Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction



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Inspired by Actual Fvents

with D.P. Lyle, MD

JOSEPH BADAL

3 Hard Truths About Writing

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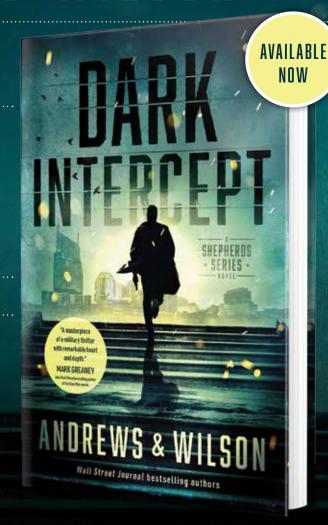
JOSHUA HOOD.

author of Robert Ludlum's Treadstone series

## FROM BESTSELLING DUO ANDREWS & WILSON

Former Navy SEAL Jedidiah Johnson confronts the ghosts from his past and the demons in his present while on a mission to rescue a kidnapped girl with special gifts.

JED'S ONLY EASY DAY WAS YESTERDAY.





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## FROM THE EDITOR



Happy Holidays, everyone!

First, I would like to share some news with all of you. *Suspense Magazine* has been one of the leading publications in the genre for over ten years. However, this is the final quarterly issue we'll be sending out. In 2022, we are going to use the website to

update all of our fans, friends, and supporters with similar content.

This decision didn't come lightly, but it was something that we needed to do. We can't express enough how much love we have for *all* of you. I know we aren't saying goodbye, but it feels like that in some ways.

COVID hit our family, crew, and loved ones harder than we could have ever expected, making this past year very challenging to the *Suspense Magazine* family.

Inside this issue, however, you will find the absolute "Best of 2021," including the *Crimson Scribe* award winner given to the best overall book of the year. We are also taking a look back at some of our "greatest hits"—giving readers a glimpse into how we started and how far we have come over the past decade.

There are so many people we need to thank. Please forgive me if I fail to mention you here but, as I said, over ten years of working with the most creative and imaginative people we've ever met is a lot to remember. Just know that we are extremely grateful to you, and those who have passed, for your help and support. Amy Lignor, Mary Lignor, Susan Santangelo, Kaye George, Weldon Burge, Dennis Palumbo, D.P. Lyle, Alan Jacobson, Lisa Gardner, Ken Brosky, Anthony Franze, Jon Land, Kimberley Howe, Liz Berry, Kathie Antrim, Leslie Borghini, Jeff Ayers, Joseph Badal, Bailey Day, Patrick Whitehurst, John Valeri, Jeffery Deaver, Dean Koontz, Christine Feehan, Sheila English, the entire ITW staff, Steve Berry, Steven James, Peter James, Paul Kemprecos, Jaime Lynn Hendricks, Boyd Morrison, Mark Adduci, Donald Allen Kirch, Tasha Alexander, Kirsche Romo, Andrew Grant, Barry Lancet, David Ingram, Ashley Wintters, Terri Armstrong, Mark Sadler, Jim Thomsen, and everyone who works ThrillerFest—the best damn conference on the planet!

THANK YOU ALL! It's been quite the ride and there is still a *lot* left in this story to write about.

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
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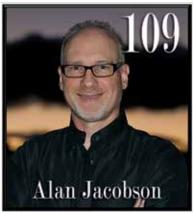
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# America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction THE SEVEN (BAD) HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE WRITERS

By Anthony J. Franze

In this series, author Anthony J. Franze interviews other suspense writers about their views on "the rules" of fiction. For the past few months, Anthony has profiled authors who are teaching at this summer's CraftFest, the International Thriller Writers' writing school held during the organization's annual ThrillerFest conference. This month, nearly a dozen CraftFest instructors, including ITW's co-founders David Morrell and Gayle Lynds, identify recurring issues they see in the work of newer writers.

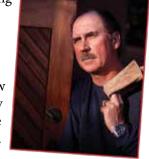
Shattering the adage, *those who can, do; those who can't, teach*, some of the biggest names in fiction will teach this month at CraftFest, a writing school held during the International Thriller Writers (ITW) association's annual conference in New York City. Dozens of renowned storytellers will teach nearly forty classes on a myriad of writing topics.

As a member of the 2013 CraftFest faculty (I know what you're thinking, and I don't know how it happened either), I had access to this impressive talent pool, and I couldn't resist asking the CraftFest teachers a question of interest to readers of this series: "In the numerous manuscripts you've reviewed by newer writers, what's the one main problem

you've seen over and over?" The authors rose to the occasion and identified not only recurring problems—seven bad habits—of newer writers, but also some solutions.

## Bad Habit #1: Flashbacks at the Beginning

**David Morrell**, the father of the modern action novel—and author of the acclaimed new Victorian thriller, "Murder as a Fine Art"—identified the flashback as a major problem. "I frequently see minor flashbacks on the first pages of manuscripts. 'Joe woke up with a terrible hangover. The previous night he'd been at his favorite bar and had drunk three more drinks than he should have.



He'd barely been able to find his car. Now he wondered where he'd parked it.' Moving a story backward on a first page is, by definition, not a good idea. It becomes a stylistic tic that shows up again and again in later parts of the story. I see this problem so often that I use it to determine my level of hope for the rest of the manuscript."

Morrell's fix? "Especially on a first page, step back and look for the number of times that 'had' is used. If there's a cluster of them, chances are they signal a minor flashback. On the theory that forward motion is essential on a first page, get rid of the flashback."



## Bad Habit #2: Rushing the Ending

**Gayle Lynds**, the reigning queen of espionage, said it's the end of manuscripts where she often sees problems. "One of my biggest frustrations is spending four-hundred pages deeply involved in a novel only to have it end abruptly, in just a chapter or two. After that much time with the characters and their stories, readers want and need a sense of completion, of satisfaction. And if the book has been violent, they need a violent confrontation at the end for catharsis. It's true that not all subplots and characters need to be resolved in your ending, but at least work through the primary ones. For instance, because politics plays a large role in my books, my characters generally have somewhat happy endings, but the situation itself is likely to be bettered only for the time being, because that's the way it is in life."

Lynds said that if you've written a great tale and finish it with an ending "commensurate with its length and weightiness," you'll find your readers will not only love what you've written, "they'll hunger for your next book."

## Bad Habit #3: Too Much Telling, Not Enough Showing

We all know the conventional rule of writing *show, don't tell.* The CraftFest authors, however, went beyond this general prohibition and identified some specific show-don't-tell problems they've observed in manuscripts. They also gave tips on how to avoid telling, not showing.

Linwood Barclay, the #1 international bestselling author of a dozen novels, including the highly anticipated, "A Tap on the Window" (Aug. 2013), said a mistake he's seen, and one he's made himself, is "having major plot developments happen 'off camera.' You don't want someone showing up and saying, "That time-bomb we were worried about? It just went off in Tuscaloosa."



Barclay's advice: "As much as possible, put your main character where the action is. Don't have her hear about someone finding a body. Let her be the one who finds the body. This heightens the suspense, gets your protagonist fully involved in the story. Best of all, you're showing the reader what happened, not telling. Get your hero to Tuscaloosa. She may not disarm the bomb in time, but she'll sure see what happens."

Catherine Coulter, the author of this month's hot release, "Bombshell," and more than sixty other *New York Times* bestsellers, identified the misuse of dialogue tags as the biggest problem she sees in manuscripts. "Dialogue followed by: he snorted, he gasped, she wailed, he gritted, she panted, he rasped, he complimented (common and grammatically wrong) and on and on. In addition, after dialogue, a 'said' followed by an adverb, e.g., she said haltingly, he said enthusiastically, she said cruelly, he said bitterly, and on and on."

The Fix: "Use 'said' or nothing at all. There are no synonyms for 'said.' It is merely an identifier. If you don't need to identify the speaker, use nothing, or some physical action, e.g., he walked to the window, then dialogue. By using an adjective in the place of said or tacking an adverb onto said, you aren't trusting that what you've written will tell the reader how the character is feeling."

**Stanley Trollip**, the co-author of the exceptional *Detective Kubu* mysteries with Michael Sears (under the name Michael Stanley), agreed that too much telling is the main problem he sees in

the work of newer writers. "When a new character is introduced, if the writer includes a long description of the character's background, how the character looks, and so on, that is telling. The effect of this telling is to break the flow of the story and, usually, to slow the action down. Similarly, descriptions of locations can disrupt the flow, detracting from the tension of the

story."

As for how to tell, not show, the award-winning author of "Deadly Harvest" advised, "Almost always, the information a writer provides when telling the reader something can be incorporated into the action, into the dialog, or into how characters behave." Trollip gave the following paragraph as an example: As she walked home, Lesego's head was full of Christmas. She knew her sister would save some of her tips and buy her a small present. Lesego had no money, so she was making Dikeledi a doily from scraps of red material left over from her needlework class. She was trying to embroider 'Dikeledi' across it in blue, but she'd made the first letters too big, and the whole word wouldn't fit neatly. She frowned. She was going to have to start it again.



"This probably leaves the reader with the impression that Lesego and Dikeledi are poor, that they are close, and that Lesego was young. But nowhere does it say those things. That is showing rather than telling."



## Bad Habit #4: Lack of Structure

**Steve Berry**, this year's ITW Silver Bullet Award recipient whose books are staples on the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists, said a lack of structure is "a common flaw in nearly every new manuscript I read." At CraftFest, Berry teaches a class titled, "The 6 C's of Story Structure," which include Character, Conflict, Crucible, Complications, Crisis, and Conclusion. "All six of these have to be created, developed, and resolved at precise points in the story. A failure to do that creates a snowball effect, one that cascades uncontrollably into an avalanche of problems. It's like building a house. No matter how elegant, fancy, or clever the walls and decor ultimately are, if the foundation is not laid right underneath the whole thing will eventually crumble to the ground. I'm not saying that my writing is perfect on this. I make my share of mistakes, too. But I can say that I'm aware of structure and work hard to adhere. Many new writers today tend to ignore it."

Berry's advice on how to address the problem: "Unfortunately, there is only one way. Study your genre. See how writers

structure their stories. Both the good ones and the bad. In fact, you can learn a lot more from the bad. Then write. After that, write some more. And keep writing and studying every day. The process never ends. I've been at it for twenty-three years and learn something new every day. All any writer can ever hope for is what they write today is better than yesterday, and what they write tomorrow will be better than today. That's about as good as it gets."

Leonardo Wild, the celebrated writer of eleven books and more than two-hundred articles (and ITW's only member in Ecuador), said the biggest problems he sees is "a lack of understanding of what a scene is, how it is structured, and what are its functions within a story." He said a first step is "to realize that there is no scene without three meta-elements: (1) Setting: where and when does a particular scene happen? (2) Characters: who are the characters that appear in the scene? (3) Conflict: what is the nature of the *main* conflict in a particular scene? Is it a physical conflict? A mental conflict? An emotional conflict?"





## Bad Habit #5: No Unique Voice

**Jenny Milchman**, one of this year's breakout debut authors, said, "Over and over I read a fine, workaday manuscript, only to be left wanting. What's missing is the writer's unique voice, style, and take on a novel. There are hundreds of thousands of novels out there. Our decision to try and add another is warranted only by our willingness to be daring, to take a leap into uncharted territory. When I read, I want to find something new. I want to *feel* something new. Give me that, and your novel will find its way."

Milchman's three tips: "(1) Identify the books that have moved you the most and ask why; (2) practice entering a meditative state in which the voice telling you to play it safe is quieted; and (3) envision your novel as a movie and write each scene as if it were appearing before you on the screen. When you describe something—instead of being in that state of trying to be a writer—you sometimes bypass your inner editor and take off."

Brandt Dodson, the author of the acclaimed Sons of Jude and Colton Parker series, said that "the most common problem

I've seen when reviewing manuscripts from newer writers is the lack of originality in the plot. I've seen two manuscripts in the last month alone in which the climactic moment is defined by the protagonist attempting to decide which wire to cut when defusing a bomb. Really?" Dodson's recommendation: "Read widely and read deeply. And don't be afraid to read outside your genre. Some foreknowledge of what's already been done can go a long way toward being original."



## Bad Habit #6: Diminishing a Character's Status

**Steven James**, a critic's favorite and author of this month's must-read release, "The King," said a problem he's seen involves writers inadvertently lowering the main character's "status." What does he mean by status? "Well, in nearly every social encounter one person has, or is vying for, the higher status, or the more dominant position. By allowing the main character to become too submissive, too cold and unfeeling, or too weak and gimpy you can make the reader start to cheer for someone other than your hero."

James's guidance: "Remember that showing compassion and exhibiting self-control will always raise your character's status. So, if she is being tortured and screams out for help—low status. But if

she clenches her teeth and refuses to cry out, higher status. If your detective arrives at a crime scene and scoffs and coldly assesses the facts—low status (he's not showing compassion). If he treats the dead with dignity and respect it raises his status. Show higher status by letting your character slow down—stillness is power. Also, choose verbs that portray self-control (he strode into the room) rather than the need for attention (she sashayed into the room, or she strutted across the room). Allow your hero to act heroic by letting him sacrifice for the good of people who are oppressed (emotionally, physically, financially, etc.), letting him turn the other cheek, and showing how he is not easily rattled."

## Bad Habit #7: Too Much Backstory

The seventh bad habit of newer writers is perhaps the most recurring: too much backstory. Nearly half of the CraftFest instructors I interviewed identified this as the main problem they see in manuscripts. For instance, **Karen Dionne**, the author of the exciting environmental thriller, "Boiling Point," and a member of ITW's Board, said "the most common mistakes I see in manuscripts from new writers are overexplaining, and including too much backstory in the opening pages." Dionne's answer: "Trust the reader. Don't explain every detail, and watch out for instances where you've said essentially the same thing twice. Remove all instances of backstory in the opening pages so that your story raises questions instead of answering them."



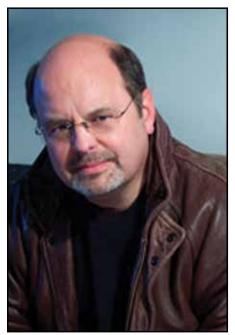
Other CraftFest teachers—James Bruno, Lincoln Child, JT Ellison, Jamie Freveletti, Andrew Kaplan, Douglas Preston, and Alexandra Sokoloff—also offered some great advice on how to avoid the backstory problem. So much so, that I'm dedicating next month's edition solely to addressing their views on backstory. Until then, want to learn more from these and other masters of suspense? Head over to CraftFest in New York on July 10-11. It could change your (writing) life. •

\*Anthony J. Franze is the author of the debut legal thriller, "The Last Justice." In addition to his writing, Anthony is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a major Washington, D.C. law firm and an adjunct professor of law. Anthony is active in the International Thriller Writers association where he Co-Chairs ITW's Debut Authors Program and is the Assistant Managing Editor of the Big Thrill magazine. Anthony lives in the D.C. area with his wife and three children. Learn more about Anthony at <a href="https://www.anthonyfranzebooks.com">www.anthonyfranzebooks.com</a>.

