

THE STILETTA NEWSLETTER

Sisters in Crime  Northern California Chapter

VOLUME 26, ISSUE 1

FEBRUARY 2025

Curiosity

Since I'm still new to the idea that the presidency of this very successful chapter of Sisters in Crime sits in my lap, I've spent some time working my way through our local SinC NorCal website and the national SinC website. What an education! Not just for me about the organization but about me personally and the way I think.

Let me explain. Websites are the first place I visit when I want an overview of a group. I couldn't begin to tell you how many I've looked at. Although I needed answers to some very practical questions about SinC chapters and officers' duties from the national website, my mind took an abrupt turn when the website popped open. Websites, in general, filled the big thought bubble over my head. I forgot about SinC, bylaws, and promoting events. I followed my inquisitive mind and was pulled toward websites as a category. I learned that the first website was launched on August 6, 1991, and created by a British computer scientist, Tim Berners-Lee. His plan was simple . . . share information between different devices. By the end of 1992, there were ten websites, 3,000 in 1994. When Google came on the scene in 1996, the number of websites jumped to two million. Today there are about 1.9 billion websites.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who loves simple little facts that take me anywhere else but where I currently am. If you're a



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President's Letter, continued

writer or a reader, I bet this happens more than once a day. Why? Because we're curious. And it's that curiosity that keeps us writing the next page and reading the next chapter.

We're not daydreaming, procrastinating (well, maybe I am), or lost in imagination; we're learning and storing up information. As one friend said to me, "It's all grist for the mill." And I believe it's a quality we all share. So, stay curious and follow your mind, wherever it goes.

There are a few things I learned from the SinC NorCal National website that I didn't know. The organization has a page devoted to Awards and Grants:

https://www.sistersincrime.org/page/awards_grants

Two of my favorites were the **We Love Libraries** and **We Love Bookstores** awards. SinC gives six different independent bookstores a \$500 grant every year. The same award goes to six different libraries every year. One of the requirements is that the bookstore or library has to have three or more books in their collection by current Sisters in Crime members. If you're willing, talk to your local library and independent bookstore and tell them about the grant. Together, fill out the very simple one-page form. Take a picture of the staff and submit. It's a great way to connect with the libraries and indie bookstores in your area.

I hope to meet you all during the year. Questions? Ideas? I'm open. Drop me a line at president@sincnorcal.org.

Sincerely,

Glenda Carroll

President, Sisters in Crime NorCal



Mark Your Calendar: Upcoming SinC NorCal Events

Saturday, February 1, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Annual Meet & Greet and Potluck, with a Promotion/Marketing Panel

Rockridge Branch of Oakland Public Library, 5366 College Ave., Oakland, and on Zoom
Street parking and BART (Rockridge Station) are available.

Panel members discussing promotion and marketing will include NorCal chapter's Michelle Chouinard, George Cramer, Victoria Kazarian, and Lisa Towles, moderated by Vera Chan. Panelists are experts in areas such as newsletters, social media, blogging, podcasts, book trailers, Facebook ads, and more. Bring your questions and experience with any kind of marketing and promotion. For the potluck, please bring a small- to medium-size dish to share and plan to take the leftovers home.

Saturday, March 1, 4:00 – 5:30 p.m.

Location, Location, Location, with Diana R. Chambers

Sausalito Books by the Bay, 100 Bay Street, Sausalito (check website for Zoom availability)

Author and world traveler Diana Chambers will discuss the importance of setting to highlight the senses and bring richness to our work. Sometimes it can suggest the story itself. In *The Secret War of Julia Child*, Diana wanted to explore the WWII theater of India and China known as the Forgotten War of Asia. She also wanted to follow Julia Child's size 12A footsteps through this little-known region where she came to find herself and the man of her life.

Saturday, April 5, 1:00 - 3:00 p.m.

Firefighters and First Responders in Crime Fiction, with Christy Warren

The Arts & Science Center at Lafayette Public Library, 3491 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette, and on Zoom

Our own Ellen Kirschman will interview Christy Warren, former Berkeley FD Fire Captain, about her long career as a professional firefighter and paramedic and about how crime fiction writers get things right – or wrong – when writing about first responders, PTSD, firefighters, and minorities in the fire service (women and LGBTQ+). Attendees should come loaded with questions. Christy is a no-holds-barred, high-energy speaker.

Please check our website and your email for updates and more details on our events and presenters, and for registration links for all events.

In Case You Missed It . . .

If you weren't able to attend our recent events, here's what you missed. Members can find recordings of these events in the Members Only section of our website.

November Meeting - Fall Author Showcase

In this twice-a-year event, NorCal members familiarized attendees with their new or recently published works by reading excerpts, and some lucky attendees took home a free book!



Ana Manwaring



Claudia Long



Daisy Bateman



Diana Chambers



Ellen Kirschman



Faye Snowden



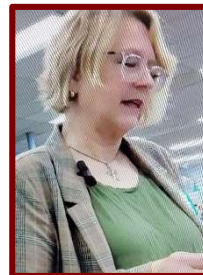
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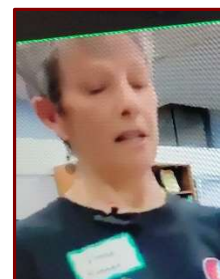
Robin Somers



Vera Chan



Victoria Kazarian



Vinnie Hansen

December Meeting - Joint Winter Open House (SinC and MWA NorCal).

Members of NorCal chapters of both SinC and MWA mingled with potential new members and enjoyed festive refreshments of the season. Lucky attendees took home copies of McCracken Poston Jr.'s book, *Zenith Man*.



