for me and a huge loss to our community. Everyone who knew her is devastated. Rest in peace, Bonnie.

Guppy Small Publisher List by Sharon Owen

What Is the Guppy Small Publisher List?

A few years ago, the Guppies set up an interactive Google database where members can visit and look through an extensive list of publishers we've identified who will take unagented submissions in the mystery genre. Many of the presses on the list invite both unagented submissions and submissions from agents.

We decided to exclude vanity presses and any others that offer only self-publishing services or that charge inappropriate fees to writers. Although we recognize that there are valid reasons for self-publishing, it was thought that mingling self-publishing presses with traditional, royalty-paying publishers might lead to confusion. The only exceptions to those restrictions are small presses that meet our criteria, and in addition, offer the option of self-publishing services. In those cases, aspiring writers are advised to use a "buyer beware" attitude.

The confusion some folks have about the Small Publisher list is understandable, because it is not a Yahoo email group. Rather, it is a Google database designed to be interactive.

Guppies who have been granted access can visit the site at <http://sites.google.com/site/smpubs> to peruse the numerous publishers there and determine if any of them might be a good fit.

Any Guppy in good standing can go to the site and fill out a request for access, which jumps to me. I then go into the site, where I'm a designated "owner" and can grant the requesting member permission to view the database. Once permission is granted, it remains valid as long as the Guppy's dues are paid and he or she remains in good standing.

The site is set up as a wiki, which allows visitors who are proficient in the use of Google sites like this one to edit the information already available. If they are tech savvy enough, they can even add another publisher to the list.

Another option is to leave comments in a designated comment section at the bottom of a publisher's page. This keeps the site current without the need for members to contact the "owner" with updated information. If a publisher has done a swell job for a member, that's good to know. If the opposite is true, our members would benefit from that information.

In researching for this article, I came across information about several helpful sites. The sad news is that Preditors and Editors is no longer available. This is the word from its host site, The



Access the Guppy Small Publisher List, maintained by Sharon Owen, at <http://sites.google.com/site/smpubs>

If this is the first time accessing the list, you will be granted permission by Sharon Owen after you sign up at the URL above. You must be a Guppy member to access it.

Critters Writers Workshop:

Unfortunately, much of the data on the P&E site has become stale and outdated, and needs a new caretaker with the time required to update the site. The listings are being removed until they can be updated by a new caretaker.

Until then, we refer you to the following:

[GENERAL THOUGHTS—set of guidelines & tips on how to avoid scams](#)

[SFWA's Writer Beware](#) (I highly recommend this site.)

[The "water cooler" forums at Absolute Write](#)

In addition to the sites recommended by The Critters Writers Workshop above, I found another site that looks like a reliable resource.

<http://publishedtodeath.blogspot.com/p/publishers-looking-for-authors.html>

If any of our Guppy members have questions or suggestions about the Guppy Small Publisher list, they can email me at sharonstgeorge42@gmail.com.



Sharon Owen (writing as Sharon St. George) is the author of the Aimee Machado Mystery series published by Camel Press (Seattle, Washington). She is a member of Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime, including the Guppy Chapter. She maintains the Guppy Small Publisher list and volunteers as a proof-reader for the Guppy newsletter, *First Draft*. Sharon is also the program director of Writers Forum, a 100-member non-profit organization for writers in Far Northern California. You can visit her

website at www.sharonstgeorge.com.

Agent Insight: Making the Fast Pitch by Carol Newhouse

I recently participated in a pitch-fest. The host agency invited wannabe authors to tweet about their manuscripts. If an agent “liked” the tweet, you emailed a query letter and three chapters. If not, you could submit a new tweet, up to a total of five, over an eight-hour period. Seven agents participated.

Cryptic tweets hung in cyberspace. Some tweets garnered multiple “likes.” Although all genres were welcomed, the bulk of “liked” tweets leaned toward quest plotlines and fell into the paranormal and romantic categories.

In the end, no agent “liked” my tweets, but I enjoyed the adrenaline rushes throughout the day and I loved that I could hide behind a machine!

My experiences with pitch-fests at in-person events, usually conferences, have been more stressful. I’ve spent hours before a conference refining and practicing my pitch to prepare for a three- to five-minute appointment. On the day of the pitch, I can’t concentrate on any of the panels I’ve anticipated attending. During actual pitches, I twice delivered like a professional spokesperson but, more often, stumbled over words and once even lost my voice.

My experience as an author is not unique, and it made me wonder how agents viewed pitch-fests. I asked **Jessica Faust** of BookEnds Literary Agency, **Pamela Ahearn** of The Ahearn Agency, **Sarah Younger** of Nancy Yost Literary Agency, **Sharon Pelletier** of Dystel, Goderich and Bourett, **Emily Forland** at Brandt & Hochman, and **Susanna Einstein** of Einstein’s Literary Management several questions regarding pitch-fests.

Five of the agents have participated in at least one pitch-fest and one, Jessica Faust, has participated in a Twitter pitch event.

What do agents think of the pitch-fests?

Susanna Einstein says pitching has evolved from a screenwriting tradition that focuses on the story idea. However, in writing, the skill of executing the idea is more important to her than the beauty of the idea itself—execution that is not visible in a pitch. She thinks writers “are looking for advice they can act on,” something that is difficult for an agent to provide at a pitch-fest.

In fact, Einstein feels so strongly about this that “at this point when I see that conferences charge extra for pitch sessions, or that they advertise a pitch-fest as a centerpiece of their conference, I avoid those conferences as ones that exploit writers either financially, emotionally, or both,” she says.

Several other agents concurred with Einstein’s observations about the limitations of a pitch-fest.

Emily Forland thinks the single most important thing is for her “to experience a writer’s voice on the page,” something she cannot do at a three- to five-minute session.



Photo via visualhunt.com

“It’s hard to target a story type in pitch-fests, as I personally think that there is a lot that makes up a story, so it’s been much easier for me to target a genre.”

—Literary agent Sarah Younger

Pamela Ahearn agrees that the very short time allotted to each author in a pitch-fest constrains her decision-making ability.

For Sarah Younger, “it’s hard to target a story type in pitch-fests, as I personally think that there is a lot that makes up a story, so it’s been much easier for me to target a genre.”

Time constraints of a pitch-fest

Ahearn will usually ask for a 10- to 20-page excerpt plus a synopsis to see if she wants to continue reading.

Einstein also asks for pages. “My experience of the pitch-fest as an agent is a line of writers, each nervously waiting to give me their one-minute pitch, and unless it was a genre I absolutely don’t represent, the only possible response I felt I could have was ‘great, send me pages.’ Because

the only thing I can safely say without reading pages is how good a public speaker the writer is—and that’s irrelevant if their writing is no good.” That being said, although she dislikes pitch-fests, she still goes to the occasional conference and is “more than happy to read 10 or 20 pages of a writer’s work and give feedback on those pages.”

Forland really prefers to “go off and sit quietly with a query letter and the opening pages of any given book.”

Younger finds “online pitch-fests usually have genre tags that one can use to look through the tweets and sort easily.”

On the other hand, Sharon Pelletier enjoys pitch events. “I regularly take a look at #PitMad, part of Brenda Drake’s Pitch Wars contest, and take part in a few others as my schedule allows.” She did not comment on the time constraints of a pitching event.

Continued on next page



Carol Newhouse is a member of several writing organizations, including Sisters in Crime Toronto and the Toronto Romance Writers. She is hard at work on her first book in the Zookeeper Mystery series. When not working as a legal assistant or dreaming of dead bodies, she is walking her dogs, chilling in yoga classes, or hanging out at the Toronto Zoo.

Agent Insight, continued

Faust participates in an event hosted by the Bookends Agency called BookEndsChat. “All of the agents are present and answer questions ‘the Twittersphere’ might have for us. Since we have divergent interests and come from diverse backgrounds, we think this can be a fun and interesting event. We’ve received questions on the market, how to query, thoughts on book ideas, and we’ve been asked writing advice.” Faust says the last chat she participated in spanned two hours.

What makes a good pitch?

The keys to a strong Twitter pitch, Pelletier says, “are sharply defined stakes and a vivid character. In the short space of a tweet we don’t need to see plotline or themes; we want to meet a character who we’ll be invested in and see the obstacle or objective that will be driving the story.” And good news for Guppies, she finds suspense categories lend themselves to sharply defined stakes that shine in a Twitter pitch format.

“Pitches have to be very succinct,” Ahearn adds. “In my view, a good pitch will tell the agent which subgenre of suspense they’re writing in, book length, setting and time period, any comps with well-known titles, and what makes their book distinctive.”

Forland believes “it’s important that writers who plan to attend pitch sessions are able to describe the themes and characters of their books with an economy of words, to know what’s fresh about their idea, who the most likely audience is for their book, and why they as authors might bring something distinctive to the project at hand.”

Younger suggests writers know their hooks. “Know those keywords that will gain an agent or editors interest. Also, perhaps try out/test a few different ones if you’re able to share multiple times online. Know the genre that your book/manuscript is and also what it isn’t. If it’s not something, don’t use that tag or descriptor or participate in a pitch-fest that doesn’t suit your work. It would end up being a lot of wasted time.

“Also, be ready to send your manuscript out once you get requests. And when you’re sending try to follow the agent or editor’s submission guidelines as closely as possible.”

She adds an important proviso: “Know they might update/change their submission guidelines for specific pitch-fests, so play close attention to the details and do your research.”

More advice for pitch-fest participants

Pelletier echoes Younger’s opinion on the importance of guidelines. “Pay attention to the guidelines for each Twitter event,” she says. “Use genre hashtags! As Twitter pitch-fests grow more popular, agents are using the hashtags to filter by the categories they’re looking for, so you are more likely to slip through the cracks if you omit them.”

Pelletier also suggests you observe a Twitter event before you pitch in one. “See what tweets appeal to *you* and figure out why, then apply that when you’re drafting your tweets.”

Ahearn suggests authors target which agents they most want to pitch to—and approach them first, “as both they and the agent will be fresher.” Also, “authors should be professional and understand that if an agent doesn’t ask to see their work it isn’t a slap in the face—it merely means that they wouldn’t be a good fit.”

Finally, don’t give up if you don’t get any interest during a pitch-fest, the agents said.

“My one piece of advice to anyone participating in a pitch-fest is that you don’t forget the importance of querying,” Faust says. “Just because an agent passes on your 140-character pitch doesn’t mean she’ll do the same with a query. I would still query agents who might have been to a pitch-fest, but failed to ‘like’ your pitch. A query and a Twitter pitch are two completely separate things.”

Pitch-fests, adds Forland, can be “great practice for participants learning to hone their book descriptions to be quick and engaging.”

Do pitch-fests help agents?

Yes, the agents say.

“The events are great for any agent looking to build a list or spice up a waning submission pile,” Faust says.

She also thinks pitch-fests are a good publicity vehicle for an agent “to spread the word about what you might be dying to see, but haven’t yet found, and of course, to introduce yourself to new writers. My most recent client came from an #ownvoices event that I did through Twitter.”

Younger agrees pitch-fests can help agents grow their author list. “I’ve seen it happen (many times in fact!).” However, she adds that she has signed more authors from in-person pitches than online pitch-fests.

Says Pelletier, “Social media pitch-fests are a very helpful way to find not just projects with a great premise, but clients who have done their research on their category and market and understand social media effectively. That kind of client is going to be a great long-term partner, not just for the project that caught my eye but for books to come!”

Forland thinks pitch-fests are “a nice way to meet writers and to form an initial impression of the author and their work.”

Ahearn also finds pitch-fests “worthwhile,” saying, “I have gotten a couple of clients from these sessions.”

Even Einstein, who was less positive about pitch-fests in general, says, “I do believe writers must be able to pitch their books—especially once the book is written and acquired by a publisher. If a writer meets a bookseller somewhere or someone from the press, it’s essential for them to have an ‘elevator pitch’ ready.”

However, she ends with this cautionary note: “But for trying to get an agent to sell your book? Better to devote that time to making the actual writing as compelling as you possibly can.”

Glimpses Behind the Publishing Curtain by Carol Elkovich

The Algonkian Writers New York Pitch Conference is held in audition studios off Times Square. The hallways hum with frenetic energy as actors mumble or sing and tap dancers rehearse their routines in the hallways. Would-be-authors also sat there and waited to pitch acquiring editors from hallowed Big Five New York publishers.

Writing conferences reveal various paths to publication and have helped many aspiring authors. However, choosing a conference requires careful weighing of your career stage, if budget and time are issues (if not, please, rare creature, do share your secret). Choosing a conference nearby is a no-brainer; you save on travel and lodging expenses. If your work is in early revision stages, a conference that focuses on craft and plot workshops can be indispensable. Conferences with opportunities to pitch may help land an agent. Some mystery writing conferences are geared more toward fans and published authors; albeit informative, they may not boost you toward publication.

New York Pitch promises an unflinching assessment of one's pitch (*not* the manuscript) from publishing insiders—distinctly from a commercial vantage. Enrollment is limited and submission of work is required for acceptance, which ensures quality and personal attention. My manuscript was complete and I knew marketing required distinctly different language, so I chose the NY Pitch. I also wanted the opportunity to interact with faculty member Paula Munier.

Paula wears a fedora in her press photos, which is apropos to her many professional hats—author, editor, teacher, content strategist, literary agent at Talcott Notch, current vice president of Mystery Writers of America, and past president of the New England chapter of MWA. Paula has authored excellent books on writing.