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By John Gilstrap Press Photo Credit: Amy Cesal



GOOD MORNING, EVERYONE. WELCOME TO BAD GUY BOOT CAMP. Please take your seats so we can get started. Yes, it's good to see you, too, Dr. Lecter. What's that? Oh, no thanks. While your snack looks delicious, I'm still full from breakfast.

Um, Mr. Morgan? Dexter? Please don't sit so close to Dr. Lecter. Okay, I'm pleased that you'd like to get to know him better, but you can do that after the session. The lounge downstairs has a very nice wine list. I recommend the Chianti.

Let's get right to it, shall we? I think I speak for all of us when I say that I'm sick and tired of the good guys getting all the credit in fiction. Without us, all those stories would be pretty darned boring and I think that...

Um, Mr. Dolarhyde, please turn off the camera. We don't allow filming of these sessions, and I believe you know why. Thank you.

As I was saying, I think it's about time that we started taking more pride in our work. For me, it's about craftsmanship and respect. For example—and please take no offense—several of you were taken down by a quadriplegic detective. I mean, really. That's embarrassing. Yes, we all know that it's the hot chick doing all the leg work (no

pun intended), but the quad is the headline, and that makes us all look bad.

Let's start at the beginning. If you're going to be a bad guy, be a freaking bad guy. Do your crimes, get them over with, and quit making it so easy for the good guys. If we frustrate those detectives enough, they'll quit being so glib.

Let's start with you serial killers. I know you're crazy and all, but try to stay focused on the goal here: sexual gratification through unspeakable mutilation. Everything else is secondary. You've got to quit it with the notes and clues. I know that for some of you, the creative process requires spewing DNA, and I suppose you gotta do what you gotta do, but how about leaving that as your only direct pathway to arrest? It's about risk management. In a perfect world, you should keep all your body juices to yourself—but for heaven's sake, do without the notes and the videos.



And here's a suggestion for everyone: Stay out of Miami, Vegas, and New York. They've got CSI teams there that are unlike any I've ever seen. As some of you know all too well, they've got a hundred percent catch ratio, and the average time from incident to arrest is only an hour. Really, an hour. I recommend keeping to the heartland, where all the local police are incompetent and depend exclusively on the FBI or on passing private investigators to get anything done.

Any questions? Okay, great.

Let's move on to marksmanship and gunplay. Folks, as a group, we really need to sign up for some NRA courses to learn how to shoot. I notice a trend developing in which you're very accurate at the beginning of your crime spree, but then something happens once the star sleuths get involved. Folks, you've got to settle down and shoot straight. When you whiff the shot and hit within inches of your target—and we do that a lot—we end up alerting the good guys to our presence, and we lose our advantage.

Look, the odds are already stacked against us as it is. The good guys are on the opposite talent trajectory from us. They tend to whiff their shots the first time we run into them, but then get better toward the end of our relationship. Many of them have weapons that never need reloading, cell phones that operate everywhere, all the time, and an uncanny ability to fight on even while critically wounded. We need to close the deal on these folks the first time we see them.

Here's the key: When in doubt, shoot. If the moment comes when you're muzzle to muzzle with the good guy, don't negotiate, shoot. Why do you care if he drops his gun? You're a bad guy. Act like one. Just pop him. Same goes when you have the good guy captured and immobilized. Why are you tying him up to begin with?

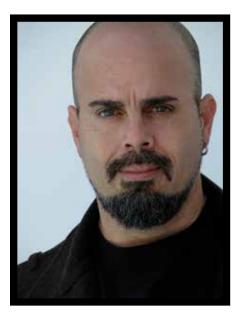
Sorry, Dexter, that doesn't apply to you. But, unlike most of the others in the room, you put the ropes and knots to good use. The rest of you use that opportunity to chat. For crying out loud, quit doing that! Let the SOB go to his grave wondering why you're doing what you're doing. That can all be part of the torture.

Yes, Dr. Moriarty, you have a question?

Actually, I'm not sure I agree that murders have become less civilized over the years. You should bring that up with Lizzie Borden during her lunchtime keynote this afternoon....

To learn more about New York Times bestselling author, John Gilstrap, and his popular Jonathan Graves thrillers, visit his website at <a href="http://johngilstrap.com">http://johngilstrap.com</a>.

# 3 Werewolves Walk into a Bar



By Christopher Buehlman Press Photo Credit: Becca McCoy 2011

Three werewolves walk into a bar.

The bartender says, "What'll you have?"

The first werewolf bites the barman's cheek off. The second disembowels him. The third rips off his leg and goes howling down the street with it.

As the poor man screams and thrashes, dying horribly, a nun, a midget, and a sailor walk into the same bar.

The midget says, "Oh, shit, sorry we're late..."

Even if it isn't comedy gold, I think that gruesome little nugget allows a glimpse at the shared DNA of comedy and horror, which I believe to be something like fraternal twins—perhaps not identical, but more alike than not.

I propose to discuss this relationship not as an expert of any kind but perhaps as something more than an interested observer. I am a comedian. And I write horror. All three of the novels I have penned so far are horrific to one degree or another, but two of them could also be called historical fiction and the third blurs into dark fantasy. Even "Those Across the River," the first and arguably the grimmest, uses humor to offset moments of terror, and even the lightest one, "The Necromancer's House," has plenty of moments sure to generate nightmares for those prone to such.

So where did this duality start for me? At the beginning, I suppose.

A plastic tub of old comics and magazines from the 1970s sits in my garage. I didn't have the foresight to sleeve them in plastic; the silverfish had a good go at them in their cardboard box before I tubbed them. We can, if we wish, sort this collection of gently nibbled childhood reading into two distinct stacks: Stack one is the most homogenous—almost entirely Mad Magazine, with cameos by Crazy, Cracked, and National Lampoon. The second stack includes dozens of titles: Creepy, Eerie, Werewolf by Night, Weird War, Secrets of the Haunted House, The Witching Hour, Chamber of Chills, you get the idea.

Horror and comedy, comedy and horror.

I was about eight years old when I saw my first episode of *Soap*, the brilliant spoof of daytime television that gave Billy Crystal his big break. I didn't know what to make of it then, and I haven't seen it since (If you have it recorded, come by tonight—I'll open a bottle), but I found it macabre, funny, disturbing, and utterly fascinating; I sensed that I was seeing into the adult world in a way I never had. My parents understood that the dark business going on was unthreatening, just a joke, but I was too unfamiliar with the basic ideas to appreciate their parody. I was alone with my sense of wonder and discomfort.

I'm no scholar in the field of human behavior, but I'll reference one; Desmond Morris noted the relationship between alarm and laughter, and I think he got it right. (That's the end of Desmond Morris's involvement here; the following observations are mine alone and it is to me that you may direct any accusations of pseudo-science or bullshittery. We're just talking here.)

So let's talk about the pratfall, from *prat* for ass and *fall* as in 'a dynamic surrender to gravity.' When someone falls down, there's a moment of assessment, isn't there? We need to know that nobody got hurt. Not *really* hurt, anyway. If we're watching collisions and spills on *Jackass* or *Tosh 3.0*, we're free to laugh immediately because the scenes have been vetted. Nobody died, right? But a car accident, live or taped, isn't funny, not to people I'll hang out with, anyway.

When someone has a physical accident in real life, we suss out the event in seconds, factoring in the victim's age, the velocity, the presence or absence of visible injury. If everything checks out, i.e., if the youngish or well-padded person has fallen on his or her ass, we release our anxiety in a simian bark of reassurance that feels good. *Really* good. And the more of us laughing together, the better we feel. Laughter is shared relief, and we tend to like people we laugh with a little more for having laughed with them.

Horror (recreational horror as opposed to the revulsion we feel when witnessing another's injury, or the pants-shitting terror we feel watching our own doom come for us) is also a kind of relief. Different palates have different preferences—I don't usually enjoy serial-killer or terrorist fiction because that stuff really happens and, if you're going to take me there, you'd better have a point. *The Strangers*, a film about a brutal home invasion, remains unwatched on my horror shelf despite the compelling cover that made me impulse-buy it from a dying Blockbuster.

Werewolves, though? They're pure fun. I willingly visit the place where I find werewolves scary because I am safely bungeed to a perception of reality wherein people (probably) don't actually sprout hair and fangs when the moon waxes full. Where does this monster come from? Maybe it's a vestige of the shape-shifting tales of older shamanic religions that were trampled by Christianity.

I suspect the werewolf myth has some relationship to alcoholism; if you've ever woken up bleary, unable to remember going to bed, unable to find your (shirt, phone, Hush Puppy), wondering where all that (dirt, glitter, nacho cheese) came from, and hoping you haven't said anything *too* horrible to your (boss, wife, boss's wife), it's not a far stretch to empathize with the bewilderment of victims of lycanthropy awakening from unremembered full-moon tomfoolery.

Another, darker possibility is that the werewolf story was, from its very beginnings, an attempt to fabulize real-life monsters. In the late sixteenth century, German serial killer Peter Stubbe (or Stumpf) was condemned for witchcraft and brutally tortured and executed; I'll spare you the details, but there's a very graphic contemporary woodcut about the whole thing if you're interested.

He confessed to killing more than a dozen people, including two pregnant women and his own infant son, while in the guise of a monster. He confessed that the devil had given him a magical belt that let him become a hideous wolf, and that he had committed his fell deeds on four legs. Perhaps he convinced himself this was true; it will have been easier for all concerned to blame his nightmarish behavior on external devils than internal ones.

Over time, Peter Stubbe's real-life tragedy in Bedburg, Germany fades and what remains is the killer's fantasy, a fantasy with practical applications. Telling your children not to go far into the woods alone is as old as children and woods, and it's much more safe, and even entertaining, to give them fantastical explanations. A werewolf will eat you, a witch will cook you in her oven, Faeries will lead you away with magic lights and keep you for themselves.

When children are young enough to believe these things are real, they also believe their parents are demigods, able to protect them from anything. By the time they doubt their parents, they doubt the monsters, too. But they still tell the stories because it recalls the hearth, the early fear and wonder experienced safely, indoors, with a strong father's gun or axe close at hand.

Horror is fun because we know it's pretend, and when we pretend with someone else, we grow closer. Horror, like comedy, is best enjoyed in a packed theater. The shared laugh and the shared gasp are improved by amplification. They're both social events that tie us to the group, and put us all *on the same side*.

If comedy is short-circuited horror, then horror fiction is its dilution, its ineffectual but satisfying vaccine. Both are best enjoyed with others, and both are a welcome vacation from routine.

I said earlier that I'm no scholar in the field of human behavior, but I'm not sure that's entirely correct. I write horror novels now, but, for the past twenty years, I have made my living comedically insulting people for money as Christophe the Insultor, verbal mercenary. I've preserved my career (and my natural teeth) by reading people, finding their line, and putting my toes on it, but not over it.

I say really awful, extreme things in my act: ugly babies are stuffed back in wombs, adolescents masturbate so vigorously their fathers use them to trim hedges, etc. All of these things are verbal crashes of a sort, rendered low-velocity by consent. It's a consent engineered by an observed exchange of money that strips me of malefic intent, despite the absurd violence of the images.

One black-iced patch of road in rough humor, as Daniel Tosh found out, is rape, and I think this subject fails so often and so spectacularly to be funny precisely because it isn't safe. It has living victims. The same is true of racial humor. The joke fails among even modestly enlightened individuals because, except in the rarest circumstances in the hands of the most finely tuned comedians (i.e. those who know how to subtly turn the force of the "joke" against the aggressor, which can be done, as can underwater escapes—just ask Houdini), the audience is robbed of the shared sense of relief.

If you create an actual victim, any decent group of human beings is collectively horrified for real, and your rollercoaster just turned into a car crash.

If mishandled, humor turns scary, and poor horror stumbles into unintentional comedy. We don't have to reach all the way back to Ed Wood to see examples of that: M. Night Shymalan, who started strong with *The Sixth Sense*, eventually gave us *The Happening*, a story about waves of people spontaneously killing themselves because...well, I'll let you rent that one on B-movie night to find out for yourself. Suffice it to say that this "happening" is happening on such a large scale that authorities can't think of anything to blame but terrorism. The audience knows it's not terrorism, though. Something new and horrifying has been visited upon mankind, and nothing will ever be the same.

I went in with high hopes—I love apocalyptic horror as long as the antagonist is improbable. Invoking the improbable without stumbling into the absurd is no easy task, however. In the course of *The Happening*, a man suffering the effects of the phenomenon flings himself into a lion pit at the zoo. He offers a lioness his arm, which she obligingly paws off for him. A wide-eyed observer says, with tongue nowhere near cheek, "What kind of terrorists *are* these?" What kind, indeed! I laughed behind my fist, quietly but hard, so hard tears came to my eyes.

I bring up this film not to use Mr. Shymalan as a punching bag—he really has produced some good moments in film (remember the birthday party scene in *Signs?*)—but because I had a unique experience watching *The Happening*; I genuinely didn't know if I was watching a horror film or a comedy. The lion thing was so over the top that I considered the possibility that our friend M. Night had played a huge joke on us; that he had given us a black comedy where he had advertised a horror film. Genius! I perked up in my seat, waiting for the next laugh.

Alas, my theory didn't stand up. This was not genius disguised as mediocrity; it was unadorned mediocrity in full roar. It became increasingly clear that the script had been written on the fly (John Leguizamo, a fine actor who did the best job anyone could do with this material, said in an interview that the actors were given each day's script the night before), and our heroes staggered from happening to happening until the film happened to end.

But when humor and horror are artfully blended? That's my favorite flavor. If you're thinking of *An American Werewolf in London*, I like you better already. When director John Landis intended to frighten us, he did so; the image of the monster rounding the corner at the bottom of the escalator in the London tube still gives me goose bumps. We know the poor man with the briefcase and umbrella isn't going to make it, and that, despite the whirring machinery all around him, he has found himself alone with a primal killer in what amounts to an abandoned cave.

But when Landis meant to make us laugh, he nailed that, too. The next morning, this same werewolf, naked and in human form, hides behind a bush negotiating with a little British boy for balloons with which to cover his shame. I was twelve when my dad took me to see *Werewolf*, and it was like a revelation. I had no idea that horror and comedy could actually be layered together like some kind of lasagna, the laughs setting you up for scares, the scares making you ready to laugh.

It was as if the ingredients I hadn't been able to grasp in *Soap* had been used in a way that made sense to me. My dad was next to me, laughing when I laughed, jumping when I jumped, his axe and gun, figuratively speaking, standing quite near the well-bolted door.

That was a good night. •

Christopher Buehlman is an itinerant comedian and novelist. His third book is "The Necromancer's House" (2013).