Our 2025 Executive Committee (Board) Members (and their 2025 Writing/Reading Resolutions)



GLEND A CARROLL, President: I am the author of the Trisha Carson mysteries, *Dead Code*, *Drop Dead Red*, and *Dead in the Water*. The fourth in the series, *Better Off Dead*, will be published in early Spring 2025. All four are set in the San Francisco Bay Area, including Marin, the East Bay State Parks and, of course, San Francisco. My books have a swimming undercurrent. I can always find a dead body floating around somewhere. Personally, I have raced in more than 150 open water swimming events in Northern California, as well as Hawaii and Perth, Australia. I completed a swim from Alcatraz to San Francisco and yes, San Francisco Bay is cold. I was a long-time sports columnist for the *Marin Independent Journal* and have written for numerous publications, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Defenders of Wildlife*, *Sailing*, *Yacht Racing*, *Swimmer*, and *Ford Times*. I tutor first generation high school students in English and History. I live in San Rafael, CA with my dog, McCovey. **I consider myself the turtle of writing -- slow but steady. My personal writing resolution for 2025 is to accelerate the turtle aspect of my writing.**

ANA MANWARING, Vice President: I'm the author of the award winning JadeAnne Stone Mexico Adventures, suspense/thrillers set in Mexico and the new series featuring Dafne Olabarrieta, a hostage negotiator. Book 1, *Kickback*, won a Literary Titan gold book award. I'm currently at work on a domestic thriller set in Mexico and based on a true story. I continue to run North Bay Poetics, a monthly poetry event. I am a former lifestyle columnist, and my reviews of Siblings' books can be found at <https://anamanwaring.com/> I teach creative writing in Sonoma, CA. This will be a jam-packed year! I'm co-chair for Left Coast Crime 2026, and I'm working to launch a marketing co-op for SinC NorCal. In between volunteering, I plan to publish a new thriller and write JadeAnne Stone #6, *Two Weddings and a Take-Down*.



MICHAL STRUTIN, Secretary: I've spent decades as an editor and writer for national magazines and newspapers. When my husband and I moved to Appalachia, I wrote books on nature, travel, and cultural history. Upon our return to California (kids and grandkids), I switched to historical fiction: *Judging Noa: a Fight for Women's Rights in the Turmoil of the Exodus*. Now I'm writing the kind

Executive Committee Members 2025, continued

of books I like to read: mysteries. Besides writing, I'm a climate activist and a native-plants gardener. The first in my Late Renaissance mystery trilogy is set for 2026 publication. I'll be somewhere beyond draft one of book two this year. My reward: reading more nature books, starting with *Braiding Sweetgrass*. And I'll do more walking: best way to get plot ideas.



MALENA ELJUMAILY, Treasurer: I am an avid reader of mysteries, memoir, and self-help books. Several of my short plays (one-act, ten-minute and one-minute) have been produced in festivals around the country. I also love to knit, cross-stitch, and sew. I live in beautiful Santa Rosa. Last year I did very little writing, but lots of reading. I plan to continue with that and get my 10,000-book TBR pile whittled down some more. I have especially enjoyed reading books by SinC NorCal members.

NANNETTE POTTER, Membership: I am the author of *Pierce the Darkness, a Blade Broussard Novel*, which won an Honorable Mention in the 12th Annual *Writer's Digest* Self-Published E-book Awards. The hot, agriculturally rich landscape of the Central Valley is where I call home, which may explain why I write about fearless characters in exotic locations. I should have done this years ago. Currently, I'm writing the second book in the series and promoting the first. In addition to writing a novel, I've published short stories and nonfiction articles. My passions are spending time with my family, writing, and traveling. I have big plans for 2025! I just finished the second book of my *Blade Broussard* series, title to be finalized soon. Once it's published, I'll start writing the third book in the series. My personal reading is sparse, and normally I read twelve thrillers a year. But in 2025, I will include five novels from the 100 Books to Read in a Lifetime list.



ROBIN SOMERS, Program Coordinator: I am the new Program Coordinator for SinC NorCal. I am the author of *Eleven Stolen Horses*, a Wild Horses Mystery, launched in Fall 2024. The book was a Finalist in the category of Best Westerns from Pacific Coast Book Awards. I spent my middle years in the Sierra Nevada foothills, where I was a reporter for the *Union Democrat*, taught high school English and kept a horse. I returned to Santa Cruz, California, in 2002, where I

Executive Committee Members 2025, continued

live with my husband. I received my MFA from San Jose State University and am retired faculty at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I am a Volunteer Ambassador for American Wild Horse Conservation, a founding member of Coastal Cruisers chapter of Sisters in Crime and a member of Western Writers of America and Mystery Writers of America. I authored *Beet Fields*, a murder mystery, and *Backyard Burning*, a collection of poems. I love horses, especially wild ones, and currently volunteer at Canham Farm horse rescue sanctuary in Scotts Valley, CA. I will be reading *James* by Percival Everett and at least one book a month by my Sisters in Crime NorCal and Coastal Cruisers. As for writing, I'll be traveling the back road locations in Book #3 of my Wild Horses Mystery series and writing so hard my readers feel the magic.



MARGIE BUNTING, Newsletter: I'm originally from Philadelphia but lived in San Jose from 1969 to 2020, then moved to El Dorado Hills, CA. I'm now starting my tenth year as editor of *The Stiletta*, a role I really enjoy. Armed with a BA in French language and literature, I had a career in HR management. Retired for almost 10 years, I keep busy as a Toastmasters officer, attending book and movie review clubs and game get-togethers, and being a part of my young grandchildren's lives. Reading remains my favorite pastime. For my 2025 reading goal, I will again read at least 150 books and will continue to post my reviews on NetGalley, Goodreads, Amazon, and Lesa's Book Critiques. I will also encourage my grandkids' love of reading by supplying them with the best books that I can find for their reading level.