Regardless of pitch gambles, I knew I would learn much from her. Paula was diligent and generous in sharing her trove of knowledge. She receives upward of 10,000 cold queries a year aside from her current and forthcoming projects. Thus, Paula said, in addition to an excellent MS, distinguishing oneself from the slush pile requires activities such as attending conferences to make introductions to agents and other writers, having a polished logline/pitch, engaging in social media platforms, tracking publishing deals (Publishers Marketplace), and researching agent preferences (try Manuscript Wish List).

The conference shed light on publishers' viewpoints. I presented a different pitch to four acquisitions editors. Each night, after hours of workshops and lectures, I returned to my Airbnb loft and rewrote my pitch. I emailed revisions to Paula and she responded. Critiques from editors were promised, not the yay or nay from agents at a pitch fest.



Photo by Carol Elkovich

Velvet curtains and pianos were in all the audition rooms, left, where writers made their pitches. Above, agent and author Paula Munier.

However, I would advise anyone attending this conference to persist. Twice, editors attempted to dismiss me because my project hadn't interested them. I sympathized with the fatigue they endured; however, I held my ground and asked questions. My persistence paid off and illustrated I hadn't emphasized the right stakes or hit the right Unique Selling Point.

More revision produced exciting, satisfying responses from other editors. The round-robin group pitch session thickened skins as some faced suggestions to substantially rework their pitch or premise, reduce the number of POVs, switch genre (from romance to YA), or that a mystery really needed a murder. I was astounded by how thorough and immediate the feedback was from the editors and instructors.

The glimpse of publishers' perspectives and the realities of the competitive market allowed me to view my work more objectively and to accept criticism without feeling my soul had been crushed to fine sawdust.



Writing as C.M. West, Carol Elkovich collaborates in writing crime fiction novels with her husband, Mark Butler. An artist and professor at California College of the Arts, her experiences helped develop their artist/sleuth character, Tru James. Their short story *Too Good to be True* was published as the cover feature in the June 2017 issue of *Mystery Weekly Magazine*. See their website at <https://partnersincrimefiction.wordpress.com>.

Diverse Voices: Writing About Race and Prejudice by Susan Van Kirk

My decision to write about race and prejudice in a novella that complemented my Endurance Mysteries came from a discussion in a book club one night.

Wait, I'm getting ahead of myself.

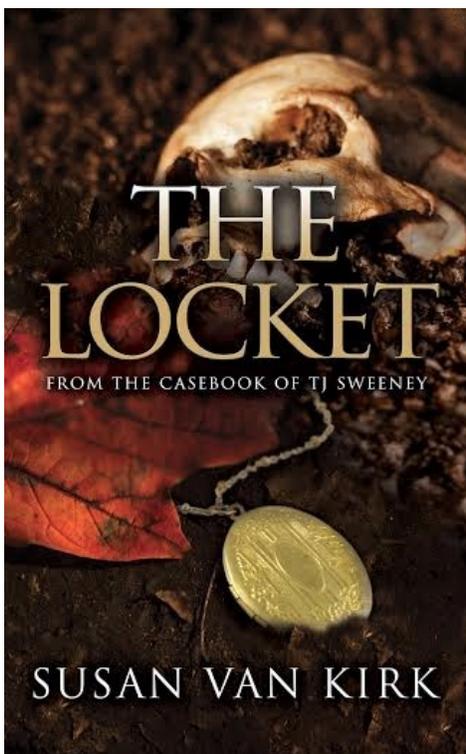
I am the author of a trilogy of novels called The Endurance Mysteries. They are set in the small, mainly white town of Endurance, Illinois. The Midwest is dotted with similar small towns that are not racially diverse. I taught high school English in the downstate Illinois town of Monmouth for 34 years, and I would estimate that of my 3,000-plus students, less than five percent were African-American, biracial, Hispanic, or Asian.

When I began this series, I followed the maxim to write what you know. My main character, Grace Kimble, is white, 56, and just retiring from teaching. (Well, alright, she is YOUNGER than I am.) She is the protagonist surrounded by many supporting characters. The most important, by far, is the lead detective in town. This is where I made a left turn from white faces in fictional Endurance.

Detective TJ Sweeney (Theresa Johanna), is brash, beautiful, professional, intelligent, well-read, intuitive, cynical about men, and biracial. Her white father left her black mother with their two children when TJ was young. Returning to Endurance after college, TJ becomes the lead detective when she scores higher than anyone in the history of the town's police exam, and solves several crimes quickly. Not only is she biracial, but she's also a woman—both characteristics making her a “first” in Endurance.

Why did I create this character? Beats me. Maybe some of the biracial women I'd mentored through high school and college came to mind. I admired the way they navigated a difficult world. One, who came from a home like that of TJ, graduated from Georgetown University and has been my “go to” person for questions about her life views and difficulties growing up in a largely white community.

I'm sure another reason I created this character is because of the period in which I “came of age.” My early life was rooted in the 1950s, but my high school and college experiences were in the 1960s. My goal, during my professional years, was to teach all students, no matter what race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status happened to define them. I believe I bent over a little more to help those students who were different from me because it was harder to understand their stories. I was the outsider. I certainly find that refrain in the lives of my characters, Grace Kimble and TJ Sweeney.



I would like to think I created TJ Sweeney because I admired her humanity and her many character facets. Grace helped her smooth some of her prickly edges during high school and college, and they have been friends ever since despite their racial difference, their age difference (56 and 39), their highly dissimilar family relationships, and their totally differing backgrounds. They have each other's backs and always will.

Because I feel this way about my two characters, I was surprised one night when the members of a book club said the only thing they found unrealistic about my mystery series was the relationship between Grace and TJ. In the “real world” this relationship would never exist. Of all the things they might have said, this comment surprised me.

After thinking about it for some time, I decided to write a novella where TJ would be the main character, Grace would be a minor character, and race would be a discussion point throughout the plot. I chose a

cold case from the 1940s that had to do with identity, a big issue with TJ Sweeney. This gave me an opportunity to explore TJ's family, her attitudes in a largely white high school and town, what college was like, and how she and Grace could become friends while coming from such different backgrounds.

The Locket: From the Casebook of TJ Sweeney begins when a murder victim is found by a crew digging the foundation for a new building on the edge of Endurance. It quickly becomes obvious that the skeleton was a woman from decades earlier. Trying to identify her before the advent of DNA databases is TJ Sweeney's problem.

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Susan Van Kirk taught high school English for 34 years in the small town of Monmouth, Illinois (population 10,000) and an additional 10 years at Monmouth College. She is the author of a creative nonfiction memoir, *The Education of a Teacher (Including Dirty Books and Pointed Looks)* and a series of cozy mysteries: *Three May Keep a Secret*, *The Locket: From the Casebook of TJ Sweeney*, *Marry in Haste*, and *Death Takes No Bribes*. She is currently at work on a new series. Visit her website

at www.susanvankirk.com.

Diverse Voices, continued

The coroner defines the victim as a white female because her femur has the forward curve of a Caucasian. But when the DNA comes back, it is clear she was biracial, favoring the Caucasian side. This further pushes Sweeney to discover the identity of a victim with whom she feels an affinity. Her investigation leads her to believe this murder was a hate crime from the 1940s.

This plot allowed me to explore TJ's ideas about her own identity, about cultural attitudes toward race, and her relationship with Grace Kimball.

TJ is well-educated, well-read, but cynical about men and marriage. She fusses about a man in her life whom she is leaving because "he doesn't know about Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Bessie Smith, Pinot Grigio, Miles Davis, Fibonacci numbers, or 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.'" In fact, she is known to love and leave the men in her life, probably going back to her relationship with her father who left. TJ's mother says he wasn't strong enough to take the looks, the faces, or the words of his white co-workers. Mama Sweeney forgave him decades earlier, but TJ is still bitter. She isn't perfect, and her relationships with men are usually troubled, especially since she seldom dates her intellectual equals.

In high school, TJ's attitudes were quite clear. She said that when she filled out forms that had a "race box," she'd put "other." She saw herself as "other," which makes her an outsider in a town of people who don't look like her. She viewed herself as poor, smart, from a one-parent home, and alone. The boys were stupid and the girls were mean. She doesn't tell Grace this story out of self-pity, but rather to say this is what has shaped her. Holding herself apart has also made her the outstanding police detective she is.

Of college, Sweeney says, "College was no different. Unlike the black kids who grew up in large cities, I had never been stopped and frisked for having a backpack. However, no matter my age or school, I was always reminded I was different because I wouldn't play the mean-girl, cruel games, or pick on others who were outcasts." TJ's concern for victims of crime stems from

The Diverse Voices series is an idea spun off from Sisters in Crime's *Report for Change: The 2016 Publishing Summit Report on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Mystery Community*, available on the [SinC website](#).



these early years when she, herself, was often the victim.

Because of their friendship, Sweeney can tell Grace, "You grew up in Indianapolis in a white-bread home with two parents, enough money, and college as inevitable. Then you married Saint Roger [Grace's deceased husband]. You have no idea how totally different our lives were before we met." And yet they share an amazing friendship as adults.



Photo courtesy of Susan Van Kirk

The author as a teacher.

The plot also allows me to venture into TJ's early home, where she goes to talk with her mother. The reader hears stories of racial epithets from TJ's earlier days in grade school, and a horrendous story of prejudice from the 1930s that TJ's mother recalls. (That story came straight from the mouth of my stepmother, who witnessed the incident in my hometown in the late 1930s.) This story also sheds light on the death of the murder victim, since she comes from that time. What appalls me is that it actually happened.

Perhaps TJ's novella, *The Locket: From the Casebook of TJ Sweeney*, is my attempt to explain to those naysayers that TJ Sweeney and Grace Kimball have the strongest relationship in the world. They admire each other and their differences, and they work together with a heck of a respect and love that two women can have no matter what their circumstances. Despite those readers who might believe this sounds like a fairy tale, I must

mention I'm not a writer of fairy tales. Even though TJ and Grace are characters in my head, they could be live people in my real world.

Do's and Don'ts for a Facebook Party by Beth Green and Christina Lorenzen

There are a couple of jokes to be made about writers and parties, but despite the stereotype of an introvert huddled in a corner with a book, virtual parties held on social media platforms are a surprisingly popular way for authors to generate buzz about their books and create and reward their community of readers.

If you're not familiar with this type of event, a typical virtual party is held on a particular day on one platform (often Facebook). Ideally, an author hosts "party games" and awards prizes, and gets everyone excited about their work. They are often used for book launches, but can also be done at holidays or for certain themes.

In this issue's column, Christina, who organizes Facebook parties twice a month on behalf of her publisher, Forget Me Not Romances, gives the Guppies some advice from a virtual party veteran.

Note: We're going to specifically discuss Facebook parties in this column because that seems to be the most widely used among authors. However, if you are more comfortable with Instagram, Twitter, or another platform—or even your blog—you can apply most of these tips to an online there as well. Now, go on, have a great party!

Do: Limit author participation so everyone can be heard.

Most events have a definite start time and stopping point. Most run from two to six hours.

If you are planning a multi-author event, then it's a good idea to cap your number of author participants. Christina recommends five to seven in order that guests get a chance to talk to all the author participants. Additionally, if there are too many authors hosting, then it can be confusing for guests and it also cuts the amount of time each author has to post. Ideally, each author should have at least 20-30 minutes. If you are planning on running a solo event, keep in mind that you'll have to fill the whole time yourself, so make sure you have enough prizes/activities planned so that you don't run out.

Don't: Forget to plan weeks (or months!) in advance

When Christina sets up Facebook parties for her publisher, she plans a month in advance so authors can figure the time into their schedules. In the planning stages, the authors determine a start time and work out who will start and who will finish. It's vital to



Photo by Brooke Lark / visualhunt.com

Facebook parties are often used for book launches, but can also be done at holidays or for certain themes.

know everyone's time zones because one time that works for one might be the early morning or middle of the night for another. Christina finds weeknights work best, with Thursdays a good choice. Hint: A good tool for keeping track of timeslots across time zones is the Meeting Planner function on TimeandDate.com.

Do: Ask a friend to help manage it with you

If you are planning to run the event solo, know that realistically you'll need at least one other keyboard warrior to pitch in and help. Two or more, if you can swing it.

But the total amount of people behind the scenes of the party largely depends on who is running the event. For example, in Christina's case, she sets up and moderates the twice-monthly events for her publisher, so the individual authors have more of a figurehead/host role and less of an organizational role. But the party planning does require organization and follow up. If two people can work together, they can divide the tasks and share the work, but be careful! If you have too many people trying to collaborate for a virtual party, you can create communication problems.

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Beth Green is a freelance writer, language coach, and social media manager. A longtime expat, she lives in Prague and reviews books for The Displaced Nation website. In her free time, Beth is working on a series of (yet unpublished) international crime novels. She's been a member of SinC and the Guppies since 2012.



Christina Lorenzen is an award-winning journalist who jumped ship from the world of journalism to pursue her lifelong dream of becoming a novelist. She's the author of four sweet romance novels and at work on her first cozy mystery. She loves nothing more than to spend her days writing with her three cats at her feet.

Social Media, continued

Do: Consider incorporating live video

As a participant in Facebook parties, Beth has seen live video done very well...and also *not* very well! If you know you're comfortable on camera, you can use the Facebook Live function to add drama to prize drawings or to do a quick author reading of your work. But make sure you're not going to be embarrassed by anything in the background of your video feed or interrupted by a pet or family member.