## Forensic Fles



## MEDICAL MALPRACTICE IN MYSTERIES & TURILLERS



By D.P. Lyle, MD Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Too often, fiction writers commit medical malpractice in their stories. Unfortunately, these mistakes can sink an otherwise well-written story. The ones I repetitively see include:

## BANG, BANG, YOU'RE DEAD:

Not so fast. No one dies instantly. Well, almost no one. Instant death can occur with heart attacks, strokes, extremely abnormal heart rhythms, cyanide, and a few other "metabolic" poisons. But trauma, such as gunshot wounds (GSWs) and blows to the head, rarely cause sudden death. Yet, how often has a single shot felled a villain? Bang, dead. For that to occur, the bullet would have to severely

damage the brain, the heart, or the cervical (neck) portion of the spinal cord. A shot to the chest or abdomen leads to a lot of screaming and moaning, but death comes from bleeding and that takes time. Sometimes, a long time.

Ask any emergency physician or nurse. GSW victims reach the ER with multiple holes in their bodies and survive all the time. This is particularly true if it's Friday night (we called it the Friday Night Knife and Gun Club), during a full moon (yes, it's true, a full moon changes everything), or if the victim is drunk. You can't kill a drunk. That's a medical fact. They survive everything from car wrecks to gunshots to falling off tall buildings. The family van they hit head-on will have no survivors, but the drunk will walk away with minor scratches, if that.

## SLEEPING BEAUTY:

I call this the "Hollywood Death." Calm, peaceful, and not a hair out of place. As if simply asleep. Blood? Almost never. Trauma? None in sight. The deceased is nicely dressed, stretched out on a wrinkle-free bed, make-up perfect, and with a slight flutter of the eyelids if you look closely. Real dead folks are not so attractive. I don't care what they looked like during life; in death they are pale, waxy, and gray. Their eyes do not flutter and they do not look relaxed and peaceful. They look dead. And feel cold. It's amazing how quickly after death the body becomes cold to the touch. It has to do with the loss of blood flow to the skin after the heart stops. No warm blood, no warmth to the touch.

Sleeping Beauty also doesn't bleed. You know this one. The hero detective arrives at a murder scene a half hour after the deed to see blood oozing from the corpse's mouth or from the GSW to the chest. Tilt! Dead folks don't bleed. You see, when you die, your heart stops and the blood no longer circulates. It clots. Stagnant or clotted blood does not move. It does not gush or ooze or gurgle or flow or trickle from the body.

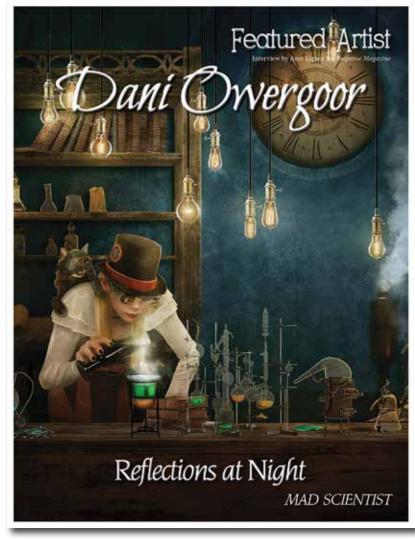
## TRAUMA? WHAT TRAUMA?:

You've seen and read this a million times. The hero socks the bad guy's henchman in the jaw. He goes down and is apparently

written out of the script, since we never hear from him again. It's always the henchman, because the antagonist, like most people, requires a few solid blows to go down. Think about a boxing match. Two guys that are trained to inflict damage and even they have trouble knocking each other out. And when they do, the one on his back is up in a couple of minutes, claiming the other guy caught him with a lucky punch. Listen to me: Only James Bond can knock someone out with a single blow. And maybe Jack Reacher or Mike Tyson. A car-salesman-turned-amateur-sleuth cannot.

And what of black eyes? If a character gets whacked in the eye in Chapter 3, he will have a black eye for two weeks, which will likely take you through the end of the book. He will not be "normal" in two days. A black eye is a contusion (bruise) and results from blood leaking into the tissues from tiny blood vessels, which are injured by the blow. It takes the body about two weeks to clear all that out. It will darken over two days, fade over four or five, turn greenish, brownish, and a sickly yellow before it disappears. On a good note, by about day seven, a female character might be able to hide it with makeup.

Similarly, what of the character that falls down the stairs and injures his back? He will not be able to run from or chase the bad guy or make love to his new lover the next day. He will need a few days (or maybe weeks) to heal. And he will limp, whine, and complain in the interim. And if he breaks something, like an arm or leg, he'll need several weeks to recover.



## I CAN RUN, AND JUMP, AND FIGHT LIKE AN OLYMPIAN:

The typical fictional PI (maybe real ones, too) drinks too much, smokes too much, and eats donuts on a regular basis. He is not training for the Olympics. He will not be able to chase the villain for ten blocks. Two on a good day. And hills or stairs will reduce that to a very short distance. Yet, chase montages in movies and books often seem to cover marathon distances. And then a fight breaks out.

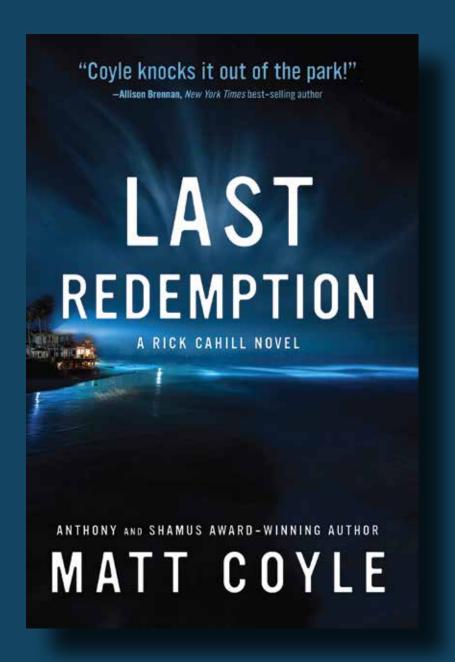
Of course, some characters can do all this. Not the PI mentioned above, but maybe Dustin Hoffman can. Remember "Babe" Levy (Dustin Hoffman) in *Marathon Man*? He had to run for his life as Dr. Christian Szell (Sir Laurence Olivier) and his Nazi bad guys chased him endlessly. But early in the film we learn that he runs around the reservoir in Central Park everyday. He constantly tries to increase his distance, improve his time. He *could* run for his life.

Hopefully when you run across medical malpractice in your reading, you'll be forgiving and enjoy the story anyway. But maybe not. ■

D. P. LYLE is the Amazon #1 Bestselling; Macavity and Benjamin Franklin Award-winning; and Edgar(2), Agatha, Anthony, Shamus, Scribe, and USA Today Best Book(2) Award-nominated author of 23 books, both non-fiction and fiction, including the Samantha Cody, Dub Walker, Jake Longly and Cain/Harper thriller series and the Royal Pains media tie-in novels. His essay on Jules Verne's THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND appears in THRILLERS: 100 MUST READS, his short story "Even Steven" in ITW's anthology THRILLER 3: LOVE IS MURDER, and his short story "Bottom Line" in FOR THE SAKE OF THE GAME. He served as editor for and contributed the short story "Splash" to SCWA's anthology IT'S ALL IN THE STORY.

He hosts the Crime Fiction Writer's Blog and the Criminal Mischief: The Art and Science of Crime Fiction podcast series. He has worked with many novelists and with the writers of popular television shows such as Law & Order, CSI: Miami, Diagnosis Murder, Monk, Judging Amy, Peacemakers, Cold Case, House, Medium, Women's Murder Club, 1-800-Missing, The Glades, and Pretty Little Liars.

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"Contemporary
hard-boiled Pl
novels don't get
any better
than this."

-PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (STARRED REVIEW)



## 10 Years of ThrillerFest— THE MASTERS SPEAK

By Kimberley Howe Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Ten years ago, the first ThrillerFest launched in Phoenix, Arizona. Since this inaugural event, the International Thriller Writers organization has grown exponentially, and the NYC-based conference now annually hosts 1,000 thriller enthusiasts from across the globe. The presentation of a lifetime achievement accolade called the "ThrillerMaster Award" is the pinnacle of our weeklong gathering. Ten iconic authors have received this award, and we wanted to check in with these masters of suspense to explore their views of the thriller genre.

## 2006 CLIVE CUSSLER

Our first ThrillerMaster's adventure novels introduced readers to a spectacular underwater world of treasures, taking us on Dirk Pitt's journeys into the ocean's depths. In

this case, fiction mirrored reality, as the California-born Cussler founded a non-profit organization called NUMA—National Underwater & Marine Agency—where his marine experts have discovered over 60 historically significant wreck sites.

Akin to his NUMA submarine, Clive constantly resurfaces on the top of the bestseller lists, and feels that the thriller genre will go "nowhere but up." An avid collector of classic automobiles, Clive now divides his time between the mountains of Colorado and the deserts of Arizona. When asked

about the proudest moment in his career, he quips, "When they burned my books in a parking lot in Georgia." This master of thrills has plans for more adventures, and we look forward to fastening our seatbelts for the entertaining ride.



## 2007 JAMES PATTERSON

Prolific is the key word when it comes to our second ThrillerMaster James Patterson who has created a dynasty of series characters, including the iconic Alex Cross. When asked what project he is currently working on, Jim responds, "That would be projects, plural. It's like plotlines, you know? If you only have one going you're falling down on the job. Let's see—I am at work putting into various degrees of peril the lives of characters whose last names are Boxer, Bennett, Grimm, Ride, Morgan, Khatchadorian, Jordan, MacDonald, Kidd, and Cross to name a few. And then there are some TV shows and movies coming. And some science fiction, some mystery, some mice." Needless to say, Patterson fans will have plenty of titles to choose from on their next foray

to the bookstore.

Jim's seamless prose and short chapters have captured a new generation of admirers, but his proudest moment rests closer to home, as he eloquently shares what matters to him most: "Helping my son Jack to become a reader. That ability of ours as writers to turn other people into readers—that is where the real payday is, here and in heaven. I really believe that. Helping people become readers is nothing short of holy work. We should feel very good about it."

## 2008 SANDRA BROWN

Texas-born Sandra Brown has written over 70 books, tackling challenging subjects with great depth and insight, and breaking ground in what had traditionally been a testosterone-laden field. "As the first woman writer to be honored as ThrillerMaster, I felt I shared the recognition with all the other women who had dared write, and succeed, in a male-dominated genre. I considered it a breakthrough, a firm stamp of approval, for all of us."

One of the proudest moments in Sandra's career touches on education. "I didn't finish college, so being given a Doctorate of Humane Letters by TCU was incredibly gratifying. I never thought I'd be addressed as Dr. Brown!"

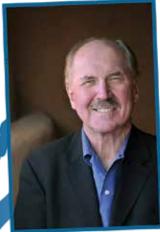
Sandra's fans will be thrilled to hear that her word processor never takes a holiday. "There's always a novel in some stage of completion—somewhere between the first notes and the final draft." This sought-after television hostess feels that "the thriller genre will remain healthy for a long time to come. After all, it's thrived for thousands of years. Stories

told in caves were about derring-do, good versus evil, struggling to survive against formidable

foes. ITW has refined and more clearly defined the genre, but a hero in peril has been at the heart of a good story forever.

That will never go out of style."





## 2009 DAVID MORRELL

Few authors have created a character with a name that transcends cultures, languages, and entertainment mediums, like David Morrell's Rambo. Our favorite professor is well known for his trailblazing tales, always exploring new territory. "This is my 43<sup>rd</sup> year as an author. With each decade, I tried a different way of writing action and suspense. The 1980s were my espionage years, for example, with 'The Brotherhood of the Rose' trilogy. Recently, my unhappiness with the modern world prompted me to write about the fogbound streets of 1850s London and one of the most sensational personalities of the era, the opium-eater Thomas De Quincey. He and those fogbound streets still fascinate me, but when they don't, I'll move on."

It may surprise and comfort writers across the world when David shares, "Self-doubt is one of my constant emotions. At the start of each writing session, I tell myself that yesterday's work could have been a whole lot better, and I often rewrite a scene many different ways before I decide that I reached the limit of what I can do with it. Writing brings fulfillment, yes, but mostly

it brings frustration. There are always more choices and better ways to do something. What I took from the ThrillerMaster honor that ITW bestowed on me is that my self-doubt was the right attitude to have, that readers appreciated the extra effort I put in." And, if the long lines at David's ThrillerFest signings are any indication, his fans agree that his perfectionism pays off in spades.

## 2010 KEN FOLLETT

Ken Follett has had phenomenal success in the spy genre, but he has been equally successful writing historical sagas. He shares the moment that stands out the most in his illustrious career, "A few days ago, my accountant told me that we have now sold 25 million copies of "The Pillars of the Earth." I can hardly believe it."

Fans of Ken's espionage novels will be excited to hear that his "next book is a spy story set in the sixteenth century. Many people, including the Pope and the kings of Spain and France, wanted to kill Queen Elizabeth I of England. She set up the first British secret service, under Sir Francis Walsingham. He had spies and secret agents in every European capital, sending him information in coded letters. Quite modern!"



Ken is also a talented teacher, sharing his analysis of the genre. "Thrillers are about people in danger. The type of danger changes, but the excitement remains. I expect we will all come up with new perils for our heroes to experience in the future. But suspense will always be a great motor for a story."



## **2011 R.L. STINE**

Known for his delightful sense of humor, Bob Stine deadpans, "Anyone who knows me knows that I HATE all honors and recognition. I don't like attention. I prefer to sit alone in my apartment in total obscurity. And anyone who knows me knows that what I just said was a complete lie. I was truly honored to be named ThrillerMaster by the most popular and successful thriller authors in the country. As one of the few children's authors in ITW, it meant an awful lot to me to be accepted and honored in that way."

Reflecting on his incredible career, selling more than 350 million books, Bob shares, "I'm lucky. I have so many wonderful moments. Being the bestselling author in America for three years was certainly a thrill... Having the #1 kids' TV show...having my own *Goosebumps* attraction in Disney World...amazing book tours in Australia and China—these all come to mind. But what I am most proud of is the millions of kids all over the world who discovered the joy of reading from my books."

And Bob's upcoming projects promise more spine-tingling tales. "I'm still turning out *Goosebumps* books, now in its 23rd year. The *Goosebumps* movie, starring Jack Black as ME, will be released in October. I have revived my YA *Fear Street* series and am writing six new *Fear Street* novels. And my first-ever picture book (with art by the wonderful Marc Brown of *Arthur* fame) will be released in August."

## **2012 JACK HIGGINS**

A former soldier and teacher, Jack Higgins is one of two ThrillerMasters from the U.K. His proudest career moment was back in 1975 when he "sold the first million copies of 'The Eagle Has Landed,' which seemed incredible." And the demand for this spy thriller has never waned. "I would never have imagined that it would have been selling as solidly as it has done in the last 12 months."

Known for his gritty, realistic storytelling, Jack reflects, "I have handled international terrorism from both the American and British point of view and have now taken no pleasure in the fact that the events in 'Rain On The Dead' seem to be happening for real whenever you look at a newspaper."

Jack feels history is repeating itself, and this element will be echoed in the thriller genre. "Years ago, because of my military service during the Cold War, I did not think it would come to the surface again, and yet Putin seems to think otherwise. So, I reckon the interest for a contemporary thriller writer is the resurgence of the Cold War."