MAUREEN STUDER, Speakers Bureau: I am an award-winning actor, director, educator, and playwright. I garnered my awards over the span of four decades of working in the theatre. I graduated from University of California at Riverside with a focus on acting and directing and received my MA from San Francisco State with a focus on theatre history and criticism. During my tenure as an educator, I taught acting, directing, playwriting, and history. I have also performed in or directed over 100 productions. Fifteen years ago, I turned my creative energy toward writing. To date, I have completed six full-length plays, three romance novels, six short plays, and a myriad of short stories and poetry. I have also written one non-fiction book, *Before an Audience: Tips and Tricks to Reading Your Writing in Public*, and I have presented the topic at various authors' meetings and three conferences. I plan on reading authors who have TV series: Ann Cleeves, who writes the Vera series; Anthony Horowitz, who wrote Foyle's War and several other mysteries; Elizabeth George, who writes the Inspector Lynley series. And probably an Agatha Christie or two.



Executive Committee Members 2025, continued



MICHELE DRIER, Immediate Past President: I was born in Santa Cruz and am a fifth generation Californian. During my career in journalism – as a reporter and editor at daily newspapers, including the *San Jose Mercury-News* – I won awards for producing investigative series. I also spent a couple of decades as Executive Director of California non-profit organizations serving women’s programs, domestic assault programs, legal services for seniors, and the arts. I retired from Legal Assistance for Seniors in Oakland, an agency that served more than 10,000 seniors in the East Bay. After retirement, I turned to my first love, writing, and am now working on my 18th novel. I’m past president of SinC chapters NorCal, Capitol Crimes, and the Guppies and co-chaired Bouchercon 2020, the world’s oldest and largest convention for mystery writers and fans. My series include the Amy Hobbes Newspaper Mysteries, SNAP: The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles, and the Stained Glass Mysteries. The latest in the Stained Glass Mysteries, *Tapestry of Tears*, was published in 2020. Find me at <https://micheledrier.me/> I will try to catch up from the pandemic and my cancer, both of which knocked my writing regime askew. I’m about a quarter through my next Kandesky Vampire Chronicle book and have a rough outline for the next Stained Glass Mystery. I’m planning to finish and publish both of these in 2025. And continue reading at least two books a week!

SUSAN ALICE BICKFORD: Member at Large : I was born in Boston and grew up in Central New York, the setting for many of my stories. Eventually I migrated to Silicon Valley to work in high tech in a variety of engineering and managerial roles. I write thrillers and suspense stories that are deeply embedded in the rural areas of New York State and New England, featuring resourceful female protagonists. My short stories have appeared in several Sisters in Crime chapter anthologies, including our own *Invasive Species*, and other publications. My debut novel, *A Short Time to Die*, was nominated for Left Coast Crime Best Debut Novel. My second novel, *Dread of Winter*, was nominated for an Edgar. My 2025 reading goal is to focus on: debut writers; famous writers I should have read by now.



MICHELLE CHOUINARD, Member at Large: I am the *USA Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* bestselling author of the Detective Jo Fournier series, the standalone psychological thriller *The Vacation*, and the Edgar Award-nominated amateur sleuth series *The Serial-Killer Guide to San Francisco*. I have a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Stanford University and was one of UC Merced’s founding faculty members. I enjoy caffeine in all forms, amateur genealogy, baking, and

Executive Committee Members 2025, continued

anything to do with Halloween or the zombie apocalypse. I have three cats, a dog, and a husband who technically keeps me from being a crazy cat lady. I think my personal writing goal for 2025 is to finish two new books this year, and I'd love to read a book a week! I think the writing goal is possible, but I'm a slow reader, so we'll see how that goes . . .

DAISY BATEMAN, Member at Large: I am a writer and fan of mysteries who lives in Alameda, California, with my husband and dog. As Stacie Grey, I am the author of standalone thrillers including *She Left*, and the upcoming *She Didn't Stand A Chance*, releasing in August 2025 from Poisoned Pen/Sourcebooks. Under my own name, I have had two cozy mysteries in the Marketplace Mysteries series published. In what passes for normal life, I work in biotech research. I mostly post to Instagram and Threads, and occasionally write a newsletter. Website: <https://staciegrey.com/> I'm not sure I have resolutions so much as I have deadlines. If I did have one, it would be to be more disciplined in working on my contracted books, so I could carve out some extra time for new projects..



SUE TROWBRIDGE, Website: I provide book formatting, website help, and general tech support to authors, as well as to several MWA and SinC chapters. In my spare time, I volunteer with Meals on Wheels and study advanced Swedish literature via Zoom through the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis. I live in Alameda with my husband and our very energetic Boston Terrier. Website: <https://interbridge.com/> My resolution is to try to read one book I own for every one I check out of the library. I'm sure I'll find some books I'll want to keep, but I'd love to stock some of my local Little Free Libraries and clear some shelf space in the process.

Feedback Bureau

by Michele Drier



Are you looking for a few good readers?

Are you working on your first book or your twentieth book?

Are you willing to help out a fellow member?

Well, the Feedback Bureau is open for business!

A couple of years ago, SinC NorCal set up a subgroup in our groups.io home to help members find beta readers, swap manuscripts, or establish or join a critique group. It hasn't seen a lot of activity lately, so I'm adopting it as my project as immediate past president.

How do you start? Google groups.io (if you don't have a password, you will receive an email with a link to join). Click on Your Groups in the left navigation column, then SinCNorCal2 | Main, then Subgroups. Feedback Bureau will be the third subgroup that is listed. Open the subgroup and follow the instructions to join.

I will be checking this subgroup twice a month for any pleas for beta readers, manuscript swaps, or critique partners and answering requests and will send requests out to the group.

In addition, as new reader requests come in, I'll send a short synopsis of the work to our main list to help you find a reader and a match.

This is a program that I fine-tuned when I was president of Guppies several years ago after I'd taken advantage of a few manuscript swaps. I received some great feedback and read several Works in Progress that I enjoyed. In fact, I'm still in touch with one of the authors I met through this project some fifteen years ago.

One thing I learned early on in my journalism career is to always get at least a second set of eyes on your work. And three or four is better!

If you have any questions or problems, please feel free to email me directly at micheledrier (at) att.net.

Michele Drier is a Member at Large on the SinC NorCal Executive Committee (Board) and the Immediate Past President of SinC NorCal. More details are available in her bio in the article above this one.