Christina says that, while she hasn't worked with live video, she'd caution authors to take into account the time zones they want to reach, and the turnout they hope are watching when the video stream goes live. You want to make sure that the author isn't talking into space, or, the other side, unable to talk to every guest.

Don't: Feel shy about asking people to like/share the event in advance

It's a party, but unlike your typical backyard barbecue with a couple of neighbors, you want to invite the whole darn state! Building a buzz is critical. Encourage all the authors participating to share the link across all their social media. If you're running the show solo, then ask a few key friends (see last issue's column on Street Teams too, if you aren't sure which friends!) to share. What's key is that all participating authors must invite a large portion of, or all, their Facebook friends.

Above, we recommend that you limit the number of participants. But *don't* limit the number of invitees. You need a lot of invitees to get a good turnout for the party. If you, or one of your participating authors is feeling shy about doing some good ol' Blatant Self Promotion by asking people to share the link, ask them to remember that the people who attend the party will have fun! So, while it is self-promotion, it should be attendee-focused. You're actually asking people to come enjoy themselves with you—not buy your book (though of course you hope they will!).

Do: Know where the party fits in your short-term goals and long-term goals

The immediate goal is usually to get the authors' books in front of the readers. The authors should have invited many friends and encouraged their friends to invite other friends. In turn, everyone is being 'introduced' to friends they don't know yet (hopefully).

But don't lose track of your long-term goals either. In the long term you usually are aiming to get new readers, new followers, and new subscribers for authors who have newsletters. Ideally, the



Photo by Sofiya Levchenko / visualhunt.com

It's a party, but unlike your typical backyard barbecue with a couple of neighbors, you want to invite the whole darn state! Building a buzz is critical.

party should get you closer to both goals, not just one.

Do: Use scheduling tools to help you out

Perhaps this commandment is more of a "maybe" than a "do"—Christina says she doesn't need to use schedulers because Facebook sends out reminders once guests have said they are going.

However, authors should share the link regularly for a few weeks before the event, right up to the day, and scheduling tools can be helpful to make sure you don't get busy and miss a day. On the day of the event, Christina has her authors do fun posts like 'Just a few hours until the party' with the link.

Don't: Forget it has to be fun!

Encourage conversation on the event page. Do this by creating interactive posts that require guests to comment more than yes or no. For example, post a picture and ask guests to share a picture of their

own. Or a question for people to share. Internet scavenger hunts and trivia quizzes can be fun too. There should be authors chatting to guests and guests chatting to each other.

And what would a party be without snacks? Encourage guests to post a picture of their virtual goodies they're bringing with them like a picture of cookies or cakes.

Do: Think of cool prizes

Of course authors want to give away their books, but we've heard it said that this actually defeats the purpose of getting sales.

But author swag is a great idea, as are little items like ornaments at the holidays, hand creams, handmade goods. Authors who have a themed series are in luck here! Choose whatever an author can reasonably send out in the mail. Of course, gift cards are always good, too. Make sure your swag is available on the day of the party—you don't want to make guests wait too long after the day to receive it.

Do you have any tips or questions for social media you'd like to see featured in this column? Contact Beth Green at (beth_verde@yahoo.com) or Christina Lorenzen at (carp119@aol.com), or hit us up on Twitter @bethverde or @ChrisFoxLorenz. We'd love to hear from you!

The Editor's POV: Book Blurbs and Bios by Lourdes Venard

This is the fifth in a series.

So far this year, we've looked at how you should write and format manuscripts, query letters, synopses, and online writing, from blogs to digital publications. But what about those other "bits"—author bios and book descriptions. Even though they are short, they can often be just as frustrating.

Book descriptions

These are sometimes called back-of-the-book blurbs, although they are not always on the back cover. With hardbacks, these descriptions are on the front cover inside flap (the back cover is reserved for blurbs, or quotes, from other authors or book reviews). On paperbacks and softcovers, these descriptions are indeed often on the back.

With ebooks, these book descriptions often are front and center on Amazon or BarnesandNoble.com. In any case, this is often what the reader looks at second—the first being the cover. The book description is what hooks a reader into buying the book, so it's probably the most important short writing you will ever do. It can also be used in a multitude of places—from blog posts you write to promotion copy.

Word lengths vary from 100 to 200 words (paperback covers seem to be, at most, about 150 words; flap copy tends to be longer, up to 200 words).

What do authors include in these book descriptions? Here's what makes for a successful description:

1) A clear sense of what type of book this is. It should not only reflect your story, but your voice. The reader should know whether it's a cozy, thriller, or historical mystery. You do that, of course, by choosing words that show (not tell).

In Terrie Farley Moran's *Read to Death*, we get a sense of that by her words (I have bolded certain words for demonstration purposes):

"With their **book club** season wrapping up with *The Florida Life of Thomas Edison*, **Sassy and Bridgy** decide to take their group on a day-trip to the **beautiful** Edison and Ford Winter Estates. Hiring driver Oscar Frieland, who's known for his **colorful stories** and his love of the café's Robert Frost **fruit tartlets**, the bibliophiles set off for **a day of sunshine and history**. After a **lovely excursion**, the club returns to the café for lunch and a book discussion, but the group falls silent after Oscar is found dead in his van. The sheriff's deputies have some questions of their own for the group, and if the ladies don't find some answers soon, the next book they read might be from a prison library."

From the characters' names (Sassy!) to mention of delicious desserts, we know we're in cozy territory. Contrast that with Catriona McPherson's *Quiet Neighbors*, another story set in a

bookshop:

"It's the oldest bookshop in a town full of bookshops; **rambling and disordered**, full of treasures if you look hard. Jude found one of the treasures when she visited last summer, the high point of a **miserable** vacation. Now, in the **depths of winter**, when she has to **run away**, Lowell's **chaotic** bookshop in that **backwater of a town** is the safe place she runs to. Jude needs a bolt-hole; Lowell needs an assistant, and when an affordable rental is thrown in too, life begins to look up. The **gravedigger's cottage** isn't perfect for **a woman alone**, but at least she has quiet neighbors. Quiet, **but not silent**. The **long dead** and the books they left behind both have tales to tell, and the dusty rooms of the bookshop are **not the haven** they seem to be. Lowell's past and Jude's present are a **dangerous cocktail** of **secrets and lies**, and someone is coming to light the taper that could **destroy everything**."

It's not a cozy, for sure, but something darker and twistier, we expect. Both stories are sure to please bibliophiles, with talk of book clubs and bookstores, but the descriptions promise two very different books.

2) Name your protagonists, but don't tell the reader that much about them yet. In fact, we don't know anything about Jude, really, except she's running away—and this adds a wonderful layer of mystery.

3) Add in the setting. From Terrie's description, we know it takes place in Florida, part of it in a café, which is sure to be quaint. We don't know the city for Catriona's book, but we know it is set in a "backwater" town, a description that tells us this will be an isolated and insular village, and in a dusty, chaotic bookshop, which immediately brings to mind an old shop crammed to the top with piles of books.

4) As seen by the examples above, you only need to hint at the plot. Avoid spoilers, but give a glimpse of the mystery and central conflict—who killed Oscar? And what are the secrets and lies in Lowell's and Jude's lives? End the description on a cliffhanger. See the last lines of the two examples I have given—they promise a bumpy ride, at the very least, for the protagonists.

Continued on next page



Lourdes Venard had a 30-year career in journalism, working at *The Miami Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Milwaukee Journal News*, *Newsday*, and other publications. She is now a college instructor and independent editor working with individual authors, magazines, and other clients. You can visit her website at www.commasense.net.

The Editor's POV, continued

Author bios

This should be easy—you know all about yourself, right? But the struggle in the author bio comes from telling about yourself in an interesting, entertaining way, rather than providing a resume. Here are some tips:

1) Tailor your author bio to your book. If you are writing a cozy, keep the author description light. A horror author, on the other hand, won't be mentioning puppies and rainbows.

2) Use the third person to write your bio. Readers will still know you probably wrote your own bio, so inject your own sense of humor or voice into the description. Tell us something unusual or funny about yourself, if it is appropriate.

In fact, you may want to make a list of five things you are passionate about. Use one or two of those in your bio. People are always interested in someone else's hobbies or interests.

3) Keep your bio short, 75 to 150 words. This bio won't only go on your back cover or Amazon author page, but it's something you can use on other platforms (Goodreads, Facebook), as well as blog posts and articles you write. Remember that readers have short attention spans online. If they have to click the "Read More" button on Amazon's author page, you may have written more than most readers will get through.

Bios may be longer on your website, where readers often go to learn more about the author and her books.

4) If you are a best-selling or award-winning author, by all means drop that into your description. However, if all you do is list publication credits in a dry manner, this will be less interesting to readers, who want to know you as a person.

5) Finally, make sure your bio is updated regularly. In doing research for this article, I visited many Amazon author pages and found outdated information for quite a few authors. Make sure that information about books, prizes, and even your personal life (if you've included it) are all up to date.

On Amazon pages, include links to your blog posts and freshen up the page with videos and other new content every once in a while. These are steps you can take even if you only have one or two published books out. For an example of someone who does this effectively, look at Hank Phillippi Ryan's Amazon page and her "Author Updates."



Photo via visualhunt.com

Keep your bio short, 75 to 150 words. This bio won't only go on your back cover or Amazon author page, but it's something you can use on other platforms (Goodreads, Facebook), as well as blog posts and articles you write.

Some of the best

Some examples from Amazon author pages:

"Mary Feliz writes the Maggie McDonald Mysteries featuring a Silicon Valley professional organizer and her sidekick golden retriever. She's worked for Fortune 500 firms and mom and pop enterprises, competed in whale boat races and done synchronized swimming. She attends organizing conferences in her character's stead, but Maggie's skills leave her in the dust."

Mary's bio showcases quirky interests that make her appealing—whale boat races and synchronized swimming—but she also drops in a hint of her character and what her series is about.

I also like the bio for Jim Jackson (James M. Jackson on Amazon):

"Known as James Montgomery Jackson on his tax return (and to his mother whenever she was really upset with him). Jim splits his time between the deep woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Georgia's Lowcountry. He claims the moves between locations are weather-related, but others suggest they may have more to do with not overstaying his welcome."

We get to know a lot about Jim, but he does it in a smooth storytelling voice—and he doesn't take himself too seriously.

Krista Davis is succinct (79 words), but yet her bio tells us something about her books as well as about herself:

"New York Times Bestselling author Krista Davis writes the Domestic Diva Mysteries and the Paws & Claws mysteries for dog and cat lovers. She grew up devouring Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and Agatha Christie and still loves a good mystery. Like her domestic diva, Sophie Winston, Krista enjoys cooking (okay, eating!) and entertaining, but she'd just as soon leave the cleaning to someone else. She lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains with two cats and three dogs."

Hopefully, these bios will spark some ideas. You might also want to look at other authors writing in your genre or subgenre. What attracts you about their bios? How can you replicate that in your own bio?

Thanks to Guppy Jean Macaluso, who suggested this topic. Next issue: Formatting issues for authors who are self-publishing.

Author Interview: Charlene Harris by Beth Schmelzer

I am delighted to introduce you to the gracious Charlene Harris, author of a long list of cozy and urban fantasy novels as well as short stories. In addition, Charlene has edited a number of anthologies.

Some of us have seen Sookie Stackhouse and other characters come alive on TV and DVD. While preparing for this interview, I reread several of the Aurora Teagarden mysteries. Each was better than the last. I am looking forward to reading Charlene's latest release, an Aurora Teagarden mystery, *Sleep Like a Baby*, later this month.

My biggest surprise when reading her latest series was what fun it was to be transported to Midnight—Texas, that is. I fell in love with her characters in the Midnight Texas series, which range from vampires to witches. In the series, psychic Manfred Bernardo resurfaces from her Harper Connelly books.

Recently, Charlene Harris received the Lifetime Achievement Award at Malice Domestic 29.

Q. Charlene, you are known as a caring, kind, and generous person, so how do you create such devious and scary antagonists?

A. Obviously, the reports of my good nature are greatly exaggerated! I don't think people are all on the surface. Everyone has hidden fears, hates, desires, goals. I think the trick is writing a character that way, showing the reader the surface, and yet having that reader not be completely surprised when something unexpected pops up in your character's behavior.

Q. My favorite quality about your writing is your imagination. Each book, short story, and series is peopled with different characters. How do you keep up with your many characters?

A. I don't, always. With the Sookie Stackhouse books, I eventually hired a woman—I called her my continuity editor—who kept track of everyone's eye color, vehicle, height, education ... everything. She was invaluable. With shorter series, I keep a notebook on each series and a lot of sticky notes.

Q. You brought urban fantasy to mystery fans with your Sookie Stackhouse and Midnight, Texas series. I wonder what advice you have for Guppies about crossing genres.

A. Don't be afraid. Evidence shows that fans of one may be quite willing to enjoy the other. It's not the concept that's the problem. It's the execution. If you have the ability to charm and coax readers into following your plots and characters, they'll go with you into unknown realms.



Q. Tell us a little about your journey to publication.

A. That was a long time ago. Condensing heavily, when I married a second time my husband offered me the opportunity to stay home and write. I took a creative writing class taught by Shannon Ravenel Purvis, who at that time had just quit working for Houghton Mifflin. She liked the book I wrote for the class and asked an editor at HM to read the book. HM bought it, and my second book, both standalone conventional mysteries. I had a bumpier road after that, but wasn't that a great beginning?