## 2013 ANNE RICE

Anne Rice's books have sold almost 100 million copies, placing her among the most popular authors in American history. When Anne learned that she was to be presented with the ThrillerMaster award she, "was so honored! I felt like a member of something. I was so grateful. To be honored in this way by one's fellow writers. I was overwhelmed."

Fans of Anne's vampire novels, brace yourselves for some spectacular news, as she is, "working on 'Blood Paradise,' a vampire novel involving my hero, Lestat de Lioncourt. It's a big, sprawling 'everything but the kitchen sink' kind of novel."

Asked about the future of thrillers, Anne expounds, "I think the thriller genre is so healthy and vigorous—and so respected—that we will see more and more originality—more experiments in prose style and novel structure, new and different characters no one ever imagined before, inventive stories that baffle and delight, that kind of thing. Once a genre has a strong hold, then the scope broadens, and you have greater and greater variety and more and more surprises."

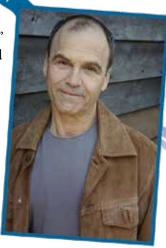
## 2014 SCOTT TUROW

Attorney Scott Turow took the thriller world by storm with his first book, "Presumed Innocent," and has been creating unique characters and compelling stories ever since. "Being honored as ThrillerMaster meant a lot to me. The list of prior honorees meant that I was joining a distinguished lineage. My predecessors are all people I think of as great writers. It is truly humbling to think that I've arrived at a point where I can keep company with authors so distinguished."

Fans of Scott's legal thrillers, take note. He's currently "working on a novel set at the International Criminal Court at The Hague. It focuses on an American lawyer who's thrown over everything in his life to move to The Netherlands and to undertake an investigation of the murder of 1200 Roma in Bosnia in 2004, perhaps by US forces under NATO command."

When asked about the future of the thriller genre, Scott shares, "The thriller in its many forms is the dominant literary mode of the moment, and I see no sign of declining popularity. In fact, self-publishing has brought many burgeoning thriller writers to a reading public that

continues to have a strong appetite for our work. Readers still love a strong story, a protagonist in danger and plenty of surprises for her or him."





## 2015 NELSON DEMILLE

At ThrillerFest X in July, we'll be honoring the talented Nelson DeMille. And what a special moment it will be for him, and all of us, as he shares, "Believe it or not, in 40 years of writing I've never been the recipient of an award, so this is a unique honor."

Our future ThrillerMaster offers some thoughtful insights on the suspense genre. "When I started out in this business in the 1970s, most thriller novels were set against the Cold War, or were novels about post-World War II Nazis up to no good. The world has changed and so has the thriller. Ironically, my first hardcover, 'By the Rivers of Babylon,' was about Islamic terrorism, which was not a common subject in 1978. And now this is a major topic for thriller writers. I sense, however, that the public, and perhaps writers themselves, are getting a bit weary of this topic which we see enough of on the nightly news. My guess is that younger writers will focus on cyberterrorism, and the villains will be China, Russia, or smaller countries with big ambitions and crazy leaders, like North Korea or Iran. Or perhaps

even deranged individuals, who have access to advanced technology. Heroes are easy to create; good villains are more of a challenge, and the better the villain, the better the story."

Sage advice for all authors, aspiring or bestselling. The future of thrillers is as of yet unwritten, and may surprise us all. As ITW co-founder and ThrillerMaster David Morrell explains, "It's impossible to know where the thriller genre is going, but one thing I know is that it's a mistake for authors to chase the market. No one could have predicted the success of Stieg Larsson's 'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo' or Gillian Flynn's 'Gone Girl,' the two major thriller successes after Dan Brown's 'The Da Vinci Code' in 2003. Those books seemed to come out of nowhere and inspired a herd of similarly themed novels. Notice all the unreliable narrators that are suddenly the vogue in thrillers, thanks to Gillian Flynn's example. One mantra I teach my writing students is, 'Be a first-rate version of yourself and not a second-rate version of another author.' The next thriller megaseller will be as unexpected as the titles I just mentioned."

Congratulations to all ten ThrillerMasters on their incredible body of work. We hope that you'll come help us celebrate the past, present, and future of the thriller genre at ThrillerFest in NYC at the Grand Hyatt from July 7-11, 2015!

Kimberley Howe is the Executive Director of ThrillerFest, the annual conference for the International Thriller Writers, and she has the honor of winning three Daphne du Maurier awards for excellence in mystery and suspense. A medical, health, and fitness writer, she also has a Master's in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. Travel and adventure fuel her imagination. She has been cage-diving with Great White sharks in South Africa, raced camels in Jordan, zip-lined in Costa Rica, and interacted with elephants in Botswana. Home is Toronto, Canada, but she is often missing in action. Learn more at: <a href="www.kjhowe.com">www.kjhowe.com</a>.

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## DRIVEN TO THE BRINK:

## My Take on Emotionally Priven Characters

By Vincent Zandri Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Here at *Suspense Magazine* we add a column or two every year, and this year is no different. We decided that it would be cool to pull back the cover of a book and look inside, sort of taking apart an engine and seeing how it works. We call this new section "Craft Corner." We have partnered up with the ITW (International Thriller Writers) and *The Big Thrill* magazine to bring you the very best authors talking about writing, but in a unique way.

In each issue you will be introduced to two authors, many you probably already know, who have been asked a very specific question about writing. This could include, "How do you write such a scary villain?" or "What does it take to create a fictional town?" We wanted you, the fan, to get a look under the hood and see what it really takes to create such fascinating stories.

This month we have two outstanding authors who each have a very unique writing style: Vincent Zandri and Darynda Jones. Vincent's book "Moonlight Weeps" won for best original paperback at the 2015 ThrillerFest conference, and Darynda's *Charley Davidson* series has put her on the *NY Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists. While it's no secret they each know how to write a great story, these authors also share how hard work and lots of imagination are essential in the creation of a bestselling book.

We begin with the very entertaining take on emotionally driven characters by Vincent Zandri.

Mr. John Raab, Publisher, *Suspense Magazine*, to Mr. Vincent Zandri, Noir and Suspense Writer:

"Mr. Zandri, how do you write an emotionally driven character and why is it important?"

What the fuck kind of question is that?

First of all, there's no formula or methodology or academic thesis involved in creating something so elementary yet so integral to the life of a thriller novel as emotion; that's almost like asking how you go about alchemizing human blood from tap water. Then, to follow up with why it's so important, is like asking why oxygen is necessary for life support (if you'll allow me to stretch the human biology analogy even further).

Okay, I'm messing around here at the expense of my good friend, John Raab. But I get a little over-the-top passionate when it comes to discussing the emotive part of the writing craft (tongue in cheek). This probably stems from my two-year tenure at Vermont College earning my coveted MFA in Writing back in the mid-1990s, when emotional character and characterization was frowned upon because it might be construed as, ummmm, entertainment (that nasty 'E' word). Back in those days, when Slick Willy was President and you didn't have to get naked to pass through airport security,

## "If you're not sweating bullets when you're writing a thriller novel, then you're not writing a thriller."

mandated reading involved books like John Hawkes, "The Lime Twig" and Dennis MacFarland's, "The Music Room," both reads brilliantly written in academic terms, but better than Ambien for the chronically sleepless.

Okay, so what did David Foster Wallace who hanged himself to Lana Del Rey's "Born to Die" attest about the modern literary novel and the contemporary reader? Sometimes you gotta work a little when you read, bitch.

Bullshit.

I mean, God rest his soul and all, but saying his stuff doesn't make my putter rise is putting it lightly. Yeah, yeah, the academic, New York Times, read-the-Sunday-edition-in-bed-over-numerous-cups-of-too-expensive-coffee are going to turn their snooty noses up at me. Maybe even call me (Gulp!) crass. But chances are they aren't reading Suspense Magazine anyway and, for certain, the poor hungover bastards they pay to walk their dogs on the Park Avenue sidewalk are far more likely to enjoy a good piece of skin splitting, knife plunging, blood spattering pulp. You know, a novel that boasts characters with real life and death in them. Real excitement and feeling. Why work hard when you wanna have fun?

So back to emotion and Mr. Raab's query.

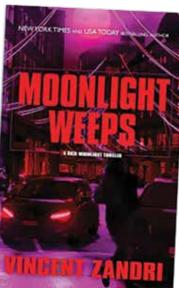
Here's what it comes down to. If you're not sweating bullets when you're writing a thriller novel, then you're not writing a thriller. Get it? Too simplistic an assessment? Listen, suspense thrillers are all about the emotion, the panic, the lust, the hatred, the jealously, the anger, the lonesomeness, the vengeance, the murderous tendencies, the suicidal tendencies, the pathological mania, the need to throw all caution to the wind and jump off that edge of that Hoover Dam into the rushing white water below just because the cops have wrongly accused you of taking a hammer to your wife's beautiful face.

It's not necessarily about how to come up with emotionally driven characters so much as it's about placing ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, and doing so quickly in the first couple of paragraphs of your novel or short story so that the average reader perusing the free sample portion of a Kindle book, while enjoying their morning constitutional, will

> feel like he or she absolutely positively must have this book. After all, chances are their lives are all about the work, TV, bed, and the emotional part of their lives pulled an Elvis and left the building a long time ago.

That said, if you're doing your job as a writer, perhaps you choose to begin a novel told in the first person present as soon as the engines on a passenger

jet inexplicably shut off at thirty-five thousand feet. And bored-to-death reader, if you are doing your job, you're going

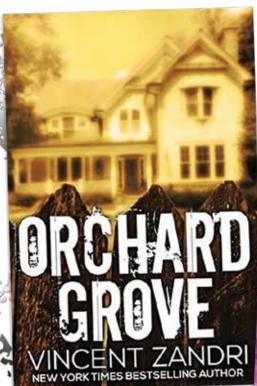


to want to see what happens to our dear narrator next. Now that's a novel that's going to sell. In theory at least. Why? Because it's entertaining (of course, Mr. Foster Wallace, God rest his soul, is still kicking my ass in sales, posthumously...so what the hell do I know?).

So then, that covers the importance of writing emotionally driven characters, but it still seems I'm avoiding the "how to" portion of our program.

Hmmmm, let me think.

I've always been drawn to emotional stories. Stories that scream bloody murder instead of vying for the understated. Allow me to indulge for a moment. When I was a kid,



and I mean a little kid of five or six years old, I spent a lot of time reading the Bible. But not the whole thing. I would skip to the good parts. For instance, I was fascinated with the passion play in the New Testament. I've probably read the Gospels (especially John) that deal with Christ's crucifixion, starting at the Last Supper and Judas's betrayal all the way through to the Resurrection, a thousand times. My mother would read the crucifixion passages while I was enjoying a lunch of bologna sandwiches on Wonder Bread; maybe Twinkies for dessert. My fascination had little to do with religion (although the occult nature of the Bible would come to play a major role later on in my *Chase Baker* action/adventure pulp series, especially my unbelievably stupendous, brilliantly conceived and executed novel, "The Shroud Key"), but instead the drama of it all.

Jesus was an emotional, heroic character. He knew he was going to withstand some of the most agonizing torture in the world, and yet He fully accepted His fate and went through with it anyway. I mean, that's an emotional character. When Mel Gibson filmed *The Passion of the Christ* ten years ago, I truly felt scooped. I'd always wanted to tell that same exact story in novel form, just because it's so compelling, and so full of raw emotion. It's the bitchin' part of the Bible.

But I digress and I owe Mr. Raab at least a semblance of a *how to*. So here goes. If I had to come up with a way to write an emotional character, I would suggest the following (and before anyone starts tossing empty beer cans at my head, this is not meant to be an exhaustive or even accurately presented list).

- 1. Start with your protagonist. He or she or it, must be dealt a very difficult situation, be it the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a life, the world as we know it, a kidnapping, a house burning down all around him, a death sentence, a firing...the list of possible plots goes on and on.
- 2. The character must face insurmountable odds at improving his situation, or at the very least, defusing the situation. In the book I'm working on now, "The Detonator," my protagonist finds himself having to defuse a series of nanothermite bombs that have been planted all over Albany. How is it possible not to interject heightened emotion into his every action, movement, dialogue, thoughts, remembrances, flashbacks?
- 3. The character must be willing to face the problem head on in order to right a great wrong, even if it means he's willing to kill some of the bad guys who get in his way. My *Jack Marconi* and *Dick Moonlight PI* series novels utilize this theme over and over again, and it makes for a very passionate protagonist as well as the characters who surround him, especially the antagonist(s). These are characters who are not only put to the test physically, but again, emotionally as well.
- 4. The character must not be one dimensional. He should be hardnosed but sensitive. He must be willing to love (or hate) without condition, possess a high moral standard and be willing to look failure and/or loss in the face, and still be able to move on with his life. (Even noir antiheros possess a degree of morality, even if that morality is twisted inside out...I.E. There's no doubt in my mind Jeffrey Dahmer possessed a keen sense of right and wrong when it came to the proper methodology behind abducting, incapacitating, torturing, and eventually consuming his victims).
- 5. Above all, the character must be interesting. That means giving his or her life story a richness and a unique quality that other flat characters don't possess. If Robert Parker's Spenser was depicted as a ninety-pound weakling incapable of love and lacking in moral conviction, it probably wouldn't have worked. That sort of thing.

Naturally, someone is going to read this and say, "Hey, what about making an emotionally driven character do this or that, or possess A, B, or C?" And that's fine. I'm just giving you my two cents on the subject. (Please address all critical commentary to Mr. Raab). In essence, for your characters to be emotionally driven to the extent that they not only make you work up a sweat, but they actually cause the pages (or Kindle screen) to heat up in your hands, you have to dig deep down into your soul of souls, and write the most authentic emotionally driven story possible. And then do it over and over again. For your characters, their very essence must be a matter of life or death. And trust me on this one, your readers (if you wish to keep them) won't have it any other way.

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Vincent Zandri is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of "The Remains" and "Orchard Grove." His novel "Moonlight

<u>Weeps</u>" won the 2015 ITW Thriller Award and the 2015 PWA Shamus Award. You can sign up for his "For Your Eyes Only Newsletter" and purchase his books at <u>WWW. VINCENTZANDRI.COM</u>.





## CRAFT CORNER



# HOW TO CREATE THE PERFECT VILLAIN

By Darynda Jones Photo Credit: Provided by Author

First, when creating any character, you need to patch together a few corpses then strap your arts-and-crafts project to a metal gurney and figure out how to channel lightning.

Just kidding!

It's pretty easy to spot the villain in a story. He has a handlebar mustache, and he twirls its curly ends with both hands. Simultaneously!

Okay, just kidding again. By today's standards, mustache guy would make a horrible villain, unless you were to give him a unique reason for that mustache. Perhaps he wears it in homage to his father who was gunned down by your hero's father, a man upon whom your villain has sworn revenge. It's up to your hero to figure out what is going on and save his father, a retired sheriff, before the villain completes his mission. See what I did there? Added depth.

If nothing else, your villain should be as complex a character as your hero. In some cases even more so. I remember reading a book by Karen Rose and being completely floored at the depth and dimension she gave her female villain. She was just as captivating as the heroine. And THAT makes great storytelling.