Cold Cases

by G.M. Malliet

I write short stories and novels and a novella here and there. I believe most authors write short stories as a way to “cleanse the palate” during the long haul of writing a novel, although some prefer to concentrate only on this most tortuous art form. I say tortuous because writing short is famously more difficult than writing long.

My shorts are stories that don’t fit with any of my three series, or story ideas that can’t be stretched to novel form, or tryouts for a new character or setting I’m experimenting with. But it’s always something that won’t let me go until I at least get it sketched out, then come back later to devote the better part of a month to tinkering with it. Sometimes the story won’t gel, and I have to put it away for a while.



In the case of “Cold Cases,” my story published in the January/February 2025 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, the sketching and tinkering stretched into years. I would have to leave the story, but I always came back to it. I changed the title several times before finally hitting upon one that exactly described what the story was about. After that, the writing pretty much took care of itself.

That I couldn’t decide on the title was unusual, but I couldn’t let the idea and the main character go. It was too much fun and too different from anything I’d done before.



You see, “Cold Cases” bends the mystery genre into a ghost story, one in which the ghosts, all murder victims haunting a rustic Overlook-like resort hotel, are trying to earn a “get out of purgatory free” card. They are saddled with each other, possibly for eternity, as they try to bring their plight to the attention of the authorities.

Two of the ghosts were rivals in life, but their time in eternity is teaching them something like tolerance.

It should be a dark story, and it is. But it’s also filled with moments of irony and even humor, as the ghosts fumble through the afterlife, still clinging to old grudges and quirks from their time among the living. There’s something almost absurd about

Cold Cases, continued

watching them, eternally bound to the scene of their demise, bickering over the past while trying to cooperate on solving their murders. It's a story that highlights the complexities of human nature—how even in death, we're shaped by the lives we lived, the choices we made, and the unfinished business we leave behind.

The challenge with "Cold Cases" was balancing that fine line between the macabre and the humorous, between the tragedy of these lost souls and the absurdity of their circumstances. It's what kept me coming back to the story again and again. The characters, dead as they are, were very much alive to me, and I think that's what every writer hopes for—that the characters take on a life of their own, refusing to let go until their story is told.

In the end, it's not just about solving the mystery of their murders. It's about redemption, even when redemption seems out of reach. It's about finding closure in the most unlikely of places and circumstances. And maybe that's why I kept at it for so long—because sometimes, like the ghosts in "Cold Cases," we're all just trying to find our way out of purgatory, one unfinished story at a time.

This blogpost regarding the author's short story, "Cold Cases," which was published in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* (January/February 2025), originally appeared in *Trace Evidence* .

G.M. Malliet is the author of three mystery series; a dozen or more short stories published in *The Strand*, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, and *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*; and a standalone suspense novel. She wrote the Agatha Award-winning *Death of a Cozy Writer* (2008), the first installment of the DCI St. Just mysteries, which was named one of the ten best novels of the year by *Kirkus Reviews*.

Learning to Love the Dark Side of San Francisco

by Michelle Chouinard



Hello, my name is Michelle, and I'm a recovering child-of-a-flower child.

To be clear, I wasn't conceived until well after the Summer of Love; in fact, I missed the 1960's entirely. But my mother watched the happenings in San Francisco from the other side of the country with a longing heart during her teen years, and when she met a man who'd lived in an actual commune in Northern California, she jumped at the chance to come experience first-hand what she'd only viewed from afar.

When I was four, we made the trek across the country and settled in the Bay Area, where, despite the intervening years, the City's flower power legacy was still very much alive. My earliest memories include free concerts draped in the mingled scents of patchouli and marijuana, and one of my most cherished childhood belongings was a necklace that declared "War is not healthy for children or other living things." My impressionable thoughts swirled with the claims that all the world needed was love, and if we would just take care of each other, we could create a paradise on earth. If my preteen years had an anthem, it was John Lennon's "Imagine."

But as I got older, I noticed my mental picture of humanity didn't match up with what I saw in the real world around me. The principle of own-nothing-share-everything, morphed quickly into greed-is-good. The AIDS epidemic swept the area, largely ignored for years by the powers-that-were, and the homeless population grew as mental health facilities closed. I experienced hungry children and street violence first-hand and learned about horrible, but very human, phenomena like the Holocaust and Jack the Ripper through books. Several high-profile child abductions rocked my community – Michaela Garecht was abducted literally blocks from places where I hung out, and Polly Klaas, abducted and brutally murdered, lived not far from where one of my best friends lived. And when the newspaper published a picture of Leonard Lake, a serial killer who murdered an estimated twenty-five victims, with the one-horned goat "unicorn" he used to lure young women at an area Renaissance Faire, I felt the gut-punch of realizing I'd crossed paths with him during my family's yearly visit to that faire. The what-if of that haunts me to this day.

The mismatch between what my parents' generation had hoped for and the world I saw around me produced many questions and emotions in me, but they boiled down to this: Why? Why was humanity so far from the ideals it claimed to embrace? What made the flower power ideals so hard to maintain? Why were some people so evil they'd kill another human, or humans? Was it some strange genetic fluke, the situation that person was thrown into, or some combination of both? I dove

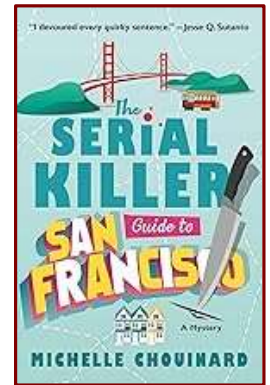
Learning to Love the Dark Side of San Francisco, continued

into true crime books (and later, podcasts), especially those that featured cases from San Francisco and its environs. Like the main character in *The Serial Killer Guide to San Francisco*, I needed to make sense of the motivations behind the dark choices people made. But not because I was consumed with the macabre – because I believed understanding the macabre might help fix it.