Q. I recently read an interview on WriterUniv.com about the differences between "straight" fantasy (more Tolkien) and urban fantasy and paranormal. Since you introduced your cozy mystery fans to

urban fantasy, how do you explain the differences?

A. Urban fantasy is tied into the world as we know it, or a very similar and recognizable world. Most often, UF contains violence and sex, though the degrees of these elements change. Just as a side note, in urban fantasy women are seldom shy, conventional, or retiring. They are often fully as capable of dealing out violence as men are. (And they are much more in touch with their sexuality, in general.)

Q. Tell us about your knowledge of the various professions of your sleuths who are librarians, waitresses, maids, and death investigators (if that is the right name for what Harper Connelly does).

Continued on next page



Beth Schmelzer is a Guppy member of the Chesapeake Chapter of SinC. She started reading The Bobbsey Twins mysteries at an early age, but then grew up to enjoy the Perry Mason series and mysteries by Helen MacInnes. After graduating from Indiana University as an English/education major, she taught middle school English in Maryland. After raising two children, she decided her true love was the library, where she could be surrounded by books for all

ages. Read her blog with book reviews for children and adult readers at <https://bestbooksbybeth.wordpress.com>.

Author Interview, continued

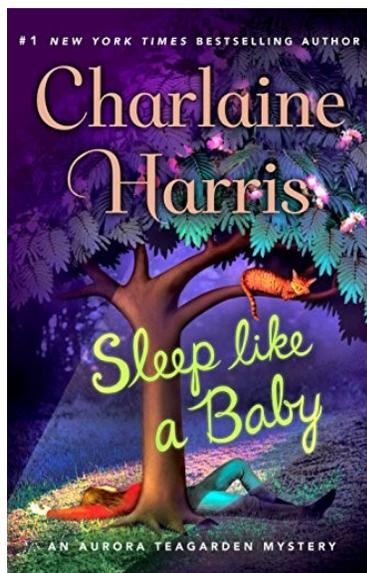
A. That's as good a name as any for what Harper does. I have never served in any of those jobs, but I know many people who have done similar things for a living. Harper is in a service industry, come to think of it. I created her when I became interested in lightning and people who have survived lightning strikes. My mother was a librarian. I'm very sympathetic to waitresses and maids in general, and I've had friends who've worked those (often) thankless jobs, who had some great stories to tell.

Q. How does writing and editing short stories and anthologies affect your other writing?

A. What a benefit that's been to me. When Toni (Toni L.P. Kelner, aka Leigh Perry) and I began editing our anthologies, I'd have to say, "This story doesn't work, though I don't know why," which is no help at all to the writer. Toni, on the other hand, could say, "This story isn't working in this passage because you don't explain X," which is MUCH more on target. So I learned from the best. And in observing the errors others had made, I learned what not to do. Writing short stories is very hard, and I've just become comfortable with the idea that I can write one that isn't a disgrace, after 30 or so.

Q. What changes have you noticed in publishing since beginning your writing with *Sweet and Deadly* in 1981?

A. Ha! It would be easier to ask what was the same. There are fewer houses, so the system is all clogged. Agents have many more applicants for their attention and harder criteria to meet. Most publishers do not give a writer a chance to develop a following, because increasingly it's about the bottom line RIGHT NOW. Editors have more writers to handle. Writers are asked to undertake more and more of their own publicity. Self-publishing and e-publishing are



much more respectable than they used to be. Contact with your readers is constant and open, sometimes too much so.

Q. We love to read the books our favorite authors enjoy. What's on your bedside table?

A. I have double bookshelves of books I want to read. I fear some kind of book apocalypse, so I stockpile books in case publishing somehow stops. I just read Ben Aaronovitch's *The Furthest Station* and Lee

Child's Jack Reacher short stories, and I also just finished Amanda Bouchet's *A Promise of Fire*. All very different. That's what excites me, as a reader and as a writer.

Q. How about sharing your dream dinner party? What guests living or dead would you invite to join you for a Southern meal?

A. Oh, geez. I'm a very anxious hostess, so really, I'd just settle for my family, or for my close friends. If we're talking a fantasy meal, with cooks and servers, I'd ask Lee Child, Karin Slaughter, Seanan McGuire, Christopher Golden, and ... gosh ... Kat Richardson, or Jeanne Stein, or Lawrence Block, or Val McDermid.

Q. My favorite line in one of your Aurora Teagarden novels is: "This was great drama for a librarian." How did you know what would titillate your readers (who I don't imagine have as much drama in their lives as your characters)?

A. That's just a judgment call. I have—with a few notable exceptions—lived a conventional and polite life. I figure what stands out to me will stand out to readers.

Q. Any lasting words of wisdom for the Guppies reading this interview?

A. Do what you fear. And know that your role is to entertain, not to instruct. If you have an agenda, readers will catch on without being lectured or harangued.

Bibliography

Aurora Teagarden

Real Murders (1990)
A Bone to Pick (1992)
Three Bedrooms, One Corpse (1994)
The Julius House (1994)
Dead Over Heels (1996)
A Fool and His Honey (1999)
Last Scene Alive (2002)
Poppy Done to Death (2003)
All the Little Liars (2016)
Sleep Like a Baby (2017)

Lily Bard

Shakespeare's Landlord (1996)
Shakespeare's Champion (1997)
Shakespeare's Christmas (1998)
Shakespeare's Trollop (2000)
Shakespeare's Counselor (2001)

Sookie Stackhouse

Dead Until Dark (2001)
Living Dead in Dallas (2002)
Club Dead (2003)
Dead to the World (2004)
Dead as a Doornail (2005)
Definitely Dead (2006)
All Together Dead (2007)
From Dead To Worse (2008)
Dead and Gone (2009)
Dead in the Family (2010)
Dead Reckoning (2011)
Deadlocked (2012)
Dead Ever After (2013)

Harper Connelly

Grave Sight (2005)
Grave Surprise (2006)
An Ice Cold Grave (2007)
Grave Secret (2009)

Cemetery Girl Trilogy (with Christopher Golden)

Inheritance (2014)
Haunted (2018)

Midnight, Texas

Midnight Crossroad (2014)
Day Shift (2015)
Night Shift (2016)

Standalone novels

Sweet and Deadly (1981)
A Secret Rage (1984)

IpsO Facto: Broadchurch, Season 2 by Keenan Powell

Spoiler Alerts: The murderer sought in Season 1 is identified in this article.

When we finished *Broadchurch* Season 1, DI Miller's husband, Joe, was charged with the murder of village boy Danny Latimer. The evidence showed that Joe was a pedophile and had been, at the very least, grooming Danny with e-mails and clandestine meetings.

The trial of Joe Miller is the overarching storyline during the seven episodes of

Season 2, and there are a number of tangled parallel plots and subplots along the way, including the tragic case that resulted in DI Hardy's (David Tennant) banishment to Broadchurch and the fallout from Miller's arrest and exposure of various villager's secrets.

Turning our attention to the trial, I'm not sure if that's how they really do things in England, but the trial would not have gone that way in the United States.

Episode 1 involves a change of plea hearing. Everyone involved in the case appears at court expecting Joe Miller to change his plea from not guilty. In America, if a defendant chooses to accept punishment, he can change his plea to guilty but more often he will plead "no contest," which means that he doesn't agree that he's guilty but he concedes that the evidence is so overwhelming that he would be convicted and so he is allowing the judge to enter a conviction and go forward with sentencing. When the defendant decides to change his plea, his attorney will arrange for a hearing for him to do it in court. Generally, the hearing is open to the public. But if the defendant is snitching out his co-defendants, as happens in federal drug cases frequently, the hearing will be closed.

The advantage to defendants pleading no contest rather than guilty is that the no contest plea cannot be used in subsequent civil proceedings to establish guilt. A guilty plea or conviction can be so used. This is a concern for defendants who have assets they want to protect because it forces the estate of the murder victims to sue to prove civil liability, a lengthy and expensive endeavor, during which time the assets could be hidden or spent.

In America, when a defendant changes his plea to guilty or no contest, he usually has a plea deal in place. The deal could include dropping some charges in exchange for a conviction on a specific charge, and agreements relating to prison time and resti-



David Tennant and Olivia Colman in *Broadchurch*.

tution. But there is nothing stopping a defendant from unilaterally changing his plea, without a plea deal, and accepting the consequences at sentencing, as Bernie Madoff did, when the defendant believes he can obtain a more favorable sentencing directly from the judge than that to which the prosecution is willing to agree.

Back to our story: Joe Miller at the last minute decides not to plead up.

A defendant can do that

right up until he enters plea. If a defendant changes his mind after he enters his guilty or no contest plea, he must convince the court why he should be entitled to withdraw that plea. The frequently used excuse is ineffective assistance of counsel; however, newly discovered evidence, if it is especially strong, should allow withdrawal of a plea even long after the sentencing.

The trial begins in Episode 2. After the jury is picked and there is some testimony, the defense attorney moves to suppress Joe Miller's confession. It is highly unlikely in America that such a motion would be sandbagged until the jury had heard it, as a confession is such compelling evidence that a jury would be unable to forget about it and deliberate without considering it.

In America, defense attorneys are required to file motions in limine (motions to preclude the introduction of specific evidence) before the trial. And before the trial there is a hearing, where witnesses can be called to testify, regarding how the specific items of evidence were gathered. The judge would make her rulings long before the jury is selected, to ensure the jury only hears evidence that was deemed admissible.

Continued on next page



Keenan Powell is an attorney practicing in Anchorage, Alaska. Her hobbies include oil painting, classical harp, and walking her Irish Wolfhounds. Inspired by a series of homeless deaths, she began writing the Maeve Malloy legal mystery series set in contemporary Alaska. The first book won the 2015 William F. Deek-Malice Domestic Grant. She blogs regularly for [Mysteristas](#).

Ipsa Facto, continued

In America, a confession could be suppressed if it was obtained as the result of a Miranda violation or coerced, or if the confession was otherwise not voluntary (e.g. mental health reasons).

The judge ultimately suppresses the confession in *Broadchurch* on the grounds that DI Miller attacked her husband after he confessed. That wouldn't happen in America. If she had attacked him before the confession and then he confessed, the confession might be suppressed on the grounds of coercion. But since she had not, the confession would have been admitted in an American court. And if there was a legitimate reason to suppress the confession after it was heard by the jury, chances are the case would be mistried and a new jury would be picked to hear the case.

In Episode 4, the prosecution puts on a witness who testifies that she saw the defendant lose his temper in a parking lot incident and beat someone—which oddly comes as a huge surprise to everyone in this little town. Character evidence is inadmissible as a rule and unless the prosecution proved one of the exceptions to the character evidence rule (motive, opportunity, intent, preparation, plan, knowledge, identity, absence of mistake, or lack of accident), it would not get in. In my state, the proponent of the evidence must prove a link to one of the exceptions. In federal court, if there is some imaginable justification to one of the exceptions, the judge will let it in. It is unlikely that evidence of one violent outburst would get in unless the prosecution could prove that the



In Episode 6, the defense moves to have the case dismissed, claiming some vague grounds of abuse of process that it contends prevents the defendant from obtaining a fair trial. If the trial were in America, vague allegations would not suffice. The defense would need to point at specific wrongs.

circumstances were similar, i.e. that the defendant had beaten a child.

In Episode 6, the defense moves to have the case dismissed, claiming some vague grounds of abuse of process that it contends prevents the defendant from obtaining a fair trial. If the trial were in America, vague allegations would not suffice. The defense would need to point at specific wrongs, such as a coerced confession that was admitted, tainted evidence, or suppressed exculpatory evidence, and even then, if the case was mistried, it would not be dismissed except in limited egregious circumstances.

In Episode 7, the defense is allowed a surrebuttal, i.e.

allowed to put on more evidence after the prosecution's rebuttal. It happens sometimes, but the defense attorney would have to convince the judge why the evidence is new and why the rebuttal evidence opened the door to the new evidence to present it because, by that time, everyone wants the trial over.

In closing, the prosecutor argues that if the defendant were innocent, he would have testified. If she had said that in America, the case would have been immediately mistried and the charges could have been dismissed as any comment by the prosecutor on the defendant's exercise of the Fifth Amendment is prosecutorial misconduct. She could very well lose her job over it too.

Broadchurch Season 2 is available on Netflix and Amazon.

Fantasy Agent Project 2017 by Margaret Hamilton Turkevich and Nancy Eady

We had a successful program of 31 brave authors who submitted correctly formatted works in progress to a group of fantasy agents. We gave the fantasy agents guidelines and a rubric for their critiques, but otherwise didn't dictate how they should respond. Some wrote letters, some did line edits, some responded to the questions on the rubric, and some did all three!

We scanned each critique and found each to be encouraging and enthusiastic but realistic. The authors who submitted their works in progress were also impressed with the critiques they received.

For those who are new to Guppies or who missed the program this year, the Fantasy Agent project is a volunteer program in which published authors review the first 30 pages of an unpublished author's work from the point of view of an agent. Both submissions and reviews are done anonymously.

We're appreciative of your collective efforts! Please volunteer next year and, if you're interested in making a submission to the 2018 Fantasy Agent Project, keep an eye out for future announcements.

The Flip Side: Lexicon of a Writer by Nancy L. Eady

I began my legal career over 25 years ago as a secretary. To this day, I am convinced that I was only hired because I was the one person in the building that day who knew that the trio of \$3,000 machines in the center of the floor were LaserJet printers that never would work until you got computers to go with them. It certainly wasn't my legal acumen; I didn't know what a plaintiff or defendant was until my third day. Now, as an attorney, I can belt out and translate legalese with the best of them.