There are several ways of making sure you have a fantastic, unforgettable villain.

**THE RIGHT FIT:** First, make sure your villain is right for your hero. Can she truly cripple your hero physically, financially, or emotionally? Is he a good opponent? Is she capable of keeping your hero from his goals? Have others in

your hero's circle gone up against your villain and paid dearly for it? We need to know exactly what your villain is capable of. How far he will go to thwart the hero.

**MOTIVE:** Just like in the example above, you can't simply give the reader a mustache-twirling villain with no depth and hope for the best. He needs a reason for trying to shove the hero off a twelve-story balcony. She needs a motive for showing compromising photos of your heroine and their very married boss at the office Christmas party. (And, yes, it was all completely innocent. Your heroine can explain!) Or maybe your villain killed everyone in her sorority in her college days. Why?

The more the writer shows motivation and depth, the more the reader will fall into your story. You will hook your reader with a villain who killed everyone in her sorority for a really good reason, as opposed to just showing the dreadful deed with no explanation. (Note: It doesn't have to be a sane reason, just a good one in your villain's eyes.)

**PERSONALITY:** The same applies to your villain's personality. Is he funny? Is she creepy? Is he sleazy and gag-inducing or sad and strangely sympathetic? Maybe she's a sociopath and was just born "bad." Or perhaps he grew up an orphan and went

# "If nothing else, your villain should be as complex a character as your hero."

from foster home to foster home, each one a little worse than the prior. Creating empathy for the villain can only strengthen your story. He still has to be brought down, but we love it when the writer can get us to like the villain. Or at least care about what happens to her.

**PURPOSE:** What is your villain's true purpose? Is she merely an obstacle for the heroine? Does he represent the struggle your hero is facing in his professional life? Or does the battle with the villain represent the war your heroine is having in her personal life?

One of the greatest villains in recent history, IMHO, is from "Gone Girl." (SPOILERS AHEAD!) As much as we grew to hate Amy (although let's face it, we didn't much like the selfish, cheating Nick either), when she was about to be robbed by that couple at the cabins, we rooted for her. We actually rooted for her.

WHY?

We hated her! We really, really did, and yet we hated the couple just a little bit more. Flynn ingeniously made us feel sympathy for her villain in that moment, and she made us question throughout most of the book who the villain really was. Hats off to her. Stellar writing there.

In the *Charley Davidson* series, I get to come up with all kinds of awesome motivations for my villains. The world is both contemporary and paranormal, so my villains can be your everyday serial killer or an evil demon from a hell dimension. I made my heroine a PI in the tangible world, but she's also the Grim Reaper in the supernatural one, and she solves mysteries for both the living and the dead. It's like a gold mine of villainous possibilities and I reap the benefits of those milder frenemy-type villains and the ones that are evil to the very depths of their souls. I have layers and layers of bad people!

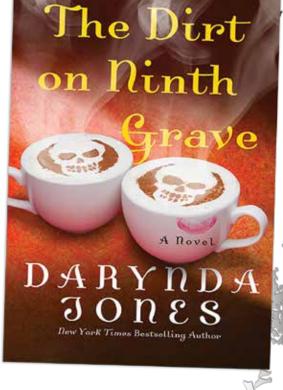
Either way, if your villain is an evil president who forces children to fight to the death on live TV or a scorned wife out to get revenge on her cheating husband by faking her own death and making sure her husband is charged with the murder, the violation has to fit the motivation. Make sure your villain moves the story forward, has his or her own arc, and suits the story you are telling. A jealous ex will fit much better in a romantic comedy than an axe-wielding serial killer will, but to each his own.

Best of luck with your evil villain!

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NY Times and USA Today Bestselling Author Darynda Jones has won numerous awards for her work, including a prestigious Golden Heart, a Rebecca, two Hold Medallions, a RITA, and a Daphne du Maurier, and she has received stellar reviews from dozens of publications including, starred reviews from Publisher's Weekly, Booklist, and the Library Journal. As a born storyteller, Darynda grew up spinning tales of dashing damsels and heroes in distress for any unfortunate soul who happened by, annoying man and beast alike, and she is ever so grateful for the opportunity to carry on that tradition. She currently has two series with St. Martin's Press:

The Charley Davidson Series and the Darklight Trilogy. She lives in the Land of Enchantment, also known as New Mexico, with her husband of almost 30 years, and two beautiful sons, the Mighty, Mighty Jones Boys. She can be found at www.daryndajones.com.





# SHE MAY BE ABLE TO PASS AS 17... BUT WHAT SHE'D REALLY LIKE IS TO PASS ON THIS UNDERCOVER JOB ALTOGETHER

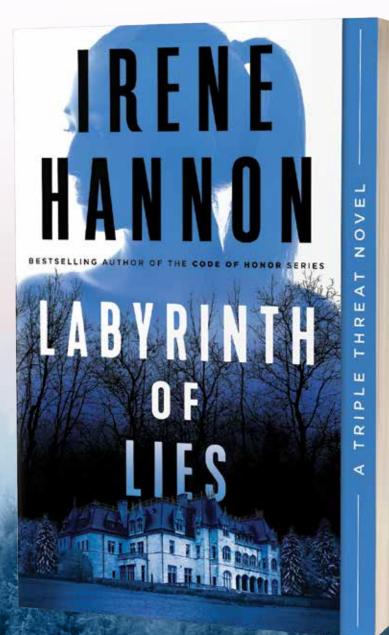
When the daughter of a high-profile businessman disappears from an exclusive girls' boarding school, police detective Cate Reilly is tapped for an undercover assignment. It doesn't take her long to realize that beneath the veneer of polish and wealth, things are not as they seem at Ivy Hill Academy.

Zeke Sloan has never forgotten Cate, but now isn't the best time for their paths to cross again. When their two seemingly disparate agendas begin to intertwine—and startling connections emerge among the players—the danger escalates significantly.

But who is the mastermind behind the elaborate ruse? And how far will they go to protect their house of cards?

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## INSIDE THE PAGES

## UNDER THE WHISPERING DOOR

By TJ Klune



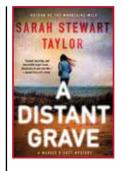
Wallace Price has no family or friends; his only personal connection is his ex-wife...who absolutely hates him. He's a lawyer who has built a reputation on fear, rather than respect, and he is ruthless

both in his cases and to his employees. His relatively drab life leads him from work to an empty house, and back again, and that's the way he likes it. Or so he claims. Then one day, at forty-years-old, Wallace drops dead of a heart attack, and when he attends his own funeral and overhears the few attendants discussing that Wallace's death was no real "loss," he's both confused and angry.

Enter Mei, Wallace's equally sassy and sweet Reaper. Mei arrives at Wallace's funeral to take him to see Hugo, the ferryman, whose job is to help Wallace cross over. Cross over to what? No one can seem to tell Wallace that one fact, and he's soon had enough. Both Mei and Hugo are human, and Wallace wants to go back to the life he had; whether it was a good life or not shouldn't be up for discussion, in his opinion. Wallace begins to act out in whatever limited ways he can, much to the dismay of Nelson, Hugo's grandfather, who made the choice long ago to stay with Hugo as a ghost, rather than cross over himself. Wallace has no choice but to adapt or leave, and since he doesn't want to go, he begins to make the most of the situation.

This book deals with the topics of death, grief, and the choices that make us who we are, in a beautiful and intriguing way. There's a little bit of humor, an unexpected love story between Wallace and Hugo—but only after Wallace begins to love himself first—and a cast of truly loveable characters. It was so wonderful to follow along Wallace's journey that I was sad to see the book come to an end. This is one you should not miss!

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta



## A DISTANT GRAVE

By Sarah Stewart Taylor

This atmospheric procedural takes place on Long Island and in rural Ireland. It's a novel of murder and family and deep secrets from the past.

Long Island homicide detective Maggie D'arcy returns, and this time, there's a body found on the beach and Maggie must find out who shot him. She's sure it's not as simple as a random gang killing and the deeper she digs, the more convinced she becomes that someone, possibly from the police force, is hiding past sins.

The victim, Gabriel, also speaks to us through occasional short chapters, as we piece together the story of what happened.

Maggie follows the clues she finds on a paper in the hotel room where Gabriel was staying, convinced that his background is important. She's completely at odds with her boss, who wants this wrapped up and put away. They have a terrible working relationship, and this isn't helping anything.

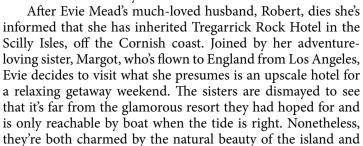
To make matters worse, she and her daughter, Lilly, are being stalked by someone and Maggie is fearful of leaving Lilly alone. She really wants to take her daughter on a trip to Ireland, but her work in New York threatens to make the trip impossible.

I don't know if I've done justice to all the beautifully woven threads running through this masterfully written story, since I'm afraid of giving too much away, but trust me, it's a great read.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter"

## DANGER AT THE COVE

By Hannah Dennison





see potential in the hotel itself once a major renovation is completed. So, they roll up their sleeves (figuratively speaking), hire some local workers, and get to work.

As the official opening of the hotel draws closer, with many things still left to do, Evie is annoyed when Margo tells her that she's already invited one guest to stay there—her pal Louise, a marketing guru who's going to design a major marketing plan to make the hotel famous. When Louise arrives, she announces that her new boyfriend, Randy, will be joining her at the hotel.

The two guests turn out to be the least of the sisters' problems. A member of the hotel staff is found dead, and the police are certain he's been murdered. Another murder quickly follows. All eyes turn to Randy as the chief suspect; is he really the financial investment genius he claims to be?

"Danger at the Cove" is the second in the *Island Sisters* mystery series by Hannah Dennison. It's a real page-turner of a tale with likeable characters, wonderful atmosphere, and surprises on every page. And the end literally took my breath away! Check it out for yourself.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," Published by Suspense Publishing, an Imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 



## GOD REST YE, ROYAL GENTLEMEN

By Rhys Bowen

It's Christmas time in jolly old England. New bride, and very distant relative of the British king and queen, Lady Georgiana Rannoch, is finally settling in as mistress of her very large estate in Sussex. Because this will be their first Christmas as a married couple, Georgie decides that she and her husband, the dashing Darcy O'Mara, should throw a party over the holiday and invite their nearest and dearest to attend. No sooner are the invitations in the mail when Darcy and Georgie receive a letter from Darcy's eccentric aunt, Ermitrude. In her much younger days, Ermitrude

was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Mary, and the two have remained in touch. Aunt Ermitrude invites Georgie and Darcy to spend Christmas at her home, and hints that the queen would like Georgie nearby. This amounts to a royal summons, so Georgie, Darcy, and their guests—Georgie's actress mother, her brother Binky, Binky's odious wife, Fig, and their two children all head to Sandringham instead.

Queen Mary has depended on Georgie several times in the past to solve "difficult situations" for the royal family. Georgie's soon summoned to a meeting with the queen, who confesses that she feels an evil force is at work on the estate. Two gentlemen in the royal household have recently died under mysterious circumstances, and the queen asks Georgie to find out what's going on. Then someone takes a shot at the Prince of Wales during a hunt, and his notorious mistress, Wallis Simpson, shows up to spend the holidays with Aunt Ermitrude. Is the heir to the throne the true target of the attacks? Meanwhile, King George is on his deathbed, so Georgie is under extra pressure to solve the mystery as soon as possible.

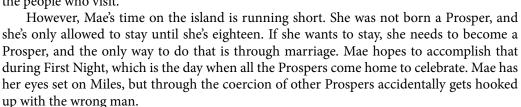
"God Rest Ye, Royal Gentlemen" weaves actual historical events into an absolutely delightful mystery that's a perfect read for cozy lovers. Highly recommended. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

## **BRIGHT RUINED THINGS**

By Samantha Cohoe

When I first picked up this book, I thought I was in for a normal fantasy romance novel. However, "Bright Ruined Things" by Samantha Cohoe turned into something much more fantastic than I could have ever imagined.

Mae has always lived on the island. It belongs to the Prosper family, perhaps the richest people in the world because they discovered aether. Aether is the source of magic, and it's the world's biggest power source now. The aether is created by spirits who dwell on the island and tend to the people who visit.



Mae labors through the evening to try and set things right and get with the boy she wants, but it soon becomes clear that love and marriage may be the least of the concerns on the island. There's something odd about First Night that no one seems inclined to tell. There's something mysterious about the obedient spirits that wander the island, and something even more odd about Lord Prosper himself. If Mae wants to set things right, she'll have to leave behind all her previous desires and sacrifice all she's ever known and loved.

The twists and turns Cohoe brings to this book truly astounded me. I thought I knew where the book was heading when we started, but I was joyfully mistaken. It's an excellent read and kept me at the edge of my seat. Highly recommended!

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 



## PALM SPRINGS NOIR

Edited by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

Akashic Books cruises into bleak, balmy Palm Springs with their newest delightful, dastardly offering.

Edited by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett, "Palm Spring Noir" delivers readers into the seedy underbelly of the Coachella Valley, to places where movie stars, tourists, and locals fear to tread. The Akashic Books "Noir" series feature gloomy, twisted yarns set in various cities scattered across the planet and each has its own flavor, from Brooklyn Noir to Las Vegas Noir. Palm Springs Noir is no exception. "All of us, at one time or another, have found ourselves in sticky situations with more than a couple of ways we might go," DeMarco-Barrett wrote in the introduction. In noir, the protagonists typically choose the wrong way. A slew of savvy writers contributed to these sun-bleached tales, including DeMarco-Barrett, Eric Beetner, Alex Espinoza, Janet Fitch, J.D. Horn, and more. Readers will explore the dark corners of Twin Palms, Bermuda Dunes, The Salton Sea, Indio, and other hot spots made famous by the actors, singers, and mobsters who have called Palm Springs home over the years. Featuring fourteen stories, all with a soul of their own, readers are treated to a dizzying array of Palm Spring's desert dwellers, from Mixed Martial Arts fighters and clowns to pool boys and sugar daddies. No stone is left unturned, no character too poor or rich, and no feelings spared.

Heavy with sunshine, bright with dread, "Palm Springs Noir" will take you on a ride not easily forgotten.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst

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### STYLED FOR MURDER

By Nancy J. Cohen

South Florida hairstylist extraordinaire Marla Vail really has her hands full these days. She's juggling her always busy professional life with her personal one, which now includes her husband, Dalton, his teenage daughter, Brianna, and their ten-month-old son, Ryder. Luckily for her, her mother, Anita, and new husband, Reed, a retired college professor, live in a nearby senior living community and are always willing to pitch in and watch Ryder when needed.

Anita and Reed have hired local contractors to renovate the master bathroom in their new home, and the work is progressing a lot slower than the couple anticipated. But the renovation comes to a shocking halt when one of the workmen is discovered murdered in the shower with one of Reed's neckties around his neck. The victim is the project manager, and there are many people who wanted him dead-dissatisfied customers, unpaid suppliers, even the staff of the design company he worked for. Unfortunately, the lead investigator zeros in on Marla's stepfather as suspect number one. Anita begs her daughter for help, although she confides that Reed's behavior has changed since the murder and it's obvious he's now keeping secrets from her.