And San Francisco's history, right from its beginnings, gives plenty of opportunity for that understanding. The city was born from an explosion of greed and opportunism: when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, the population skyrocketed from about 700 to 25,000 in two years, flooded by men scrambling to get rich quick and those ready to take advantage of them. Crime in the early days was so bad the town was known by the nickname "The Barbary Coast," and Wild West mores (or, arguably, lack thereof) ruled the day. Law enforcement and government structures lagged desperately behind the population swell, and when the town's merchants had enough of what they perceived as corruption and lawlessness, they formed vigilante committees that eschewed the inconveniences of due process, which was time consuming and sometimes ended with guilty men going free. Thankfully, most San Franciscans didn't agree that the way to solve the problem was to take the law into their own hands, and they instituted changes in the governing body that directed San Francisco onto a better path.

Several decades and a Ph.D. in psychology later, I've managed to cobble together a tentative understanding of the questions that plague me, and I now realize that "fixing it" means something very different—and infinitely more difficult—than I once hoped. There are both genetic and situational factors that cause people to treat one another unkindly; people's wants and desires will always conflict, even before you throw psychopathy into the mix. But that doesn't mean my flower power idealism is gone – it has just been redirected. Because as I was searching around the dark side of human nature, I realized the beautiful side – like the San Franciscans who wouldn't allow vigilante committees to continue taking the law into their own hands – inevitably sprung up out of the darkness, even if they had to claw and scratch and fight to survive. So while I no longer believe we can build a utopia where we all live in peace, I do believe that once we're armed with an understanding of the darker side of human nature, we know better how to fight against it. We can set up our societies to protect those who are vulnerable, and we can fight for justice for those who have been wronged.

And that's a philosophy I've seen embodied by San Francisco even more strongly than it embodied the Summer of Love. San Francisco has battled for civil rights, the right to organize, LGBTQ+ rights, sex worker rights, birthed the AIDS quilt, embraced hydroponics to feed the hungry, and so much more. And that's not because San Francisco turns a blind eye to the dark side of human nature – it's because since the earliest days of Gold Rush lawlessness, the City has looked that dark side square in



Learning to Love the Dark Side of San Francisco, continued

the eye and refused to blink. All are welcome in San Francisco, even if life gets complicated.

No, scratch that.

All are welcome in San Francisco *because* life gets complicated.

This article originally appeared in *CrimeReads*.

Michelle Chouinard is the Edgar-nominated author of *The Serial Killer Guide to San Francisco*, and under another name, the *USA Today* and *Publishers Weekly* bestselling author of eight previous mysteries. Michelle has a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Stanford University and was one of UC Merced's founding faculty members. She enjoys caffeine in all forms, amateur genealogy, baking, and anything to do with Halloween or the zombie apocalypse.



Reading Your Work Before an Audience

Part 5: Sitting, Standing, or Surprise!

by Maureen Studer



Welcome to the final article in this series, Reading Your Work Before an Audience.

No matter the size of the audience or the venue, keep in mind you are building a relationship with your readers. How you present your writing matters as much as the material. When you evaluate the physical location of the reading, you'll want to determine the best way to present. Sitting, standing, and swinging from the chandeliers are all legitimate ways to present.

Sitting – a small, intimate setting, fewer than 25 people.

If the space is a little coffee house, a living room, or even a back room at your local library, sitting while you read is a fine choice. Even sitting on a tall chair is fine if you are comfortable climbing up and down off the chair.

Often an intimate venue is rich with opportunity. Audiences of this size are looking for some one-on-one opportunity. They usually listen carefully, drink in what you have to say, and deeply appreciate your taking the time to come to their locale. Stay casual, listen to them, answer questions, ask questions.

When you only have a few people, ask their names and what else they read. You all have a common interest: reading, whether it's spy thrillers, romance, or biographies. It's a fantastic opportunity to show them you are interested in them.

Show interest in the audience, their reading patterns, and the authors they enjoy. Share favorite books, films – heck, even your favorite cocktails or coffee – with them. Tell stories and listen to theirs. This will build a relationship.

Standing – a larger venue, 25+ attendees

If the venue is larger, say a theatre with rows of chairs, or a restaurant banquet room with tables surrounded by chairs, you will want to stand. Standing is important primarily for sight lines. It is, of course, important for the audience to see you. Also, you may notice your energy is elevated when standing, which will allow you to convey the reading to a larger group.

Reading Your Work: Sitting, Standing, or Surprise, continued

If there is a lectern with a microphone, be mindful of the sound. Be sure to get there early enough to test it. Make sure the microphone is firmly set inside the lectern, stay put, and let your performance reveal your casual nature. Standing doesn't have to mean rigid, although I can appreciate it might. Arm gestures and eye contact will help you to appear more accessible to the audience.

Surprise!

I bet you're curious about this. Surprise whom? The audience of course.

This is a suggestion for that adventurous author who wants to make a show-stopping entrance. Yes, there will be one or two of you who would like to wow the audience with a theatrical entrance to capture their attention. It can be done, and it can be wonderful fun, if you do some advance planning.

I suggest you work with the venue to find out exactly what kinds of opportunities they have.

Maybe they have a back entrance, and you can come sweeping through the crowd in a red velvet cape with leopard lining.

Maybe you want to start the reading sitting in the middle of the audience. Unexpected and anonymous.

Maybe you want to walk through the crowd and do card tricks because your sleuth does card tricks.

Maybe you want to hire a musician to play while you read.

Maybe you want to give away swag by walking through the audience (keep in mind this will probably be at your expense).

Maybe you want to . . . who knows – you make it up!

While some surprises don't need any assistance and can still be a lot of fun for the listeners, things like these are serious audience grabbers. If this is your bailiwick, here are a few things to consider:

- Is this feasible? That's a question for both the venue and your personality. This is not for everybody. If you're not comfortable with this kind of presentation, don't do it.