I was startled when I discovered that the same learning curve exists for mystery writing. Over time, I have compiled an assortment of writing/Guppy acronyms and vocabulary, which include the following, in no particular order. (Yes, if you are as OCD as I am, the non-alphabetical order will drive you batty, but the self-help book I read promised it would help with my recovery.)

Backstory: Not the history of orthopedic medicine, but the stuff that happened to your characters before your story opens.

Cozy: Not how I feel in front of a roaring fire in my fireplace during the depths of winter, but a mystery subgenre where violence is usually downplayed and the crime takes place in a small, socially intimate community.

MS: Not a professional woman who wishes to remain neutral regarding her marital status, but "manuscript."

MSS: Not a bevy of belles, but "manuscripts."

MC: Not the master of ceremonies at an event, but the main character in your work.

POV: Point of View. Not your opinion about politics or the chartreuse and pink dress your best friend is wearing—you might want to keep the chartreuse and pink opinion to yourself in any event—but rather the way in which you tell your story and from whose perspective.

WIP: Not a program initiated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to create jobs during the Great Depression, but "work in progress."

BSP: Not Business Services Provider but the uniquely Guppy "Blatant Self Promotion," used in the topic lines of Guppy list-serve messages to indicate the nature of the announcement involved.

Swag: Not a jaunty step nor a fancy curtain top but the promotional materials authors use to encourage the public to read their book.

Pantser: Not a tailor, but a free spirit who sits down at her desk and starts writing, surprised as she sees what flows forth from her word crafting.

Plotster: Not a gardener, but a frustratingly (at least to those of us, such as myself, born without the organization gene) organized individual who plans out the plot of his novel before starting to write.

Flash Fiction: Not a photograph of a book taken in the dark but a short story that is less than 100 words long.

Protagonist: The Good Guy.

Antagonist: The Bad Guy.

NaNoWriMo: National Novel Writing Month. Participating in National Novel Writing Month causes writers across the world to spend the 30

days of November glassy-eyed, greeting each other with announcements about their word count for the day and how close they are to 50,000 words. Over the years, it has grown into an Event, with its own website, sponsors, and badges. Participation is free. My favorite NaNoWriMo festival is not the main event in November, but the lower-key April and July virtual writing camps where the writer gets to 1) pick his word count for the month and 2) choose whether she is going to write new material or edit existing material.

I'd love to hear from you regarding the words and acronyms the writing profession has required you to learn! Please email me at workmomad@gmail.com.



Nancy Eady is a writer and lawyer living in small-town central Alabama with her husband, daughter, and two dogs. She is the author of the blog "Tales from the Mom-Side: My Adventures as a Working Mom," located at www.workingmomadventures.com. She is seeking an agent for her first novel, *Sleight of Hand*.

Keeping It Short by A R Kennedy

A short story is defined as a story that can be enjoyed in one sitting. As someone who has read a novel in one sitting, I find this definition problematic. I hear my fellow Type A's shouting for a word count, but that's up for debate. It is defined as anywhere between 1,000 and 30,000 words. Some sites report a short story should be no more than 7,500 words, others 5,000. Flash fiction, or short short stories, is typically defined as less than 1,000 words.

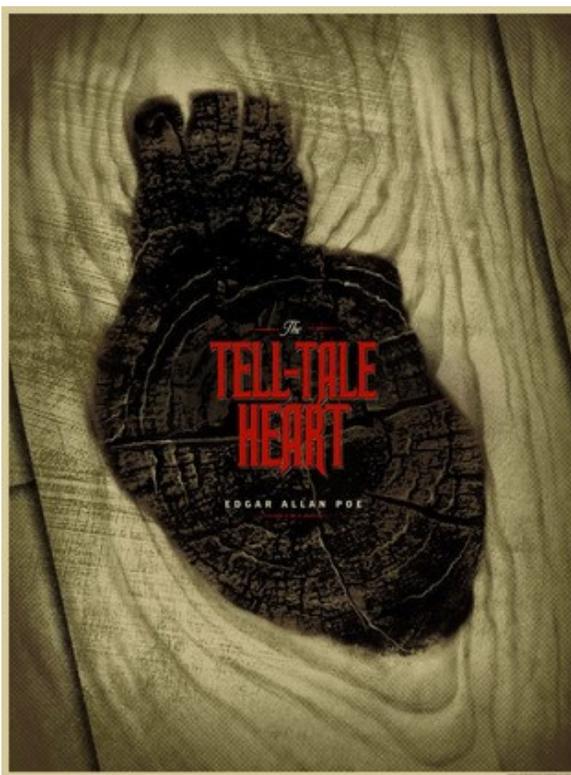
Earlier this year, Sisters in Crime announced the [We Love Short Stories initiative](#), which was developed to support the short story, and, of course, the writers who write them. It has included subscription discounts for Sisters in Crime members for magazines that publish short stories, as well as articles in *The Sisters in Crime Quarterly* on how to write short stories and how to market and promote them. More articles are scheduled for the upcoming quarterlies.

We know Sisters in Crime loves short stories. But do you? I do. Some of my favorite fictional works are short stories. Neil Gaiman's "Nicholas Was" (just over 100 words) and Stephen King's "Willa" are the first to come to mind. And who doesn't think of great short stories without thinking of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (just over 2,000 words)?

Many novelists started their careers with short stories. Charles Dickens began submitting short stories and essays. His first publication was "A Dinner at Poplar Walk." His first book was a collection of short stories. Another great, Ray Bradbury, had a similar start. His first publication was "Dark Carnival," a collection of short stories.

Today's best-selling authors are writing short stories—to keep fans' interest in between novels (Nelson DeMille's "The Book Case"), to generate buzz for an upcoming book (John Grisham's "A Witness to a Trial," a prequel to his 2016 book, *The Whistler*), and to participate in themed anthologies (Charlaine Harris' "Tacky" appears in *My Big Fat Supernatural Wedding*). And I bet some just write them for fun.

Like most of you, before I was a writer I was an avid reader, and still am. (And like most of you, I've always had stories bouncing around in my head.) Several years ago, I took a weeklong class at Christ Church College in Oxford, England—"Late Victorian and



Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" is just over 2,000 words.

Edwardian ghost stories." These were all short stories. Our reading list consisted of three anthologies—one containing stories by Henry James, another by M.R. James, and the third was a collection from various authors, including Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. On the last day, students were asked to read a portion from their favorite story from the collections (an introvert's nightmare). I chose Henry James' "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes." It's a story that includes love, sibling rivalry, fashion, revenge, and a ghost. In under 20 pages? What's not to love?

(Side note: this class initiated my writing. A published author attended the class and she gave me the best advice concerning writing she could have ever given me—"Write." See... I even like advice that's short.)

Full disclosure: I'm short (or "petite," as is now a more polite term of phrase). I've always been frugal with my words—verbal and written. I've always thought of it as a positive. A

college professor did not. She asked a yes/no question. She got a yes/no answer. I got a C.

With my brevity in mind, I was naturally drawn to writing short stories. I started writing short stories a few years ago and love it. The love is reciprocated. I've won the Writers' Police Academy's Golden Donut Short story contest the last two years.

How do you write a short story? Google it and you'll see lots of articles with tips, tricks, and steps. The basic advice is the same as for a novel—Read short stories. Grab the reader fast. Editing is key.

My advice—we'll keep it short—"Write."



A R Kennedy lives in Long Beach, New York. And no, she does not have the typical Long Island accent. She has self-published six books in the Nathan Miccoli Mystery series. She's the Writers' Police Academy Golden Donut short story contest winner, 2016 and 2017. You can find her website at www.arkennedyauthor.com.

Taking a Walk on the Police Beat by Shari S. Cain

Is there a mystery writer who wouldn't jump at the chance to answer all those nagging questions that pop up while they're writing? What is it like to shoot a rifle? How much does a police officer's duty belt weigh? What really goes on at a crime scene?

The Writers' Police Academy may not answer all those questions, but it comes darn close, even for a first-year attendee. And there's time to meet, compare notes, and talk about writing, publishing, editors, fans, and all the little questions as well.

The academy is an opportunity for writers to experience some of the everyday events in a police officer's or detective's life and take those experiences to their characters and into their short stories and books. As founder and host Lee Lofland says, to create believable make-believe. Lofland is a veteran police investigator, police academy instructor, and the author of *Police Procedure and Investigation: A Guide for Writers*.

The event took place over four days last month and was jam-packed with enough information to make your head spin. It kicked off on a Thursday with a Kooky Cop Carnival for early arrivals that offered such opportunities as trying to handcuff a reluctant suspect and maneuvering as you wore a duty belt. There was also a session on drones in police work. The carnival was followed by a welcome session that included all the information the new "recruits" would need to negotiate the weekend.

The conference was held at the Radisson in Green Bay. The hotel, on the Oneida Reservation, had a Native American dance group on hand to bless the proceedings. The training sessions were held at the Northeast Wisconsin Training Academy, a real police training facility just down the road.

The weekend officially kicked off with a request for volunteers to wear a police officer's duty belt, complete with equipment, for a day of the conference. At the end, one of the women who wore the belt said she found herself having "phantom belt" feelings. In other words, when she took it off, she felt as though it were still there. She also found herself resting her arms on the belt.

There were two kinds of classes offered to academy attendees: Classroom presentations and High-Intensity Training, or HIT, classes. The classroom side offered Death Scene Investigation; CSI:



Photo by Shari S. Cain

Friday morning's police patrol stop demonstration.

From First Responder to Evidence Collection; Armed in America; Fingerprinting; Fundamentals of Police Patrol; Incognito: Explore the Undercover Experience; Mindset of Cops; and so much more. That's just a small sampling of the classes. The HIT classes offered Defense and Arrest Tactics; Emergency Driving; Handgun Live Fire; SWAT: Explosive Entry; Taser Training, and more as well.

One of the most popular and interesting HIT

classes was Shoot/Don't Shoot Scenario Training. Writers got a chance to make the split-second decisions every police officer probably dreads and critics think are so easy.

Now think about the fact that Friday and Saturday offered the chance to take a total of only eight classes, including the HIT classes, of about 40 choices. Each class was a little over an hour long and packed as much information into that time as humanly possible. It was time to brush off those note-taking skills!

And the instructors? They were the people who actually wore a badge every day or had retired. In addition, in attendance as instructors were a Secret Service agent, an undercover police officer, a coroner, and an ATF agent. Many of the instructors had multiple college degrees and many were published authors, so they understood the process of writing. All of the instructors I came in contact with were ready, willing, and able to answer any question posed to them, some specific to situations in a work in progress.

Continued on next page



Shari S. Cain began her career in newspapers as a writer, editor, and designer. She is a freelance writer and editor, and is working on her second book. Her first book, *I Spy with My Third Eye*, was published in 2015. She lives in Central Illinois and is married with four cats. You can find her website at www.shariscain.com.

WPA, continued

Lofland taught a class—Cordite, Perps, and Badge Bunnies: Everything You Wish You Knew About Cops—that covered all the things writers get wrong and drive police officers and detectives crazy. Instead of being some kind of rant, Lofland looked at the humorous side of the topic, getting the students involved in each myth.

A short session started both Friday and Saturday on the grounds of the academy. Friday's was an officer down situation that demonstrated not only how quickly a traffic stop could go bad and an officer could be shot on a "routine" traffic stop, but also how responding units are trained to pull the injured officer out of harm's way. Saturday's demonstration showed how officers handle a suspicious person who may be in crisis and the dangers presented by that situation.

Lisa Klink kicked off the lineup of guest speakers. She spoke Thursday evening on Pitching, Selling and Writing for Television. Klink has had a long career as a television writer and author, including the Star Trek series *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*, which got a positive reaction from the audience.

Friday night's speaker should top the must-see list of any mystery writer. Writer Paul Bishop, a 35-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department, talked about interviews and interrogation of suspects. If you've ever seen the television show *The Closer*, you have an idea of his topic. If you liked the show, you would be even more fascinated by Bishop's presentation. Part psychologist, part detective, part human lie detector, he gave the group tips and techniques that make him an expert on interrogation. Everyone in the audience left with a lot of information and an appreciation for how much there is—and can be—to police interrogation.

Saturday night was the event banquet. Not only was there great food, but a raffle with more than 100 items and a live auction. The raffle featured great books, some by the instructors, and others by Sisters in Crime members. Some of those baskets included fun items—mugs, bookmarks, clothing items—as well as books. Mystery writer Tami Hoag, who acted as the live auctioneer, donated



Sisters in Crime is a major sponsor of the conference, and offers a generous discount to SinC members attending each year.

For more information about the conference, visit their website at www.writerspoliceacademy.com.

two characters from her current work in progress up for bid. Imagine yourself in a role in a bestselling mystery novel.

Saturday night finished up with mystery writer Craig Johnson addressing the group. Johnson is the writer of the bestselling Walt Longmire mysteries and consultant on the original Netflix series

Longmire. He was funny and offered the group a look at his life in a tiny town in Wyoming, along with an inspirational message and story to encourage aspiring writers to keep writing. People left the banquet hall laughing.

Sunday morning didn't start quite as early as Friday and Saturday, and the academy ended with a panel of speakers taking questions. There wasn't much downtime over the weekend, but there really weren't any complaints, either. Everyone was where they wanted to be, whether it was in a classroom, behind a firearm, or watching a demonstration.