Unlike other amateur sleuths, Marla has an inside track with the local police department—she's married to a respected police detective, who values her uncanny ability to flesh out clues the authorities often miss. This time, however, the crime took place outside of Dalton's jurisdiction, and the lead investigator isn't particularly good at sharing information. Marla doesn't let a little thing like that deter her and she starts her own investigation. "Styled for Murder" is the seventeenth in Nancy J. Cohen's Bad Hair Day mystery series. It's a well-plotted cozy with likeable characters and a surprise ending fans will love! I did.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* •

## HALLOWEEN PARTY MURDER



By Leslie Meier, Lee Hollis, and Barbara Ross

It's trick or treat time in Tinker's Cove, Maine, and temperatures will soon be dropping into the frigid zone. Lucy Stone and her friends are busy organizing the annual fundraiser to benefit the Hat and Mitten Fund, which new-to-town residents Ty and Heather Moon are hosting at their Victorian house. The mansion has been reconfigured into a scary haunted house. But the event turns truly

frightful when Heather Moon is found dead of a drug overdose the night of the fundraiser and Ty is arrested for her murder.

In "Death of a Halloween Monster," by Lee Hollis, *Island Times* food and cocktail columnist Hayley Powell is hosting a Halloween bash at her new restaurant, Hayley's Kitchen, in Bar Harbor, Maine. The town has been plagued recently by a rash of unsolved break-ins, and there's another one on Halloween night. Elderly widow Clara Beaumont, the homeowner, confronts the burglar and ends up in the hospital. Hayley's party ends suddenly when she discovers the bludgeoned body of one of the guests. Are the two violent events connected?

13-year-old Talia Davies and two girlfriends are having a Halloween night sleepover at Talia's house in "Scared Off," by Barbara Ross. Talia's parents are at their own Halloween party, and they've asked their tenant, Mrs. Zelisko, to keep an eye on the girls for them. Another girl at the sleepover is Julia Snowden's niece, Page. Page's parents are out of town for the holiday, and Julia is on official "aunt" duty. The girls' sleepover is ruined when high schoolers crash the party and trash the house. Horrified and frightened, Page texts her aunt for help. When Julia arrives, she finds the body of Mrs. Zelisko, dressed as a ghost, in the backyard.

This trio of novellas by three top-notch mystery authors is a ghostly delight from start to finish. Lots of tricks, and lots of treats cozy mystery fans will love. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

## THE ADVENTURE OF THE PECULIAR PROTOCOLS



By Nicholas Meyer

Since Sherlock Holmes was created by Arthur Conan Doyle, the detective has continued to grace us in both books and television. However, I don't think I've ever read a more delightful story of this character than the one Meyer presents to us in "The Adventure of the Peculiar Protocols."

Holmes has solved many mysteries, but never one so farreaching as the one his brother throws into his lap. A woman has been killed on the Thames, but not just any woman. She was a part of the British Secret Service, and she was carrying with her a document that claims Jews want to take over the entire world.

Watson and Holmes both have reason to believe that the document is a fake, and to prevent a worldwide catastrophe, Holmes embarks on perhaps the most expansive journey he's ever been on, going to the heart of Russia where the document was originally penned. Russia is already dangerous territory; after a recent attempt at revolution, armed guards roam the streets, and pedestrians are afraid. Watson and Holmes are followed wherever they go, making their task of finding the author of this document seem impossible. But as with all his other cases, Holmes is determined to find the truth about it and expose it to the world, no matter what it takes.

Meyer stays true to the style of Doyle by sharing the story through Watson's eyes. I felt like I was reading a truly new Sherlockian story that kept me glued to the page. I hope Meyer will write us a new Holmes story soon, for I am excited to see what new cases this famous detective will solve.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

## THE FAMILY PLOT

By Megan Collins



This book gets a thousand points for an original plot. Mrs. Lighthouse is obsessed with serial killers and has named all four of her children after victims of some of the most famous ones. The oldest boy, Charlie, is named after the ill-fated

Lindbergh baby. Next in line, Tate, bears the last name of Sharon Tate, the victim of the Manson killers. Then there are the twins; Andy, bearing the name of Lizzie Bordon's father, and the narrator, Dahlia, named for the actress known as Black Dahlia.

The whole family is "unnatural" in the eyes of the townspeople on Blackburn Island, who call their isolated house the Murder Mansion and generally avoid them. That's not hard to do because, except for Fritz, the groundskeeper, the children are kept close to the house for their education, which includes detailed studies of murder and celebrations of the annual death dates of the victims of the local serial killer, the Blackburn Killer.

The killer hasn't been active for a few years, and Charlie and Tate have left to live more normal lives. Dahlia, whose only friend in the world was her twin, was devastated when he left years ago without taking her, but she soon made her own way in the outer world, too, until they were all called home to bury their father, a strange and distant man However, when they attempt to bury Mr. Lighthouse, Andy's body is found in his plot—where he has been all these years—and it becomes clear that he didn't leave, he was murdered.

Suspects abound and suspicion is cast on the family by the locals. Andy's murderer must be found, and the identity of the Blackburn Killer finally revealed. Dahlia doesn't know who to trust and who to suspect, and wonders if she ever knew who her family was.

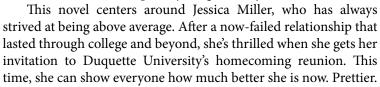
Great suspense and tension, this was a complex mystery that will keep you reading. I promise.

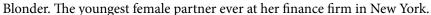
Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter"

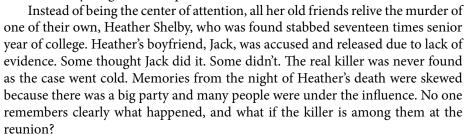
## IN MY DREAMS I HOLD A KNIFE

By Ashley Winstead

Thriller readers, drop everything and buy this book!







Or, what if the killer is one of Jessica's closest friends?

What a debut! With delicious twists that will satisfy the hungriest thriller reader, this roller coaster ride will keep you at the edge of your seat until the final pages. And those pages? They'll leave you with your mouth hanging open. What didn't I love about this book? Nothing. Put it at the top of your reading list, as I'm sure it's going to be a smash hit.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, author of "Finding Tessa" •

## **GUILT AT THE GARAGE**

By Simon Brett

Carole Seddon has retired to the village of Fethering, on the South Coast of England, in search of a quiet life where the only regular interaction she'll have is with her dog, Gulliver. Her next-door neighbor is a freewheeling "healer" named Jude (no last name is necessary). To Carole's amazement, as she and Jude get to know each other, they become friends, and develop a reputation as successful senior sleuths.

After her beloved dog and her grandchildren, Carole's pride and joy is her trusty Renault. Imagine her shock one morning when she sees that the car windshield has been smashed. Vandals in Fethering? Impossible. And, even worse, Carole finds a threatening note on her front steps: "Watch out. The window was just the start."

Carole cherishes her privacy and doesn't want anyone to know her personal business, so she immediately dismisses the note as a joke. Instead, she takes the car to Shefford's, the local garage, to have the windshield repaired before any of the other residents see the damage and question her. While she is at the garage waiting for the windshield repair to be completed, garage owner Bill Shefford is working on repairing the gear shift on another vehicle. The car Bill's working on falls and crushes him to death.

It appears to be a tragic accident, but Carole is shaken by being present and she confides in Jude. The more the two women talk about the incident, the more they begin to wonder if Bill's death was really an accident. A widower in his sixties, Bill has recently remarried, and his family is in an uproar over his choice of a young woman from Thailand, calling her a gold-digger and a "mail order bride." Carole receives another threatening note, and Bill's family accuse the new bride of murder.

"Guilt at the Garage" is the latest in Simon Brett's *Fethering* mysteries. It's a tightly written tale worth checking out. I loved it.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 



## YOU'LL BE THE DEATH OF ME



By Karen M. McManus

High school students, Ivy, Mateo and Cal, were friends once upon a time. But those days are long behind them. Ivy has just lost a student president election to someone who was running as a mere joke. Mateo is exhausted from working double shifts after his mom can no longer support working full-time for their family. And Cal hasn't had good friends since he could label Ivy and Mateo with that

title. When the trio has a chance meet-up in the school parking lot before the start of a school day, they make a last-minute decision to ditch classes to go into the city, but no one gets the fun, relaxing day they needed. Instead, their day is interrupted by the discovery of the dead body of another student.

Rather than stick around and risk being caught ditching—or worse, in the presence of the dead body of one of their classmates—the three take off before the police arrive in the hopes that they can go home and pretend they didn't have any part in the matter. Once they arrive at a safe location, they turn on the news to discover that a 'tip' has been called in: someone matching Ivy's description was seen at the scene where someone called to report a dead body. To make matters worse, that student is the same class clown that just beat Ivy in the school election. Hence, the rumors and gossip at the school begin to fly. Fortunately for Ivy, she isn't the only one of the three with a connection to the murder victim, and soon, the secrets start being unearthed.

Everyone's got something to hide in this fast-moving YA from author Karen M. McManus. If you're already a fan of McManus, then you'll love "You'll be the Death of Me." And if you're not a fan yet, then you surely will be after this one! Reviewed by Abbey Peralta

## **BE MY GHOST**

By Carol J. Perry

Maureen Doherty's job as a sportswear buyer for Bartlett's department store has come to an end. Like so many other brick and mortar stores all over the country, the venerable Boston store is closing its doors for good. Although she's been given a generous severance check to tide her over while she looks for another job, Maureen knows that the amount won't support her and her golden



retriever, Finn, for very long, especially with Boston's high rent prices. As she worries about her lack of professional options, she receives surprising news from an attorney in the Florida Gulf Coast town of Haven. Penelope Josephine Gray, a woman Maureen's never heard of, has died and left Maureen the Haven House Inn—the town's small hotel. Maureen is initially suspicious, but lacking any other options, she decides to pack up and head south with Finn.

When Maureen arrives in Florida, she discovers that the Haven House Inn is badly in need of upgrading, bleeding money, and is rumored to be haunted. Its manager, Elizabeth Mack, was trusted by Penelope to run the day-to-day activities of the inn for years, and she expected to inherit it when Penelope passed away. Elizabeth resents Maureen and resists any changes Maureen suggests.

The first night Maureen is there, one of the inn's guests is found murdered after drinking a special cocktail mixed by the hotel bartender. Maureen is the unlucky person who discovers him, and she becomes a prime murder suspect. Later that night, as she and Finn are trying to get settled in their new digs, a ghost named Lorna Dubois drops by to say hello—wearing one of Maureen's dresses.

"Be My Ghost" is the first in the *Haunted Haven* series penned by Carol J. Perry, who also writes the *Witch City Mysteries*. It's a delightful read with a cast of characters I'm looking forward to knowing better. Loved it!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

## MURDER AT KEYHAVEN CASTLE

By Clara McKenna

It's spring 1905, and American heiress Stella Kendrick has taken her very first trip to England with her ambitious, selfmade father, to be guests at the wedding of Lord Lyndhurst, the Earl of Atherly, at Morrington Hall. But the joke's on Stella when they arrive at the estate and she discovers she's also part of the wedding—as the bride. The earl's family has fallen on hard financial times, Papa Kendrick wanted to add a British title to his family tree, and a bargain was struck with the unsuspecting Stella as the prize.

Although Stella is initially resistant, she can't help her growing attraction to her intended groom, known in the family as Luddy. Against all odds, the pair fall deeply in love, although Luddy's mother makes it clear that, as an American, nothing Stella does will ever be up to the rigid British social standards.

As the wedding date draws closer, family and friends begin to arrive for the big day, including Stella's Uncle Jed Kendrick and his children, and the annoying Swensen family, friends of Stella's father. When Stella goes to meet the guests in Southampton, she witnesses a stranger being trampled to death by a horse. When the victim is examined closely, it's discovered that he has a newspaper clipping about Stella's upcoming wedding in his pocket. Tragedy strikes again, this time very close to Stella, when her father is discovered brutally murdered shortly before the ceremony. Even worse, one of Luddy's inner circle is suspected of the crime. Will the wedding ever happen? Or is their union doomed before it even begins?

"Murder At Keyhaven Castle" is the third in the historical *Stella and Luddy* cozy series by Clara McKenna. The book is an intriguing peek into British society with likeable, believable characters, a fast-moving plot, and a surprising, very happy ending.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine •

## A DARK AND SECRET PLACE

By Jen Williams



What a terrific suspense novel! I can't praise this book enough. The story is not only very dark, but also riveting; the plot was made to grab the reader by the throat and not let go until the end.

As the curtains rise on the section headed BEFORE, we are introduced to Michael Reaves. He's discovered in the woods by a man who understands Michael all too well. The stranger takes him in and doesn't refer to him as Michael's own family once did, as *brute*, *beast* and *filth*. This is also the 'time' we flash back to throughout the story to illuminate what is going on in Balesford, near London, in the present day...

Here, we follow Heather Evans, who has come back to Balesford to deal with the aftermath of her mother's surprising suicide. It's painful for Heather to be in her hometown again. She'd kept away on purpose all these years, living happily with her roommate Terry.

Heather starts finding strange things within her mother's house. The first object is a page ripped from a fairytale, the oldfashioned 'Grimm' kind, enhanced with gory illustrations. It's the kind of thing her mother would never have had in the house. And the more she discovers, the more she finds out that she didn't know who her mother really was. Or, worse, what she had done. The letters, years of correspondence from an imprisoned local serial killer, Michael Reaves, known as 'The Red Wolf,' appear during her hunt—a tie-in to a notorious hippie colony in her own dark past. The ominous notes trouble her as she tries to help DI Ben Parker investigate her mother's odd death.

The duo has a good relationship until Ben finds out she fed some confidential material that he told her to a journalist. Things go downhill from there and I, for one, could not stop reading.

If you like dark suspense, high tension, an elaborate mystery, and gorgeous writing, you'll love this!

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter"

## THE MEMORY COLLECTORS



By Kim Neville I love traveling a unique world with lovably flawed characters to join me every step of the journey. Kim Neville's, "The Memory Collectors," had a stunning premise and wonderful characters that took my breath

away as I grew more and more attached to them.

Ev is such a character, and she has a unique power. She can feel "stained" objects, or items that have positive or negative emotions tied to them from their previous owners. However, because of a tragic event from her past, Ev would rather not use her powers at all. But, like all powers, it won't go away, and it causes her problems. She's already scraping by financially, selling cheap wares at a flea market, when a negatively charged item causes a problem with a customer and she loses her table.

Harriet, on the other hand, loves stained items. She hoards them in her apartment until the boxes spill over into the hall and she gets evicted. She's determined to keep every stained item she owns, though, because she feels they can help people. When she meets Ev, Harriet tries to convince her to help her open a museum where they can curate stained objects and help people feel hopeful, content, happy, and warm. Ev is reluctant at first because of what happened in her past, but the hope that Harriet can help her learn to control her powers gives her the courage to agree, and the two women go on an adventure of growth and redemption together.