Reading Your Work: Sitting, Standing, or Surprise, continued

- Does it require planning? Do you have the time and the patience to figure out the stunts? Practice them? And make adjustments when necessary?
- Do you have someone who can assist with all the backstage rigmarole? It's rare to accomplish something like this alone. Doors need to be opened and closed. Someone might need to cue your entrance. You might need to coordinate with employees at the venue.

The more extravagant your event, the more assistance you will need.

It's been my pleasure to offer our chapter a little information about how to make the most of your in-person appearances. I wish you much luck or, should I say, "break a leg" in all your live reading endeavors. I hope you are about to have fun and enjoy your audience!

For more tips and tricks on reading your writing in public you can follow Maureen on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2w4C_PdMpqY&t=58s

Maureen Studer has bachelor's and master's degrees in theatre arts, and has had over four decades of teaching, performing, directing, and writing. She has written three romance novels and half a dozen full-length plays, won numerous short play contests, and is currently working on her first true crime play. This article is based on an excerpt from her non-fiction, *Before an Audience: Tips and Tricks to Reading Your Writing in Public*. She is now in search of an agent to help sell the book.



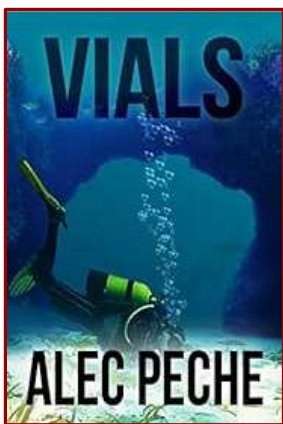
Member Profile: Alec Peche

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

Alec Peche (née Linda Smith) is a prolific writer who has lived all over the United States. Currently residing in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Alec keeps in touch with her fellow California authors through Sisters in Crime NorCal and Coastal Cruisers.

Stiletta: Your prior career was in the healthcare industry, including a role as a hospital CEO. What made you decide to start writing mysteries?

Alec Peche: The politics of hospitals are huge, as evidenced by so many soap operas being set therein. I had a long list of people I wanted to “kill on paper” after working in that environment. So, my first book was free therapy, but then I found I enjoyed crafting stories, and here I am 25 books later.



Stiletta: You wrote in a previous article for *The Stiletta* (“How I Created Jill Quint,” August 2017) about how you came up with the idea of a forensic pathologist as the protagonist of your first (and longest) series, the Jill Quint, MD mysteries. How has your medical and/or life experience influenced the character of Jill Quint, and how has she changed over the course of 19 books?

AP: I have a friend who is a forensic pathologist. She toured me through the medical examiner’s office in her city. It was interesting hearing about the differences of working in various cities’ Medical Examiner offices. Since I’ve been out of healthcare for a while, I always check in with the latest advances to make sure my writing is up to date.

Stiletta: The theme of wine and vineyards runs through the Jill Quint series. Are you writing about the subject from personal experience?

AP: Yes and no. I like my wine sweet, as does Jill. A real vintner would like dry wines. I do a bunch of research on vineyards for my stories. When I gave Jill her fictional boyfriend, I called him a wine label artist, not realizing at the time that it was a real-life occupation thanks to a *New York Times* article. Whoops!

Stiletta: You have categorized the Jill Quint books as classic mysteries. How do you define “classic mystery”?

Member Profile: Alec Peche, continued

AP: I've always been conflicted about the terms cozy and classic mysteries. A cozy is supposed to take place in a small town with an amateur sleuth. Jill solves cases all over the world, and while she is an amateur detective, she's not an amateur forensic pathologist. Her friends are amateurs also, but their skills reflect their day jobs. There's no sex or profanity in my stories, so my readers appreciate the cozy feel. But since I don't hit all the cozy tropes, I don't classify my stories as such.

Stiletta: Tell us about the protagonist in your seven-book series about Damian Green, a computer geek who helps a San Jose cop solve murders.

AP: I got stuck writing the seventh book in the Jill Quint series and wondered if I should have ended the series at six books. I took a break from the book and decided to try a new series. I saw an article in the *SF Chronicle* about an island for sale in SF Bay – Red Rock Island. I combined that factual piece with my love of the original MacGyver series with Richard Dean Anderson to create a backstory and – voilà – a new series was born.

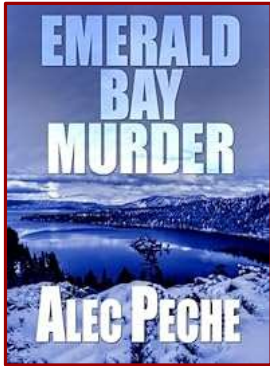
Stiletta: Your third and fourth series are a departure from what you had written previously, as they have fantasy/paranormal elements. What made you interested in including these elements in your work, and how did you land on teleportation as a skill for Michelle Watson in that series?

AP: Like any writer, I'm a daily reader. I found myself drifting toward Urban Fantasy (UF)/Paranormal stories. My favorite author wasn't writing fast enough, and I wanted to try my hand at that genre. I discussed with a friend what a cool magic skill would be and settled on teleportation. I mean, who wouldn't want to land anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds? Then I needed a backstory about where the skill came from (a cop who nearly died in the line of duty) and who she should work for now (CIA). While I loved the idea, I probably missed the tropes in Urban Fantasy and the series hasn't been popular, so I ended it at three books. I moved on to a new UF idea, with a 40-something physician who discovers a grimoire among her medical school books and finds out she's a witch with the help of a fae warrior. I'd planned to write three books in that series, but UF world building is so much more difficult to write, and my cross-country move in 2024 put a serious dent in my writing ability. So, I returned to books #15 and #6 in the other two series to get my writing skills back.



Stiletta: What can we expect from the next books in your series, and when will they be available?

Member Profile: Alec Peche, continued



AP: Book #6 in the Computer Whiz series, *Emerald Bay Murder*, arrives February 27, 2025. Then I plan to write books #2 and #3 in my UF series, then book #16 in the Jill series. My new neighbors know I'm a writer, and whenever I'm out walking my dog, they have suggestions for my next story. It's kind of fun, though I've never had the heart to tell them that a man walking out of an Airbnb carrying a rifle isn't enough of a suggestion to make a novel.