Photo by Nancy Raven Smith, 2016

Attendees could also get lessons on the shooting range at the Writers' Police Academy.

It was an interesting and informative experience. I wouldn't have figured there was so much I didn't know about cops and police work. This academy wasn't a true walk in the shoes of the recruits, of course—more like a mini police academy experience. But it did give all those who attended a look at the real life of a police officer. Everyone came away knowing something they didn't when they drove into the hotel.

And that's what makes it a valuable experience for a writer.

Me? I Could Not Kill an Ant by Sarah Niebuhr Rubin

Once, when I was a young child, I squished an ant. I believe I intended to kill it, but my finger managed only to get the back end. I watched, fascinated, as the head and a few legs and tentacles struggled to move the squashed end across the counter of my doctor's office.

"We are a place of healing. We don't cause suffering here!" I will never forget the tone of the receptionist. Never since have I been able to kill an ant, or any other creatures, without being deeply affected by even the remotest possibility that I might cause suffering.

This is why, for example, I sat all day with a goat destined for slaughter; it bleated so sadly, separated from its family awaiting its fate. It is also perhaps why, despite mystery being my favorite genre to read, I sometimes have to take a break after particularly violent reads. It has certainly impacted my ability to write a murder. At least until very recently.

I may prefer a gentle cozy. Still, I have not shied away from reading psychological thrillers, serial killers who torture their victims (true and fictional), or other subgenres with plenty of emotional and physical suffering.

How do they do it?

But I have wondered: How does Stephen King come up with, let alone sit and write, his torture scenes? How does Louise Penny continually confront her characters with trauma after trauma? How did Elizabeth Peters put her protagonists through such cruel torment, book after book? How does Jane Haddam create a Gregor Demarkian so haunted by cruelty in the world and still able to love?

Of course, everyone knows that writers *must* push their protagonists to their limits—for the sake of the story. Perhaps my writing wasn't yet good because I struggled with this writing rule.

But something shifted a few years ago, when I was mad at my boss. On a walk in the woods, I thought of the perfect scenario—where to dump a body (my boss came to mind), how to have it



Photo courtesy of Sarah Niebuhr Rubin

The author with a goat in Birecik, Turkey, where she led an archaeological dig in the summer of 2000. "The goat died that very afternoon, and we ate of its meat that evening," Sarah says.

discovered (for a proper burial) but have the murderer's tracks covered. I went home and drafted a story (unpublished), including motive and method for murder. Writing the fictional murder of a character with some of the traits of my boss—especially what had made me so mad—was cathartic!

Writing a murder

And suddenly I understood. Writing a murder isn't committing a murder. Pushing a character to the emotional breaking point isn't causing real suffering.

Reading has helped me navigate the world, and writing has been my outlet.

I cannot abide real suffering—there is far too much of it in our world. But writing suffering into my characters can save my sanity, and even help others navigate their feelings.

I've now "killed" enough in words to have several mysteries in written or conceived phase—onward to querying! My former boss is, to my knowledge, alive and well. The character no longer resembles her at all. The ant is long dead, and I reconcile killing the moths that are eating my clothes fairly well.

And that goat? It tasted wonderful, cooked fresh the day of slaughter. I only hope I made its last day a bit more pleasant, just as I hope that I offer readers a chance to navigate their emotions through my writing.



Sarah Niebuhr Rubin is the author of "Threads of a Tallis," a short story published in 2012, and "Weathering the Storm," a poem published in 2017. Her background includes forensic anthropology and religious leadership. Sarah is currently preparing to query her first mystery novel,

and writing a second. She enjoys support from her family of humans and cats.

Put Your Pants On! by Lourdes Venard

When it comes to writing, are you a plotter or a pantser? Do you have an outline for each chapter before you even put fingers to keyboard, or do you start with an idea and take it where it goes?

When I asked for pantsers who had written a series, I was surprised by the number of responses I received. It turns out that plenty seat-of-the-pants writers thrive under this method (or non-method, I should say).

Starting point

Most pantsers I interviewed said they start their books with an initial idea. It can often be as simple as a single sentence or a setting.

"It may be the inciting incident; it may be an issue I want to explore; it may be a locale I want to employ," said Jim Jackson, who writes the Seamus McCree series (four novels, one novella, several shorts stories, and two novels in progress). "I write the first scene (which may or may not end up in the final draft); then the characters take over and reveal the story I really wanted to tell (or at least the story THEY really wanted me to tell)."

For KM Rockwood, who is writing the seventh in her Jesse Damon series, it "always starts with the characters.

After that comes a premise. In the one I'm working on, there's a Ponzi scheme being pushed through church groups, and the stakes are high enough that it leads to a murder. Perhaps more than one murder? I haven't gotten there yet."

Inspiration can come suddenly for Loretta Wheeler. "Something will happen and I get the first sentence, or first scene. Then I'm off and running for pen and paper. I've had this happen when standing in line for tickets and almost went crazy digging in my purse. My husband recognizes the signs now, and he doesn't look nearly as befuddled. He just helps me locate the notepad in my purse and asks what I just 'saw.' Of course, I can't answer until I get it written down." She has three books in her Southern Breezes series.

Plot twists!

This fluidity in writing means that stories often don't turn out how the writer expected, often delivering surprises.

Lois Winston said she begins by jotting down a few sentences about the victim and the murder. "I often don't know who my killer will be or his motive until I've written at least a chapter or two, and even then, I've been known to change the killer if, as I'm writing, another character develops a better motive," she said. Winston writes the Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mysteries (five books and three mini-mysteries, with another book in the works) and the

Empty Nest series (two books so far).

Tracy Weber, who writes the Downward Dog mysteries (five books so far, with a sixth one in the works), agreed. "I have a beginning scene and an ending scene in my head before I ever start writing. What happens in between them is very fluid. I usually know who the victim is going to be, but the murderers have changed on more than one occasion. Characters introduce themselves as I write each story and often change from my initial perceptions."

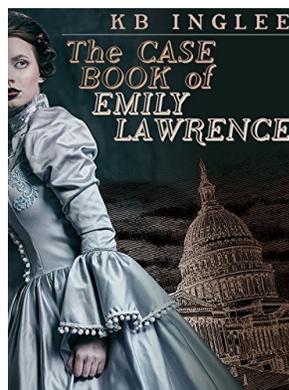


Cindy Sample, who has written six books in her Laurel McKay humorous cozy series, said one character certainly surprised her. "Laurel's grandmother walked into book four, *Dying for a Dude*, because I wanted to have a historical mystery with a 150-year-old skeleton that's found in a gold mine on their family property, located in old Hangtown, California. What I didn't expect was that Gran would take over the series from then on. She is a real hoot. When she walks into a scene the lines flow fast and furious."

For many authors, the best part of pantsing is the surprises that come along.

When she began her first book, Liz Boeger started out with the basic premise, villain, victim, and the ending. She rolled out a box of freezer paper on which she drew a character web with connection lines representing plots. Then she made a basic column chart for each character, and sketched out scenes with these characters and her protagonist.

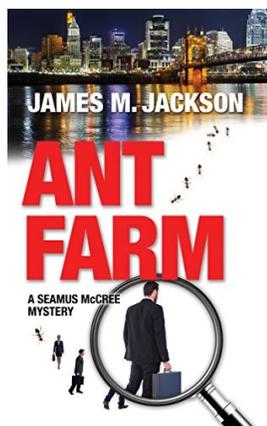
But, Boeger said, "unplanned plots and people showed up, so I just kept writing and had some pretty fun things happening. Some I kept; others were cut, but will be reused in other books. My two favorite scenes resulted from this surprise. This taught me that I might know what has to happen in a scene (plot), but I can start writing without a solid plan for the scene (pants)." Boeger has written the first book in the Moccasin Cove mysteries, and has premises for the next two books.



KB Inglee's intention was to write a novel about a retired female detective. "When I reread the third or fourth draft I realized I had a series of short stories rather than a novel. The next surprise was that I really liked writing short stories."

Her Emily Lawrence stories are set between 1852 and the mid-1890s, and feature a lady PI. Her published collection is *The Case Book of Emily Lawrence*.

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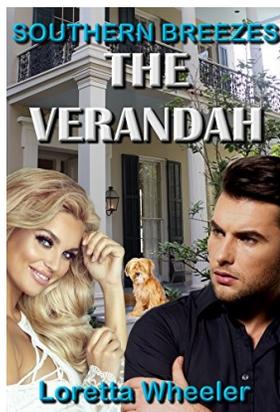


Pantsing, continued

Loretta Wheeler said she doesn't follow a detailed outline "since I have to allow for my characters to shock me. Because they always do.

"In my current Southern Breezes series, I had a secondary character, Michael, announce he was arriving in Galveston. I never saw that one coming. It's like playing musical chairs with your characters—someone's always left standing, but unlike the game, they don't leave the room (or story in this case.) They just shuffle positions."

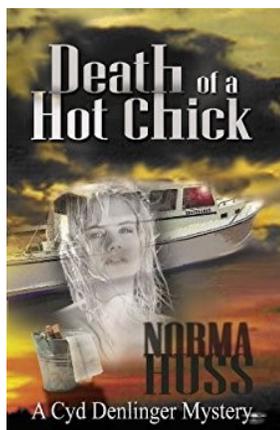
Norma Huss writes two series, the Jo Durbin mysteries and the Cyd Denlinger mysteries. The first Cyd story was initially going to be a Jo Durbin story; with the change in protagonist came a completely different story. "I'm currently writing the second Cyd Denlinger mystery, which was originally to be the second Jo book, then the first Cyd book, now the second Cyd book (drastically changed multiple times—you see one problem of the pantsers)," Huss said.



synopsis of at least a page about the next book after I turn one in, so that's kind of a book-level roadmap, but the specifics always change as I write the actual story." She has written two books in the Lauren Rousseau Mysteries as Tace Baker, five books in the Local Foods Mysteries, four books in the Country Store Mysteries as Maddie Day, four in the Quaker Midwife Mysteries, and one (so far) in the Cozy Capers Book Group Mysteries, also written as Maddie Day.

Tracy Weber had to submit story ideas for the first three books when the series sold and an additional three for books four through six when her contract was renewed. "But these are literally half-page brain dumps, and I didn't follow them completely," she said. "For me, a detailed roadmap is not only unnecessary, it's impossible. The stories develop as I write them."

Authors who self-publish, or traditionally publish books one at a time, say they like the flexibility of not having a roadmap to follow.



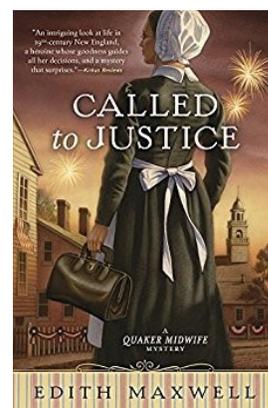
She also used the pantsing method to arrive at the killer in one book. "In Cyd's first mystery, I had three lovely suspects, and Cyd, her sister, and a friend each preferred a separate one of the three. After several almost complete rewrites, the only way I could solve it was to ask them. I wrote half a page in each of the suspect's viewpoint. They all explained themselves nicely, using their vocabularies. And, one of them said, 'Then I killed her.' And it was absolutely perfect."

For Bess Carnan, her entire series, about a woman who manages a webcomic, was a surprise. "I had been struggling with an urban fantasy series that just wasn't gelling properly when the idea for a murder at an anime convention popped into my brain," she said. "I'm sure there'll be surprises in the future as well. One thing I know for sure as a pantsers is to expect the unexpected."

Planning ahead

Those authors who write a series for a publisher often are asked for a book proposal for the next three books, something that may be a challenge for a pantsers.

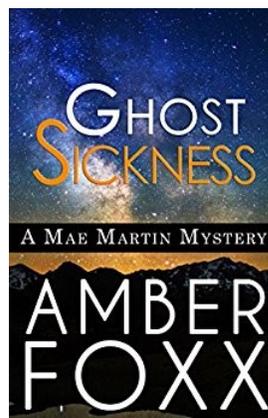
Edith Maxwell has a rough idea, about a paragraph, of what the next few books might be about. "But that can change and I like it that way," she said. "So my roadmap is like a Google Earth shot but panned way, way out. My Kensington editor does require a



Amber Foxx, who writes the Mae Martin Psychic Mystery series, has ideas in a file of inspirations that stretch several books into the future. "But these are instigating events, not full plots," she said. "I could have a better idea in a year or two than I have today, as far as the plot of each book. Inspirations for murderless mysteries can come from so many events; I never know when I'll run into one."

Jim Jackson said he often edits one book while writing another, a process that results in minor influences on the book being edited.

"In *Bad Policy* (#2), the receptionist at the Kincaid Agency is an important character and I wanted to give her a 'tag' to allow readers to easily remember her. I did that by having Seamus refer to her as 'Miss Smiles,' which was useful in part because she soon loses her ever-present smile. A series reader first meets the receptionist in *Ant Farm* (#1), where she is a very minor character. Labeling her as 'Miss Smiles' in *Ant Farm* would have been overboard for her role. However, having written her into *Bad Policy* with the Miss Smiles moniker, it was important (to me—maybe not to readers) to set the stage for the nickname with a little foreshadowing when Seamus first meets her in person. He's talked to her over the phone where she was very pleasant. The line I wrote in *Ant Farm* is: 'Inside I introduced myself to the receptionist, whose smile was as broad as her voice was cheerful.'"