The characters are masterful and fun to be around. With exceptional writing that takes readers through Ev's past and present, "The Memory Collectors" is an excellent read.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## **HIDDEN TREASURE**

By Jane K. Cleland

Antiques expert Josie Prescott and her new husband, Ty, are excited to renovate their dream home, an antique Victorian known in their hometown of Rocky Point, Maine, as the "Gingerbread House." Josie and Ty have purchased the house from Maudie Wilson, a widow who has moved into a nearby assisted living facility at the insistence of her two nieces. Tom Hill, who had been Maudie's live-in gardener, is staying on for the immediate future to help in the renovation project, along with his girlfriend, Julie.

The ink is barely dry on the bill of sale when Celia, one of Maudie's nieces, contacts Josie to say that her aunt has mistakenly left behind an old trunk, which she is desperate to get back. As Josie and Ty begin the renovations, Josie finds the trunk inside a secret compartment in the house, and when she opens it, discovers a jewel-encrusted box containing a golden cat.

To Josie's professional eye, the pieces look valuable, and she wastes no time in returning them to Maudie. She also develops an immediate bond with the woman, who appears to be alert and active—nothing like the frail, helpless woman her nieces have described. Maudie confesses she never liked the pieces, so Josie suggests consigning them with her company, Prescott's Antiques and Auctions, to authenticate their value and sell them for her. Maudie wants a little time to think it over, and a few days later, niece Celia contacts Josie again on her aunt's behalf saying Maudie has signed the necessary consignment forms. When Josie goes to Maudie's apartment to pick up the forms, she discovers that Maudie has vanished, and Celia has been bludgeoned to death. The box and the cat are also missing. Horrified, Josie sets out to find her and the missing artifacts.

"Hidden Treasure" is a tautly written humdinger of a mystery with surprises on every page. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

## A SCONE OF CONTENTION

By Lucy Burdette

Key West food critic Hayley Snow is taking her long-delayed honeymoon in Scotland with her handsome husband, police detective Nathan Bransford. The couple plan to do some sightseeing as well as introduce Hayley to her new sister-in-law, Vera, and her husband, who were unable to come to the wedding. Their

honeymoon entourage expands before they even leave the states to include Nathan's mother and Miss Gloria, the couple's octogenarian neighbor, who is of Scottish descent.

Nathan's sister is under huge pressure for a book project deadline but greets the travelers warmly (except her mother), and everyone is invited to a lavish welcome dinner at the home of one of Vera's old college friends. The other guests are also Vera's college chums and their spouses, all of whom are collaborating on the book project. The dinner party comes to a halt when one of the women becomes violently ill and claims she was poisoned.

Hayley and Nathan's plans for an idyllic honeymoon trip are spoiled when Vera's husband announces that he and Nathan are playing in golf tournaments for the next several days. Vera has already planned an extensive sightseeing itinerary, and Hayley is determined to make the best of this trip despite the unexpected absence of her groom. One of the first stops for Hayley and her group, which now also includes Vera's college friends, is the famous Falkirk Wheel, high above the Forth and Clyde Canal. The visit is spoiled when a mysterious tourist tumbles to his death from the wheel. Vera and her friends deny knowing the victim, but after observing their initial reactions to the incident, Hayley is convinced they're lying. It's becoming increasingly obvious that the group's camaraderie is coming to a crashing halt. Literally. And one of them could be a murderer.

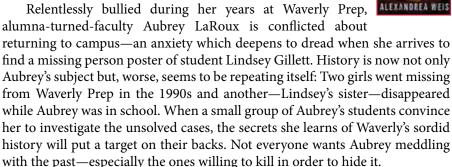
"A Scone of Contention" is another well-plotted cozy mystery by author Lucy Burdette. It's also a fascinating trip to Scotland without a passport! Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

## HAVE YOU SEEN ME?

By Alexandrea Weis

Chilling suspense, a twisted whodunit, and a series of gruesome deaths written by a nurse-turned-author weave into an intricate web of secrets and murder in Alexandrea Weis's atmospheric YA thriller, "Have You Seen Me?"



Dark academia meets teen slasher with just a sprinkling of superstition and folklore, "Have You Seen Me?" has all the hair-raising suspense of *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* with the dark secrets of Jackson's "A Good Girl's Guide to Murder" and the twisty crimes of Sager's "Home Before Dark." This is a slasher worth dying for.

Reviewed by Seven Jane •

## THE SECRET STAIRCASE

By Sheila Connolly

Kate Hamilton has returned to her hometown of Asheboro, Maryland to spearhead an ambitious project—re-create the town as the Victorian village it



once was. The town has been steadily losing population and businesses for years, and its economic structure is shaky. Wanting to do things right, Kate sets up a nonprofit board of directors and begins her research.

The most prominent citizens in town many years ago were the wealthy Henry Benton and his wife, Mary, so Kate and the board zero in on renovating the old Benton Mansion. The house still maintains many of the original features but badly needs updating. Kate begins with the original kitchen so that it can be used for catering fundraising events. She hires a local contractor, Morgan Wheeler, who has a similar love of old houses, and when he begins the renovation, he discovers a secret staircase that has been walled up for years. Waiting at the bottom of the stairs is a long-dead body.

The police are called, and a forensics examination determines that the victim is male, died around 1880, and didn't die a natural death—he was murdered. Although Kate's concerned about the discovery, she's more interested in finding out everything she can about the Bentons, so the house can be restored to the way it was when they were living there. Aided by a student researcher, Carroll Peterson, they begin to put together a history of the couple and discover that they had three children, all of whom died young. After the death of the third child, Mary became very ill and died, so Henry spent a lot of his life in that huge house alone. Or did he? Then another body, this one more recent, is discovered at the bottom of the cellar stairs. Is history repeating itself?

"The Secret Staircase" is an entertaining mystery which seamlessly weaves longago events into the present day. Likeable characters and excellent plotting. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

### **BONES OF HILO**

By Eric Redman

In this police procedural Redman takes us all over Hawai'i, a place clearly dear to the author's heart. Detective Kawika Wong has been given a complicated case with a long list of suspects. Unfortunately, his love life is nearly just as complicated and troublesome.

The book opens with a bizarre incident. Bodies are being flung into the ocean from a cliff and eaten by sharks. No one knows who these victims are, why they were killed, or who is killing them. But an even more sensational crime soon overshadows this one. A separate victim, a barefoot, middle-aged white male, appears to have been sacrificed on a golf tee that was made to look like an ancient Hawaiian temple, stabbed through the heart with a Hawaiian spear that has historical significance. The dead man is a developer who is unpopular with the islanders. Did a group of natives kill him?

Kawika's long-time girlfriend, Carolyn, quickly spots the errors that were made. Were they made on purpose to steer them away from the natives? Or was it someone else?

When Kawika encounters Patience Quinn, a journalist who helps him with the case, he begins to split his nights between the two women. He doesn't do this without a great deal of guilt, though.

From the maps and the pronunciation guide in the front, to the journey throughout the whole novel, I learned so much about the complex history of this place, and the many present-day cultures that coexist and overlap, while sometimes clashing.

Such a fascinating, complex place! It makes for a truly interesting story that I'm sure you'll enjoy.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Into the Sweet Hereafter"

## ANIMAL INSTINCT

By David Rosenfelt

There are two things I can't get enough of: thrillers and dogs. Combine them in one book, and I'm a huge fan. Rosenfelt's "Animal Instinct" thriller was a humorous and suspenseful read.

Police Officer Corey Douglas has a few cases over the years that he wishes would have gone differently and one is coming back to bite him. Corey couldn't save a girl from her abusive boyfriend and now, a few years later, the girl turns up dead. Convinced he could have done something to save her, Corey becomes determined to put her boyfriend behind bars.

It seems like a cut-and-dried case to Corey, but things take an unexpected turn when the abusive boyfriend winds up murdered, and Corey becomes a suspect.

With his faithful dog and fellow private investigators, Corey Douglas is on the case to find out who would want these two seemingly uninteresting people dead. This goes far beyond a relationship gone wrong; Corey uncovers a scheme behind the scenes in the place where the victims worked. For Corey to uncover the truth before his verdict at court may seem like an impossible task, but maybe nothing is too hard for private investigator Douglas.

A great book. The mystery they were solving kept me engaged and the ending caught me by surprise, which I really appreciated. I highly recommend!

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

### THE FAMILY TREE

By Steph Mullin and Nicole Mabry

Liz Catalano has it all. Her cousin is her best friend, she has a job she loves, and she's got a tight-knit Italian family. Or so she thought.

When she uses a DNA kit to find out more about her heritage, she finds out she's adopted. Not only that, but shortly thereafter she's contacted by the FBI saying her DNA was found at a crime scene. But of course, that's not so cut-and-dried either. Her DNA matched a family member...a serial killer called TSK, the Tri State Killer. With at least 20 victims, all taken in pairs over forty years, the killer has never been found and this is the strongest lead yet.

Told through Liz's point of view with victim chapters interspersed—all cleverly named after some of our favorite horror movie characters—this is a thrill ride you won't want to miss. Don't read it if you're about to have a power outage. You'll want all the lights on for this one! Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, author of "Finding Tessa"

## THE BATH CONSPIRACY

By Jeanne M. Dams

Dorothy Martin and her husband, retired chief constable Alan Nesbit, are in the historic city of Bath to celebrate Dorothy's birthday. The city and the surrounding area are filled with notable sights to visit—including one of the most famous in the world, Stonehenge. Dorothy is looking forward to doing some serious shopping as well. She plans to enjoy every minute of the trip.

Alan hires a car for the week so the couple can explore the area at their own pace. On their first day, they leave their car parked at their hotel and spend time visiting local sights. The following day, they drive to Stonehenge. After being awed by the immensity of the prehistoric monument, Dorothy pays a visit to the gift shop there and has a great time buying souvenirs for family and friends. When the couple opens the trunk of their rental car to store her purchases, they're shocked to find it filled with a mixture of precious artifacts and cheap trinkets. The artifacts have all been stolen from various historic sites around Bath—including an actual hunk of Stonehenge, itself—but how they ended up in the trunk of Alan and Dorothy's car is a complete mystery.

Naturally, the local police zero in on them as the thieves, until Alan produces his professional credentials and insists that they be fingerprinted, to prove neither of them had ever touched the contents of the car. Satisfied, the police let them go, but Dorothy's curiosity is peaked. She can't figure out how the stolen merchandise got into their locked car, and she's determined to find out.

Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 

### **MURDER AT GREYSBRIDGE**

By Andrea Carter

Talk about satisfying, as always when it comes to this author and this series. Even at first glance, the cover is so extraordinarily done that you're "hooked" as a reader before ever diving into the story.

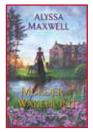
This is the fourth installment of the *Inishowen Mystery* series, and it has everything a reader could possibly want in a stellar piece of writing.

In this latest installment, Solicitor Benedicta O'Keeffe is in the process of trying to decide whether to accept a job in a law firm located in America. But first, she must attend the wedding of her own assistant, Leah. And where are they having the event? That's right...Greysbridge Hotel. Not a shock, considering its summertime now and the hotel is on a property that has a private beach and stunning pier.

Although this is a happy occasion, it soon turns sour. What was supposed to be a great weekend doesn't even really start because two guests of the hotel die on the night of the wedding, and two teens that were supposed to be part of the wedding party mysteriously disappear. Add in a horrible storm moving in quickly that ends up trapping Ben on an eerie island when she goes out to look for the missing teenagers, and the confusion erupting all over the place regarding the groom's family, and you have an excellent story with just the right amount of creepy added. This is truly a perfect choice for fans of character-driven mysteries set in thrilling surroundings. Agatha Christie would be proud.

I was excited to learn two things as a fan of this writer and this series. A) This series is currently being adapted to bring to the small screen; and B), "The Body Falls" is the next title in this series to hit shelves in 2022. Talk about gifts!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 



## MURDER AT WAKEHURST

By Alyssa Maxwell

It's September 1899 in Newport, Rhode Island, and Emma Cross, editor-in-chief of the *Newport Messenger*, is mourning the death of family member Cornelius Vanderbilt II, known to both his admirers and detractors as "The Commodore." Emma always thought of him as Uncle Cornelius, although in reality they were more like distant cousins. Known as a man who ran his businesses and family with an iron hand, one of The Commodore's final acts was to disinherit his namesake son

because he didn't approve of Neily's marriage to the former Grace Wilson.

Emma and Grace are close friends, and both women are even more concerned than ever about Neily since, now that his father has died, the two men can never be reconciled. Grace asks Emma to accompany them to an Elizabethan masked ball at Wakehurst, one of Newport's mansions, and help her keep an eye on her husband. Held in the mansion's English-style gardens, the party includes a swordplay demonstration, scenes from one of Shakespeare's plays performed by a troupe of professional actors, an archery display, and a joust. The swordplay demonstration is too realistic for Emma, so she escapes to wander the gardens until it's finished and accidentally overhears a heated argument between a man and woman. The couple is hidden behind a tall hedge, so she has no idea who they are. Returning to the festivities, Emma is called by the sounds of the host's dogs barking furiously and finds the body of a man on the grounds with an arrow through his chest. The victim is prominent Judge Clayborne Schuyler and, despite the police's warnings to stay out of their investigation, Emma is determined to find the killer.

"Murder at Wakehurst" is another sneak peek into the Gilded Age of Newport's high society. Part of the fun of this series is that each book takes place in a real Newport mansion and includes actual historical characters. Highly recommended!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* 



## CEMETERY PLOTS OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

By Terry Shepherd, Catriona McPherson, Virginia Kidd, Chris Dreith, Jenny Carless, Elaine Faber, and Kim Keeline

"Cemetery Plots of Northern California," a rousing collection of cemetery-themed short stories from members of the Capitol Crimes chapter of Sisters in Crime, offers deadly "plots" aplenty.

The Sacramento group's fourth anthology begins with an introduction by best-selling author Catriona McPherson and kicks off with a murderous tale set in the heart of the 2020 pandemic. Virginia Kidd's "Murder in the Time of Covid-19" brings readers to Sacramento's East Lawn Memorial Cemetery, where our protagonists are quick to find a body in the graveyard grass. Hugo de Leon's "Dreamscape" ends the collection with a somber funeral and a strange mark just below the neck of the dearly departed Miss Betty. Buried within these pages are tales of murder, revenge, family drama, and small-town terrors, such as the Karen Phillips short, "The Secret of Thompson's Hill." Eve Elliot's slow burn of a story, "The One," introduces us to Amanda Stack, or whoever she is, while Jennifer Morita's "Cranes in the Cemetery," unveils a fresh corpse and a trail of paper cranes, as preparations for an annual Buddhist Church bazaar get underway. Other contributors include Donna Benedict, Melissa H. Blaine, Jenny Carless, Elaine Faber, Kenneth Gwin, Nan Mahon, Richard Schneider, Terry Shepherd, Kim Keeline, and Joseph S. Walker. "Dreamscape" is included as part of a partnership with 916 Ink, a Sacramento charity that empowers youth through creative writing.