Stiletta: You have formerly lived in northern and southern California, New York City, and Florida, and you write that you have visited 95% of the locations in your books. What have been your favorite places to live or visit?

AP: I've spent the vast majority of my life in NorCal or Pasadena. I built my forever home in Green Bay, where I lived for a decade and made good friends. Yeah, the winters are cold, but that's an incentive to stay indoors and write.

Stiletta: Tell us about your daily writing routine: time, location, environment, etc.

AP: I'm a morning person, so I'm up writing at 4:30 to 5:00 a.m. My new home has an office that looks out onto Green Bay. I see squirrels, eagles, red foxes, and woodchucks passing their day. I'll join writing sprints off and on throughout the day – some with SinC, sometimes with a group of writer friends. I compete against myself to see how many words I can write in 25 minutes, and that keeps the story going.

Stiletta: What is your motivation for writing several series at a time, and how do you keep them all straight, especially since you have described yourself as a "severe pantser"?

AP: I don't always keep the stories, straight, lol. My first reader (she's been there for all 25 books) will point out when I confuse my character names. In one of my books, I killed a guy on page two, then had him driving a car on page 150. However, when I start a story, I have the background of the series and a crime, and then I start writing and see where the story takes me. I'm going back now and using AI to create story bibles for each book. I've wasted a lot of time searching for a minor character's name in a past book, and I need to fix that. I also try to advance Jill's wine business forward, and I was having to look up what grape varietals she planted. Those story bibles will save me time.

Stiletta: You have been quite active in Sisters in Crime. What benefits have you received from this organization?

AP: I served as the National Chapter Liaison and expanded Sisters in Crime by ten chapters, including an international chapter based in the UK/Europe. I enjoyed my time there. Now I'm the long-distance treasurer for Coastal Cruisers. This year, I purchased a lifetime membership, as I've found the

Member Profile: Alec Peche, continued

November/January daily sprints and the remainder of the year Tuesday/Friday/Saturday sprints to be critical to my productivity.

Stiletta: What would you like your fellow SinC members to know about you that I haven't asked?

AP: I'm a proponent of Indie Publishing. When I started writing in 2012, I hated the concept of a gatekeeper to the traditional publishing world, and instead I wanted readers to evaluate my work. Since then, I'm constantly learning new stuff. I've taught the subject at Gavilan College and now at UW Green Bay. I've helped other authors get their work published, as it is a form of community service for me. I like that beyond writing, keeping up with the marketing and technology of being an Indie keeps my aging brain active, learning new stuff. If anyone reading this wants to dip their toes into Indie Publishing, contact me and I'll help.

Check out Alec's other articles in past issues of *The Stiletta*: "Five Mistakes" (August 2022) and "Getting Over a Writer's Slump" (November 2024).

Alec Peche was interviewed by Margie Bunting, SinC NorCal newsletter editor.



**to our newest members
(joining SinC NorCal from October 1, 2024, through December 30, 2024)**

Lorraine Aho (pen name Emily Barrett)
Diana Corbitt
Lynn Denley-Bussard (pen name Terence Denley)
Donna Wierzbowski (pen name Donna Del Oro)

Member News

New and Upcoming Releases

GM Malliet has a short story titled “The Unwanted Guest” appearing in the March/April 2025 issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. You know what they say about guests and fish smelling after three days? Try decades of being landed with the care and feeding of Mary Queen of Scots and her entourage.

Rachele Baker’s second book in her Rylie Sunderland cozy mystery series, *Vengeance in the Vines*, was published on January 11, 2025 on Amazon. In Book 1, *Tragedy in Tahoe*, 32-year-old veterinarian Rylie Sunderland moves to Lake Tahoe with her golden retriever Bella to try to make sense of the mess her life’s become and suddenly finds herself entangled in a murder investigation. And she’s inadvertently become one of the suspects! In Book 2, *Vengeance in the Vines*, the owner of a local bar is found dead in his home after eating at Rylie’s best friend’s husband’s restaurant, and Rylie’s determined to uncover the truth to save her friend. Will the secrets of the past prevent the truth from being revealed?

Better Off Dead, book #4 in Glenda Carroll’s Trisha Carson mystery series, will be released on March 7. A gruesome boating accident in the cold waters of San Francisco Bay kills a prominent financier training for an open water swim. Amateur sleuth Trisha Carson hunts down the killer and locates more than one person seeing deadly revenge.

Elena E. Smith’s first mystery/crime novel, *Mahuenga*, was published on December 30, 2024, by Books for Boomers. Dean Deveraux wants to get back on his feet after a lifetime of addiction and the failures that go with it, but before he gets a chance to feel too sorry for himself, he's caught up in the investigation into disappearance of a teenage sex worker after she has a violent encounter with someone in a dark parking lot.

Vanished, a novella by G.M. Malliet, was inspired by true crime and was released on January 3.

Vinnie Hansen’s short story, “Downward Dog,” is included in the eighth Guppie anthology, *Gone Fishin’; Crime Takes a Holiday*, releasing in February. A yoga retreat might seem like the perfect place to bag babes and scam older women, but . . .

Vinnie Hansen’s flash story, “Eavesdropper,” has been accepted by *Guilty Crime Story Magazine* with a publication date in February. An overheard conversation could be criminal.

Member News, continued

Public Appearances

Diana R. Chambers attended the Ceylon Literary Festival in Sri Lanka, where she earlier did some research for her book, *The Secret War of Julia Child*, so she should have plenty to talk about at her “Location, “Location, “Location” presentation at our March 1 meeting (see Upcoming Events article, page 3). The book will also be featured at several Women’s History Month events, including: February 26 at 6:00 p.m. at Books, Inc. in the Marina, 2251 Chestnut Street, San Francisco; March 6 from noon to 2:00 p.m. at Orinda Books, 276 Village Square, Orinda; March 23 at 2:00 p.m. at Sebastopol Library, 7140 Bodega Avenue, Sebastopol.