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Pantsing, continued

Indie author Judy Alter writes three mysteries series: the Kelly O'Connell series (seven books), the Blue Plate Café series (three with a fourth one underway), and the Oak Grove series (two books). Not only does she eschew a roadmap, but she's not even sure how long she wants a series to last.

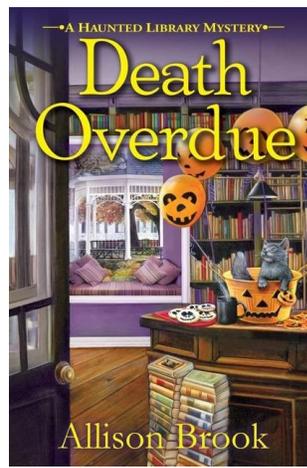
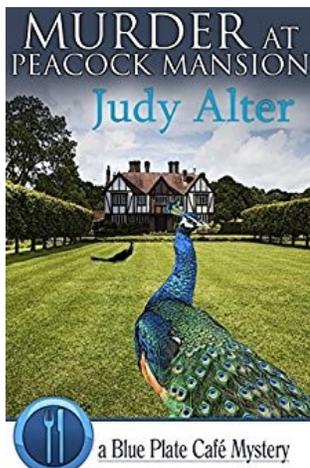
"I think being indie published probably gives me more freedom to follow my own whims. I keep notes for each series on possible plots, and I suppose I'll end a series when I run out of plots. I thought maybe the Kelly books were ending with *Desperate for Death*, but then I thought of *The Color of Fear* and now I feel there must be another book."

Michele Drier, who writes the Amy Hobbes Newspaper Mysteries (three with another two planned) and a paranormal romance series, *The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles* (the 10th is being written), said, "I planned ahead a bit in the mysteries and always intended it to be a series. The main characters are the same, the actual plot changes with a different murder/mystery in each book. The planned-but-unwritten ones have a general mystery plot (who ends up dead and why) but nothing more. The Kandeskys, I initially saw as a trilogy but as the characters developed, I had to keep establishing plots. Because both of the series are character-driven, a roadmap isn't necessary. The characters can find themselves in the middle of a variety of situations that don't have to be plotted out ahead of time. My only roadmap for this series is to continue the thread of the characters—they tell me what's going to happen."

KM Rockwood said she has a basic roadmap, which involves changes in characters and following up on things that occur in earlier books. However, she said, "the main reason I don't come up with a solid roadmap is that the characters wouldn't follow it anyhow. They are not very respectful of my ideas."

Some plotting allowed

While many say they are pantsers through and through, some authors have notes at hand or find that, unconsciously, they come to use the same narrative structures that plotters use. Others need to add in structure during the revision process.

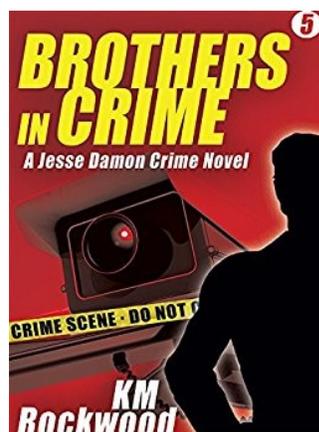


Marilyn Levinson has two books in her Golden Age of Mystery series, two in her Twin Lakes series, and has finished book two in her Haunted Library series. "I've been a plotter most of my writing career," she said. "That said, you can plot only just so much. Just going from one scene to another may require on-the-spot planning, especially in a mystery. I know who the murderer is, many important plot points, but I work them out as I write the first draft.

"Re my WIP: I knew the opening scene. My sleuth's father, whom

Carrie hasn't seen in ages, shows up in the middle of the night. Jim wants Carrie to act as a go-between between him and his partner in crime. This is against Carrie's principles, but when Jim's partner is murdered, she feels obliged to defend him and find the murderer. No roadmap from here on in, but I knew my characters well, what's driving them, and various complications that impact Carrie's relationship with her father, her boyfriend, and her desire to find the missing gems."

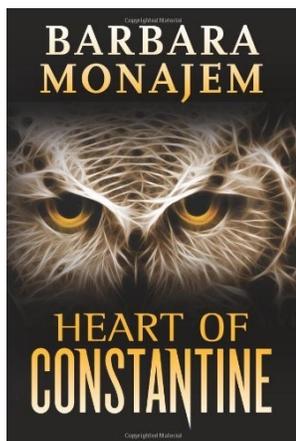
Amber Foxx said, "As every pantser knows, it's a process of revision. Each book evolves in seat-of-the-pants flow, but then I have to rearrange, cut and revise, sometimes to such an extent that there's little resemblance between the first and final draft other than the instigating event and the cast of characters. What started as the instigating event for my fifth book, *Ghost Sickness*, ended up as the near-to-last scene, the revelation scene. I realized I wanted to work the mystery forward toward that moment, not backward figuring out how it happened. Each book grows differently, though. The one coming out in the fall, *Death Omen*, grew a tightly woven plot organically from beginning to end without any need to rearrange the parts."



KM Rockwood agreed, saying pantsing involves "a fair number of rewrites to reconcile details as the emphasis, indeed the very story, changes. In the first mystery I wrote, which will deservedly remain filed away somewhere, I discovered when I wrote the last chapter that I had been wrong all along about who the killer was. That made me realize that, for me at least, planning will only take me so far."

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Pantsing, continued



While Barbara Monajem doesn't outline on paper, she says her subconscious plays a role in the pantsing process, "doing a lot of plotting in the background of one's mind (or maybe it's a muse at work). I think Jennifer Crusie [a bestselling romance author] calls this subconscious writer's aide or muse 'the girls in the basement.'"

Monajem has two series: the Bayou Gavotte paranormal/mystery series, with three books and a novella, and a historical romance with three novels.

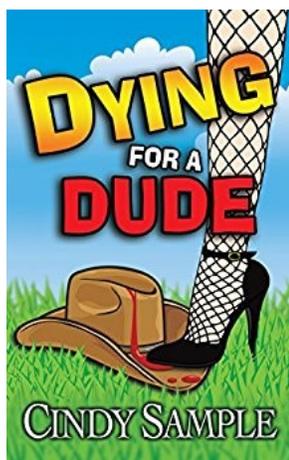
"When I was writing *Heart of Constantine*, I was astonished at how everything fell into place at some point, especially with regard to the villain," she said. "It was as if I was unknowingly setting everything up for his character and actions without even realizing it—his motives, his methods, his devious plans ... whew. This has happened to me with other stories, too, but never so powerfully as in HOC."

Cindy Sample said she didn't know much about arcs or plotting when she started her first book. "But I knew that the first book in this series needed to be *Dying for a Date*, which establishes the character at a certain point in her life—newly divorced soccer mom willing to take a chance on love again (and discovering a few dead dates along the way). My goal was that she and the detective investigating her in this book would discover a few sparks along the way and that I could keep the momentum going for a few books.

"It turns out I have an amazing knack for creating romantic conflict, so the wedding and honeymoon don't take place until book six. By book two, I was already mapping out ways the secondary characters could also develop throughout the series from a romantic, personal and professional standpoint.

"That being said, if I was a new writer starting out, I would definitely plan ahead as to the protagonist and secondary characters' growth throughout a series. Nothing needs to be set in stone, though. I've frequently been surprised by some of my characters' decisions, but it gives the writer a base to work with."

Bess Carnan, who is writing the second book in her series, said she collects her ideas in a Google spreadsheet with columns of ideas for settings and where she thinks her protagonist's romantic relationship is going to be at each point.



"Honestly, I dream of being the sort of person who plots rather than pantses," Carnan said. "I even tried making an outline for book two, but my brain just doesn't work that way. I had a nice, logical outline, but just the process of writing it killed my creativity. My style of writing is more 'throw everything in the pot and hope it makes an edible soup,' with a little bit of 'using a strainer spoon to pull out the bad stuff later' to balance it out. I'm wildly jealous of plotters because they seem so organized and grown up, but I just can't make it work. Besides my Google spreadsheet, I'm an E.L. Doctorow-style writer." She quotes Doctorow, who said, "Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You never see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

Advice for the pantser

If you are going to be a pantser, Lois Winston advises that you "make sure you keep all your little duckies in a row, especially in a series. You don't have to line up all those ducks before you ever start writing, but you need to make sure you didn't make your protagonist an only child in the first book, then have her sister arrive on scene in book three.

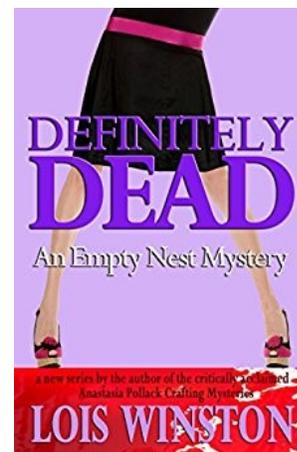
"As I write, I keep a calendar of events for each book. I also have a spreadsheet of all my characters in the series. On the calendar I list the scenes that take place on each day during the course of the book. This keeps my timeline straight. On the spreadsheet, I list my characters' physical traits, their personalities, their professions, etc. As I add details about the characters throughout the series, I make notes on the spreadsheet. I also add new characters I introduce, even minor ones, because you never know when one might return in a subsequent book.

"For instance, in the first Anastasia book a character makes a passing reference about a nosy neighbor. That neighbor became the murder victim in the fifth book. I also keep Word docs of each of my series books on my computer. This enables me to do a quick search whenever I need to double-check something about a character or a prior event."

Most of the authors, though, stress that everyone has a different way of writing—and that's fine.

"There is no 'right' way to write a series, a book, a short story, or a poem," said Tracy Weber. "Ignore anyone who tells you that there is. The right way is the way that works for you."

Thanks to the following writers for answering my questions: Judy Alter, Liz Boeger, Bess Carnan, Michele Drier, Amber Foxx, Norma Huss, KB Inglee, Jim Jackson, Marilyn Levinson, Edith Maxwell, Barbara Monajem, KM Rockwood, Cindy Sample, Tracy Weber, Loretta Wheeler, and Lois Winston.



Quasi-Pantsing by Geoffrey Mehl

Pantsing is a wild horse in need of a bridle, but not a harness. It's exhilarating to run free, but the path to a finished project is fraught with hazards that often cause a great idea to fizzle or crash and burn. The plague of "unfinished" projects appears to frustrate many.

I've experienced a number of abandoned stories as a consequence of the inability to hold an entire book in my head. A determined push to the finish line led to my first fiction piece, *Stray Cats*, but it wasn't easy. Changes were in order, so I focused on clarity of concept.

Having had a satisfying career in nonfiction, I chafed under the methodical organization that goes with it. *Cats* was intended as a standalone, a one-time fling. Improving the process, however, was alluring and led to a sequel, *Nine Lives*. About 15 to 18 chapters in, a meandering subplot and mushy pacing led to half a dozen restarts. Stalled, I stepped back to reorganize and focus more on story management, rather than await rescue from the alleged muse.

Perhaps modest compromise—a very loose outline—might allow creative impulse to run free but still help me reach my destination. Often, pantsers write first and synopsis/query later. Instead, that golden first paragraph of a query—what's the story about?—should be done first rather than last.

For lack of a better term, I was "quasi-pantsing."

A flash of brilliance and a story concept is one thing, but honing it to razor-sharp clarity is even better. My preference is to express setup, conflict, and resolution with the most possible detail but within a limit of 25 words. Why 25? It's long enough for detail, tight enough to demand succinct writing.

The next step is a working synopsis. Clear, concise sentences identify each of the points of classic three-act story design (which has been around for thousands of years). Between turning points in three-act stories are conventions of progress and struggle for the protagonists that build dramatic interest. Using these as prompts, the task was to understand how the characters might move from turning point to turning point.

I then create a series of loose notes, chapter by chapter, that are more prompts or reminders than an actual outline. The amount of detail is entirely a matter of individual preference, the needs of the moment, or what's comfortable. Notes can include reminders of research needs. And they are not sacrosanct; mine are tweaked constantly as the draft progresses. I've found that when using only a prompt, it's helpful to begin the phrase with "Show how..."

In some cases, it's as elemental as "figure out and show how the protagonist will get to Ohio." But sometimes there's a real flash of detail for a chapter that's much further out in the book; rather than lose it, it gets fleshed out in detail in the story "outline" to be polished later. Sometimes it's a simple list to keep things in sequence:

1. Show how they go to New York and find Jones.
2. Show how they counter Jones' reluctance with a bribe.

3. Subplot: They need to get an unusual piece of equipment.
4. Show how this also satisfies Jones and they move on.

In other words, it's whatever works.

The effect for me was instantaneous on the stalled *Nine Lives*, which clicked into high gear and sped directly to completion with only minor rewrites to fix old mistakes. When I decided to turn *Cats* and *Lives* into a series, the new approach worked well from the beginning.

What works for me, with synopsis points in italics:

What's the story about? Setup, conflict, resolution in as much detail as possible, in 25 words.

The working synopsis, which should include major subplots for all their usual purposes, about a page or two:

Setup, about 25 percent of story: introduction/empathy building, *inciting incident* (10 percent), initial response, *first turning point* (25 percent and includes the dramatic question resolved in the climax).