Awards and Recognition: Congratulations!

Rhys Bowen and Michelle Chouinard have both been nominated for the Simon & Schuster Mary Higgins Clark Award, with the winner to be announced at the 79th Annual Edgar Awards celebration by Mystery Writers of America in New York on May 1. Rhys is nominated for *The Rose Arbor*, and Michelle for *The Serial Killer Guide to San Francisco*.

Terror Bay by Lisa Towles is a semifinalist in the 2024 Chanticleer International Book Awards CLUE Awards for Suspense Thrillers.

Catriona McPherson and Leslie Karst have both been nominated for a Lefty Award. Winners will be announced at Left Coast Crime in Denver on March 15. *Scotzilla*, book #7 in Catriona’s A Last Ditch mystery series, was nominated for the Best Humorous Novel award. Leslie’s *Molten Death*, book #1 in her Orchid Isle mystery series, was nominated in the Best Mystery category.

Pierce the Darkness by Nannette Potter won an Honorable Mention in the 12th Annual *Writer’s Digest* Self-Published E-book Awards. The feature article promoting the competition will appear in the May/June 2025 issue of *Writer’s Digest* magazine.

Question of the Quarter



What has it meant, or what would it mean to you, to win a literary prize?

My dream is to win a legitimate literary award, one judged on literary merit, not popularity. Awards attract readers and let our parents know that being a writer is working out as whatever they had in mind for us. *Ellen Kirschman*

I have been most fortunate to win literary awards, and what it has meant and means to me as a non-traditionally published writer is another form of validation of my work. I may be self-published, but I hold myself to the standards of the “big guys.” I have editors, beta readers, cover artists, a publicist, the whole nine yards. There are still several awards that are open only to traditionally published writers, and that’s fine with me. You can’t have everything in this world. I take what I can get and am grateful to have won enough awards to say to myself, “Keep going, girl. You can do this.” *Heather Haven*

Photographer Gary Irving and I worked together on the *Smithsonian Guides to Natural America: Great Lakes*. We both grew up in Illinois and decided to do another book together—a photographic and prose “love letter” to the Midwest, *Places of Grace: The Natural Landscapes of the American Midwest*. Unbeknownst to us, University of Illinois Press entered the book in the Great Lakes Booksellers Association contest, and it won the prestigious Great Lakes Book Award. It meant a lot to us because we put our hearts into the book . . . and we were thrilled. I think that the literary awards I’ve received for books submitted by my publishers mean more to me than those I’ve submitted because they were submitted because of someone else’s judgment of their merit and not because it would help me sell more books. *Michael Strutin*

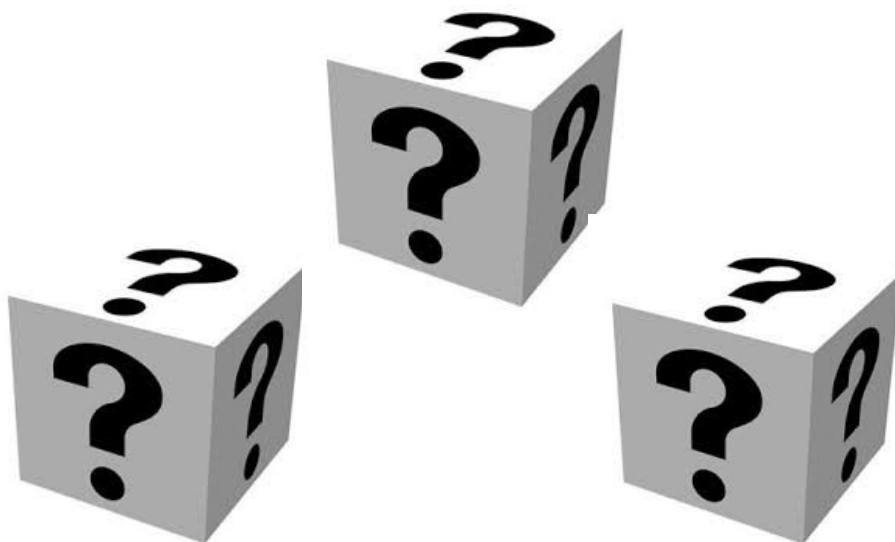
My thriller, *Pierce the Darkness*, recently received Honorable Mention in the 12th Annual *Writer’s Digest* Self-Published E-Book awards. After sending in my submission, I never gave the competition a second thought. I mean, *Writer’s Digest*? When I received the email informing me of my award, I was dumbfounded—and elated! I immediately told my family and friends. It’s difficult to put into words how I felt at that moment. It definitely gave me validation, encouragement, and a sense of belonging to our writing community. *Nannette Potter*

In the words of Demi Moore, “I belong.” An award is acknowledgement for the hard writing. Hearing I’ve won an award affects everything in my mind, body and soul, from that delicate pineal gland to my lightening hypothalamus and grinning heart, always surprising and always pleasant. Onward becomes much easier. My muse is much happier. *Robin Somers*

I like the validation of awards and would love to win more. That said, I don’t hold them all in the same regard. I’ve been a Claymore Award finalist twice. The first time, Killer Nashville had a single list of ten authors who qualified as finalists. Now, KN has a Claymore finalist list for every imaginable

Question of the Quarter, continued

category of crime fiction, so the second time as a finalist not only felt less special, but also devalued my first. One award I'd like to receive is a Derringer. Submitted stories are judged blindly, and members of the Short Mystery Fiction Society vote on five finalists advanced by the judges. When I've voted for winners, I've always read all five works, and I think that is true of most voters. Therefore, a Derringer seems like a true stamp of quality. *Vinnie Hansen*



All about YOU!

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

Please contact **Robin Somers**, Program Coordinator (resomers11 (at) gmail.com), with meeting and venue suggestions and **Margie Bunting**, Newsletter (mbunting (at) sbcglobal.net), with newsletter article suggestions and submissions.

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