Conflict, about 50 percent of story: initial struggles and hurdles, *midpoint* (50 percent mark, point of no return, where the story turns on the basis of new information and may include a crushing defeat or mirror moment of self-awareness), another round of struggles and hurdles that are increasingly difficult, a major setback or all-is-lost moment, the final infusion of information and resources, *second turning point* (75 percent, where the protagonist revives, and goes for the goal possibly because it's the only path left).

Resolution, about 25 percent of story: the most intense and difficult challenges and hurdles, quickened pace, *climax* (90-99 percent of story and where the dramatic question is resolved), aftermath (variable from one to 10 percent, depending on the desired effect of emotional release on the reader and details to wrap up).

The draft should be on target for length and require relatively light revision. Notes summarizing key points and paths in between form a final synopsis for the project. The setup-conflict-resolution line forms the first paragraph of a query.

This is not one-size-fits-all. *Whatever works best and is most comfortable for you remains the best way to write a book.*



Geoffrey Mehl is a former journalist, editor, and marketing and communications executive in health care systems and higher education. He founded his own publishing company, the Penny-stone Press, and is the author of three best-selling books on sustainable landscaping and two thrillers, *Stray Cats* and *Nine Lives*. He is currently working on the next novel in the series. Visit his website at www.geoffmehl.com.

Do You Need a Virtual Assistant? by Lourdes Venard

As an author, you are always juggling. Not only are you writing the next book, but you are promoting your latest book, writing a monthly newsletter, keeping up with your blog (or other blogs), and updating your website. And that's just for starters.

This is where a virtual assistant (sometimes called an author assistant) comes in handy. They can help you gain some breathing space and may even boost sales with their knowledge of promotions. These assistants—who don't have to be in the same office, or even same city, as you—handle a multitude of tasks, including:

- Marketing, from writing press releases and newsletter to coordinating contests and giveaways. Some virtual assistants have graphic artist experience and can create the promotions for you.
- Social media management. VAs will handle social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Goodreads, Instagram, YouTube, etc., creating content and replying to comments.
- Scheduling. An assistant can help you with whatever you need to schedule, from speaking events and book signings to blog tours.
- Website and blog management. VAs may update websites as needed (new books, events, photos of you, etc.). They can also write content for your blog, or help you by brainstorming ideas.
- Database administration. If you need to maintain any sort of database—for NetGalley requests, Goodreads giveaways, newsletter signups, etc.—an assistant can keep track of these.
- Online research. Some assistants do research and fact-checking.
- Other assistance. This can include monitoring email, sending out cards and letters, ordering supplies, and making travel arrangements. Depending on their skills set, some offer book formatting services.

Most authors seem to use virtual assistants to develop marketing plans and run promotions. You could, as an author, do this on your own. But experienced virtual assistants have already done this for other clients and know how best to promote your book.

How to work with a VA

Most virtual assistants charge \$25 to \$50 an hour for their ser-



Virtual assistant Jenel Looney designed and then mailed 30,000 bookmarks for author Susan

VICES. You don't need to hire them full-time, although you can. You may need them just for a few hours a month, or to work on a specific project.

"Each virtual assistant will have a different skill set," said Jenel Looney, who works full-time for three authors. "If you want someone to create marketing graphics for you, make sure that she knows how, and that you like her style. If you want someone to help you brainstorm contests that will get readers excited about your books, make sure you hire a VA that has creative ideas that are in line with your readers' tastes. If you want someone to handle a large mailing for you (like the 30,000 bookmarks I recently mailed to Susan Mallery's

readers), make sure you hire a VA who has mad organizational skills."

If you know you will have to promote your book (because your traditional publisher only does so much, or you are self-publishing), then your VA can help you come up with creative promotions. For example, Looney, who works with mystery author Kate Carlisle, designed a custom deck of cards for one of Carlisle's books. Each face card held a different murder weapon. It was used for a giveaway for members of Carlisle's mailing list. In addition, Looney created a video revealing each day's random winner. It was so popular that "she had a lot of readers asking if they could buy the cards," Looney said.

"I offer a wide variety of services that come down to this: helping authors get more organized and feel less stressed," said Mel Jolly, who has assisted multiple *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling authors. "The clients who utilize my services best keep me in the loop for everything involving their business. When it comes to things that need to get done (website updates, blog interviews, social media posts, newsletters, launch plans, ad booking, etc.), I either do the thing or I make sure the thing gets done."

Another assistant, Amanda West Kassis, who also works as an editor, focuses on publishing weekly newsletters and growing subscribers. "I am in the publishing industry, which gives me unique skills and knowledge," she said. She will help an author post on social media, write newsletters, and do other marketing.

Is it worth hiring a VA?

You may have written a wonderful book, but it won't go anywhere without marketing. And marketing may take away time spent writing the next book, which is crucial in a series.

Most virtual assistants said this is the beauty of having help—the author can concentrate on the writing.

Continued on next page

Virtual Assistants, continued

Having a virtual assistant, said Looney, “isn’t going to magically make you a bestseller. In my opinion, authors should not hire a VA until they’ve reached a stage in their career when it makes financial sense, and that’s a decision each author must make for herself. When you’ve reached the level of success that leaves you too busy to have a life, consider hiring a VA.”

Sarah Merchant, who specializes in social media and website/blog management, said that what may take someone else hours to do might take her minutes. “Is it worth it to you to struggle through those hours simply because you think it will save you money? Isn’t your time worth more than that?” she said. “I have a lot of respect for authors, and love putting my skills to work for them, so they can concentrate on their writing.”

She can’t say how much her work has helped with sales, but pointed to a recent Facebook promotion she did for an author. Her work resulted in an immediate increase in clicks.

Looney also said it’s hard to pinpoint whether her work has boosted book sales. “The frustrating thing about marketing is that you will rarely be able to draw a straight line from a specific promotion to specific sales,” she said. “I will say that I don’t take any credit for my clients’ success. That always, always, always comes back to the book. They write books that readers love. My work is not responsible for their success; rather, I help them manage that success.”

An author first needs to consider the budget and her priorities, said Jolly. Most of her authors only need her for five or so hours per month.

“We all wish we could outsource SO MANY THINGS, but the reality is that we have to start small and outsource just one or two things at first,” Jolly said. “That’s best for a small budget and for building trust.

“Quickly, let’s talk quickly about math. Let’s say an author can afford to hire an assistant for 10 hours/month. That’s 120 hours per year. How many more words can that author produce with an additional 120 hours per year? Let’s estimate low and say that’s one additional novella per year.

“If the author is paying the assistant a rate of \$40/hour, that’s \$4,800 for the year. How much can the author make by self-publishing that novella? Or selling it traditionally? At this point, there are too many variables for me to continue with the math, but do you see where I’m going with this?”

Author’s experience

One author, Susan Mallery, has worked with Looney for nine years and considers her indispensable. As an example, she mentioned her latest book, *Secrets of the Tulip Sisters*. Looney created the content for TulipSisters.com, sent 200 copies of the book to a “Review Crew,” created a sign-up form for mailing list members to receive bookmarks, then sent out the bookmarks to 30,000 fans (Looney also designed the bookmarks). In addition, she created quote-of-the-day shareables with quotes from the book, created videos and graphics to use in Facebook ads, and executed the Facebook campaigns. During all this, she coordinated with Harlequin’s PR and digital marketing departments on the book promotion.

“Because of my virtual assistant, I can write one extra book per year,” Mallery said. “I write four or five new books every year. I couldn’t keep up that pace without help.”

Final note

All of the virtual assistants agreed that you should have a conversation with potential hires about what you need, as VAs have different specialties.

“If you don’t get a love match the first time around, don’t give up,” said Looney. “You might have to kiss a few frogs.”

Special thanks to the following virtual assistants for their help:

Naomi Cowan Eaton (eaton.naomi@gmail.com)

Mel Jolly (www.authorr.com)

Jenel Looney (www.jenellooney.com)

Sarah Merchant (www.workadayservices.com)

Amanda West Kassis (www.awestediting.com)

Seeking Scholarly Discussions of Mystery Fiction by Deborah Leiter

Whether you’re employed by a university or working as an independent scholar, do you study mystery and detective fiction or other forms of crime drama on a scholarly level? The Mystery and Detective Fiction Area of the scholarly Popular Culture Association is looking for proposals for presentations at their spring 2018 conference, which takes place in Indianapolis, Indiana, from March 28-April 1.

The PCA welcomes proposals on writers and works ranging from classic to contemporary; storytelling styles, stock characters, and tropes relevant to the genre (e.g., individual mysteries compared to series, long-term story arcs); axes of diversity and identity poli-

tics in mystery/detective fiction (e.g., race/ethnicity/class/gender/sexual orientation); various subgenres (e.g., hardboiled detective fiction/cozy detective fiction); overlaps with other genres (e.g., horror, romance, dystopia, Westerns); trauma theory and other psychological approaches (e.g., cognitive poetics); questions of high/low culture; the mystery community culture; and much more.

More details about the conference, requirements for proposal abstracts, and how to submit can be found at <http://pcaaca.org/mystery-detective-fiction>. Please note that registration for the conference is required in order to present should your proposal be accepted.

Calendar of Events: Conferences and Workshops

Sept. 7-10

Book Passage Mystery Writers Conference, Corte Madera, CA
Conference for mystery writers, covering everything from developing ideas and writing skills to finding a publisher. Faculty includes John Lescroart, Michael Connelly, Cara Black, David Corbett, Halle Ephron, and Jacqueline Winspear.
www.bookpassage.com/mystery-writers-conference

Sept. 8-10

Creatures, Crimes & Creativity Con, Columbia, MD
Conference for writers and readers of mystery, suspense, thriller, horror, sci-fi, fantasy, and paranormal. Keynote speakers: Peter Blauner and Jonathan Maberry; local guest speakers: David Swinson and Debbi Mack. creaturescrimesandcreativity.com

Sept. 8-10

Bloody Scotland Crime Writing Festival, Stirling, Scotland
Crime writing master class, keynote speech by Sophie Hannah, a gala opening, and a celebration of 30 years of Ian Rankin's Det. John Rebus. www.bloodyscotland.com

Sept. 8-10

Colorado Gold Conference, Denver, CO
Sessions on craft improvement, genre knowledge, career management, and more, hosted by the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers. Keynote speakers: Diana Gabaldon, Sherry Thomas, and Lori Rader-Day. <http://rmfw.org/conference>

Sept. 13-17

Agatha Christie Festival, Torquay, UK
The five-day festival includes exhibitions at Torre Abbey's galleries, lectures, films, orchestra performances, garden parties, and several tours and walks. <http://www.iacf-uk.org>

Sept. 23

Book 'Em North Carolina, Lumberton, NC
This free, one-day event brings together more than 75 authors, publishers, literary agents, and publicists under one roof. The Book 'Em Foundation was founded by suspense author P.M. Terrell and Police Officer Mark Kearney as a partnership between authors and law enforcement. www.bookemnc.org

Oct. 11

SinC Into Great Writing, Toronto, Canada
Sisters in Crime sponsors the pre-Bouchercon four-hour master class "Screenwriting Tricks for Authors" workshop with Alexandra Sokoloff. www.sistersincrime.org

Oct. 12-15

Bouchercon, Toronto, Canada
Panels, interviews, awards banquet, and two days of programming hosted by middle grade and YA authors (B'Con4Kids). Canadian guest of honor: Louise Penny; American guest of honor: Megan Abbott; international guest of honor: Christopher Bookmyre; 4Kids guest of honor: Chris Grabenstein; fan guest of hon-

or: Margaret Cannon; toastmasters: Twist Phelan and Gary Phillips. bouchercon2017.com

Oct. 12-14

Nancy Drew Haunted Maine Convention, Ogunquit, ME
Convention selects a theme book each year of the convention to discuss. Also includes a ghost tour and mystery dinner with special guests Parker Stevenson (Frank Hardy) and Pamela Sue Martin (Nancy Drew) from the television shows.
www.ndsleuths.com/ndsconventions.html

Oct. 20-27

Magna cum Murder, Indianapolis, IN
Conference for writers and readers with panels, banquet, and book signings. Guest of honor: Terence Faherty; international guest of honor: Andrew Taylor.
<http://cms.bsu.edu/academics/centersandinstitutes/ebball/magnacummurder>

Oct. 27-29

Writer's Digest Novel Writing Conference, Pasadena, CA
This conference is geared exclusively to the novel. Mix and match sessions across four tracks: craft, character, genre, and beyond. Keynote: Neal Shusterman. Presenters includes James Scott Bell, Sophie Littlefield, and David Corbett.
www.novel.writersdigestconference.com

Nov. 3-5

BookBaby Independent Authors Conference, Philadelphia, PA
Writing conference dedicated to helping independent authors publish successfully. Speakers include mystery author Hope Clark. <https://sites.grenadine.co/sites/rps/en/bookbaby>

Nov. 4

Murder and Mayhem, Milwaukee, WI
One-day conference includes author panels and interviews. Schedule to be announced.
www.murdermayhemmilwaukee.com

Nov. 4-5

Texas Book Festival, Austin, TX
This is one of the largest and most prestigious literary festivals in the country. The Sisters in Crime: Heart of Texas chapter usually has an exhibit table. www.texasbookfestival.org

Nov. 10-12

New England Crime Bake, Woburn, MA
Conference for writers and fans. Registration is limited to 250 participants. The conference is jointly sponsored by the New England chapters of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America. Guest of honor: Lisa Gardner. <http://crimebake.org>

If you have any information on upcoming conventions, please let Lourdes Venard know at NewsGuppy@sinc-guppies.org.