Simmering with dread, embalmed with humor, and full of thrills, "Cemetery Plots of Northern California" is a trip to the graveyard that's anything but quiet.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst •

## 'TIL DEATH

## A June Quigley Story



By Phoef Sutton Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

## WHEN IT CAME TIME TO HIRE SOMEONE

to kill her husband, Nicole Hopley approached the decision with the same methodical care she used when picking a dog groomer or a tree trimmer. There was no job too big or too small for Nicole not to spend endless hours on the Internet doing a thorough vetting of a potential employee, poring over their Yelp reviews and the discussions of their work and their demeanor on The Neighborhood Patch and other sites. In fact, when she was asked to innumerate her best qualities, Nicole put her ability to find the best people for a given job near the top of the list.

Of course, hiring an assassin was a bit more of a delicate chore than finding an honest personal shopper. For one thing, murder was illegal, and for illegal things, one had to

read between the lines and catch the subtle "dog whistles" that were necessary in advertisements, even on the so-called "Dark Web."

Nicole found out about the Dark Web by browsing through one of her husband's paperback books while she waited in the car for him to come out of a doctor's office. Alan went to the doctor quite often, usually with imaginary ailments he was sure were cancers or brain tumors or coronary artery abnormalities that would surely prove fatal. Nicole, when she grew tired of thumbing through WebMD on her phone, would sometimes dig out a well-read Lee Child novel from between the seats and browse through it, while imagining her husband's distraught face when he came back to the car with a grim diagnosis – three months to live. No hope. Inoperable.

But when Alan did come back, looking sullen, he'd always tell her that the doctor said it was indigestion, or the flu, or IBS, or something else non-fatal. It was the seventh or eighth time this happened that Nicole realized she was actually disappointed Alan wasn't going to die from some dreadful, wasting disease. And, coincidentally, Nicole had been reading only a few minutes before how Jack Reacher had used the Dark Web to investigate some professional "exterminator." And somehow, the two ideas fused in her mind, like two pools of pancake batter that her mother would sometimes pour too close together on Christmas morning, making a blob of misshapen dough Nicole would always claim as her own. Nicole, even as a child, loved the unusual.

Two notions—Alan dying and the Dark Web—became a daydream for Nicole to mull over while she did her shopping and her charity work. And, after a bit, she found herself cruising on her computer, wondering if that Dark Web actually existed and how to get there. It took her several months and much time spent on unsavory websites before she actually

non-indexed, unreachable-by-Google hemisphere of the World Wide Alternate Web.

During the months she'd spent exploring this, peeling it away, layer by layer, she'd thought of the whole thing as a game, a fantasy, a story she was making up in her head. Even when she found herself discussing it online with someone named WetWork1239, she told herself it was just a lark.

But now, here she was, stretched out on the sofa, playing sick, plotting and planning:

The perfect murder.

Nicole looked at Alan Hopley and decided he was pleasant-enough looking for a man in his sixties. She might cast him a second glance at a cocktail party. Right now, he was putting on a suit coat and tying his tie in a Prince Albert knot. So carefully knotted that Nicole wanted to pick up a candy dish from the coffee table and pitch it at his head.

Nicole glanced at herself in the antique mirror that hung over the 19th century Japanese bureau and saw a lovely woman in her late-thirties, propped up on the sofa, dressed in elegant pajamas and clasping a mug of tea, looking picturesquely ill. It was just the image she wanted to create.

"I don't have to go," Alan was saying.

"No." Nicole Hopley's voice was appropriately weak. "There's no reason for both of us to be miserable."

"You're sure you don't want me to call Dr. Woolrich?"

"It's a headache, I'm not an invalid. Now, if I had my medication..." She let the accusation hang in the air.

"I'm sorry I forgot."

"I'm not blaming you. I'm not making you wrong. I'm not saying it was your fault," she said, blaming him, making him wrong, and saying it was his fault. Reaching out her hand, she let him help her up.

They walked through the grand house to the front hall. Nicole thought about how impressed she'd been the first time she'd entered this house, how it looked like a chateau or a mansion to her. Now it was just a massive piece of real estate she had to keep up.

"I was really looking forward to us going to this party together," Alan was saying.

"Now, now, there'll be other parties," she said, as she brushed the dandruff off his shoulder like a patient mother. "Just 'cause I'm not there, don't just stand in some corner. Remember to mix and mingle."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll make sure everyone knows I'm there."

"That's a good boy."

Alan sighed. "This would have to be Yolanda's night off. I feel guilty leaving you all alone like this."

"Oh, I'll find something to do. I'll binge-watch The Crown and call it an early night." She entered a number in the keypad by the front door, the security light blinked red,

breached the digital wall and made it into the uncharted, and a flat-toned voice said, "Ready to arm in sixty seconds," followed by a series of BEEPS.

> He sighed again. "It never gives us enough time to say goodbye."

She blew him a kiss. "Go."

He stopped at the threshold and turned. "Remember how you used to flash me sometimes, when I was heading out?"

She smiled tightly. "I remember."

He stepped out of the house. "You'll feel better soon."

"I know I will," she said, shutting the door. The beeping stopped.

She waited until she heard the Mercedes head down the long driveway, then bolted down the hall, all signs of her crippling headache forgotten. Racing into the kitchen, she flung the basement door open and ran down into the cellar. She hurried past wine racks and opened a door to a narrow hallway lined with air ducts and vents. The working organs of the house, kept well out of sight.

She pulled a pair of boots out from behind one of the ducts, took off her slippers, and put them on. Locating a flashlight she had hidden behind a pipe, she switched it on and crept onto a concrete wall. Stepping onto a crate, she pulled herself up into a crawlspace. Hauling herself along by elbows, she crawled under the house, the flashlight playing wildly around the claustrophobic area. She stopped in horror as a bug-eyed possum scrabbled past her. When it was gone she let loose a sigh and pulled herself along faster until she reached the grate of a window well. She pushed it open and climbed out into the night air, gasping for breath.

Nicole raced across the grounds of the estate, her p.j.'s billowing behind her so that she looked like Scarlett O'Hara doing the hundred-yard-dash. It was autumn in Virginia, so the weather was wildly changeable, but tonight was warm and muggy. She ran up to the hedge that lined the estate, bent down and pried up the bottom edge of the hidden fence.

A hand reached through from the other side. Nicole knew it was the hand of a killer. Or an assassin. Or a hired hit man.

Nicole grabbed the hand and pulled.

A figure emerged from under the hedge, and it wasn't until it rose to its feet that Nicole realized the hand had felt surprisingly small and soft.

The figure was a woman. A non-descript woman of about forty. A soccer mom. The sort of woman who looked at Nicole as a threat. The "first wife" kind of woman. The PTA kind of woman. She wore a raincoat she could have bought at Target and looked like the mother from an old TV show, but Nicole couldn't say which one.

"You're WetWork-one-two-three-nine?" Nicole asked.

"Yes," the woman said. "Not what you expected?"

"Well..."

The woman smiled, pleasantly. "You thought I'd look peeved. meaner? Like a biker chick? A lot of tattoos? Or the slinky, leather-clad Soviet spy type? Maybe a scar on my lip?"

"I thought you'd be a man," Nicole said.

"Oh. You're the old-fashioned type." The woman laughed. "Trust me. Man or woman, I'm the one for the job."

Nicole shrugged. "What do I call you?"

"You can call me June Quigley. That's my name, after all."

"Okay, June, this way." Nicole led June back to the window well. "You'll enter through here. It's the only entry point that isn't connected to the security system."

"You don't mind if I check that myself, do you?"

"Of course not. That's what I'm paying you for."

Nicole climbed into the window well and June followed. Once they were inside, Nicole handed June two paper covers to slip over her shoes. "I've got to tell you," June said, "I'm impressed. Most people don't take these precautions seriously enough."

"Well, I really want this to work out," Nicole said, handing June a pair of surgical gloves.

"May I ask where you got these?"

"My sister had a baby a few months ago. I swiped them from the maternity ward."

June smiled. "My, you really do premeditate."

Nicole wasn't sure how to take that. "Thanks. It'll be up to you to dispose of them, of course."

"Of course." She took June from the basement up into the kitchen. "Now, it has to be Thursday night," Nicole said. "That's Yolanda's night off. A week from tonight would be perfect. At exactly eleven o'clock, come through here, quiet as possible." She walked through the archway into the living room. "Every night at that time, you'll find my husband in that chair watching the local news. You'll step in, and then... I imagine you carry your own firearm?" June raised an eyebrow, and Nicole took that as agreement. "Well, once that's done..." Nicole gestured vaguely in the direction of the chair—it made her uncomfortable to think about the actual act. "...then you'll find this bag," she said, pointing to a small valise by the knickknack shelf.

"Go around the room, taking valuables. Break as many as you like—but not the Lalique crystal, that's mine." June stood by the mantel, nodding, but looking at a wedding photo of Alan and Nicole, not seeming to pay much attention. "Then, go out the way you came in. I'll give you the balance of payment and all the police are left with is an attempted home-invasion robbery gone awry. Simple, isn't it?" Nicole finished her lecture, pleased with herself.

June lowered herself into the intended victim's chair, looking very tired. "Well, to be honest, I'm a little offended," June said. "I'm a professional, you hired me as a professional. But do you ask to hear any of my ideas?"

"Of course, I want your opinion," Nicole said, a little

"You sure?"

"Really. I want to know what you think."

June got up and started pacing the room. "All right. Now, don't think I'm just saying this 'cause it wasn't my plan, but I see problems."

Nicole pursed her lips. "What problems?"

"Well...the alarm system has one weak spot and somehow I know about it? You don't want people to think I had inside help, do you?"

Nicole faltered. "...Okay, I'm not married to that."

"And maybe he is watching the news, but just as I arrive, he goes into the kitchen to make a sandwich. I come in; I get a mayonnaise-covered knife between the ribs. I look bad; you look bad. We don't want that."

"All right, I'm new at this."

June smiled at her. "Aw honey, everybody is once. You've just been thinking about it too much. If it's supposed to be a robbery, wouldn't it be better if I just busted through a window, clubbed him over the head and ran?"

"I suppose."

"The problem with that approach is, it still looks like murder. The police will investigate; they'll find stuff out. Have you been doing anything naughty?"

"Well..." Nicole stammered.

"No judgment here. But the thing people don't realize is, if you're going to get away with murder, it can't look like murder."

"Fine, fine, I'm an idiot. Now can we hear something constructive?"

June looked around. "I like your house." Nicole didn't see what that had to do with anything. "I particularly like that balcony up top."

"The cupola? That's Alan's home office."

"Can I see it?"

Nicole was beginning to begrudgingly admit that maybe June knew what she was talking about, so she took her up to Alan's little octagonal office on the top floor of the house. His private retreat was filled with folk art and gewgaws and useless trinkets of all sorts. At least, it was after Nicole had moved in and given the house a much-needed makeover. Nicole was Alan's third wife, and she'd replaced his second, named Claire, who'd made out like a bandit in the divorce.

That was why Alan made Nicole sign a pre-nup, which, in turn, was why Nicole was having Alan killed. She couldn't stand living with him any longer, but she had put far too much time and effort into the marriage to come out of it with nothing.

June stood out on the fourth-story balcony, leaning out and looking at the view of the Virginia countryside at night. Nicole remembered the first time she'd seen this view. She had been naked then, clinging to the railing with Alan

behind her. Looking out over the valley, she had imagined she could see her little apartment house off in the distance. Not that she hadn't enjoyed Alan's lovemaking, but she did find her mind wandering even then.

Taking the humid night air into her lungs with big dramatic gulps, June turned around and walked back into the study. "Not a soul around for miles," she said. "You need a place like this to just stop and think." Then she turned to Nicole and spoke earnestly. "Is your husband content with his lot in life?"

Nicole stood by her husband's desk, a little annoyed, and wondered when this woman was going to stop her blathering and get down to business. "I guess he is," she replied.

"But I can assume," June went on, "from the fact that you're having him murdered, that the marriage is not an altogether happy one?"

"I didn't hire you as a marriage counselor."

"I'm sorry if this is personal, but sometimes I have to probe."

"Why?"

June's smile struck Nicole as a little patronizing when she answered. "The way a person dies—it's the end of their story. It's got to fit. If it doesn't fit, people ask questions. We don't want people to ask questions. Therefore, I have to know; what is your husband like? Is he an angry person? A depressed person?"

"More depressed than angry."

"I see. Would you say he's capable of suicide?" June asked, as she walked out onto the balcony again.

Nicole sparked to this idea. "I like where you're going with this, but I don't know. Suicide is awfully pro-active for him. I'm not sure people will buy it."

June leaned back in through the French doors. "In my experience—and I have a bit more than you—when people see a body and a note they tend to make sense of it retroactively. 'Well, he has been depressed,' they say. 'We should have seen this coming,' they say."

Nicole was impressed, but was reluctant to give up on her own plan. "Still...I mean, for one thing, how would I get him to write a note?"

June pursed her lips. "That is a problem." She glanced at the old Underwood typewriter that Alan kept on one of the shelves. "Is your husband very attached to this?"

"Oh, yes. It belonged to his mother."

June smiled brightly. "Beautiful. You type the note on it; he signs it. A woman like you can get a man to sign something without him looking at it, I'm sure."

Nicole smiled coyly. "It's been done. I used to be his personal assistant." She crossed to the typewriter. "So, what? I write 'Goodbye cruel world,' something like that?"

"Don't be flippant about this," June said, all business. "It's got to convince the police psychologist or all bets are off." She

grabbed a pad of paper and a pen off Alan's desk and handed them to Nicole, who nodded, taking this very seriously now. "You have to make it disjointed and desperate. Like this, 'can't take it anymore..."

June walked out to the balcony again and Nicole, eager that they were at last getting somewhere, followed her. "I can't take it anymore…" Nicole repeated, jotting it down.

"No. No personal pronouns," June barked, and tore off the page Nicole was writing on. "It shows a negation of self. The shrinks eat that up."

Nicole nodded. "So just, 'Can't take it anymore."

"Now you're getting it. Write this, 'Nothing here. So sorry. Must end it now."

Nicole wrote with quick strokes of the pen, then looked up, ready for more. "Uh-huh?"

"So, have decided to jump off the balcony," June said.

Nicole wrote this down then had second thoughts. "I'm going to have to draw the line there. Alan would never do that. He's too much of a coward."

"Well, he may be a coward, but he does have his good points. For one thing, he pays in full, in advance," June said, as she pivoted and back-kicked her foot, striking Nicole in the chest. Nicole flipped over the rail and plummeted four stories toward the hard paying stones below.

And just before she hit the ground, Nicole let the suicide note fall from her hands and looked up. She saw June leaning over the balcony, watching her fall.

In the seconds before her head struck the granite, Nicole's life did not flash before her eyes. She didn't beg whatever God was in heaven to forgive her for plotting her husband's death. All she did was regret that she wouldn't live long enough to give WetWork1239 a very negative review on social media.

Phoef Sutton is a New York Times bestselling author. The winner of two Emmy Awards for his work on the classic television comedy Cheers and a Peabody Award for the legal drama Boston Legal, he also wrote for the cult FX show Terriers. As a screenwriter, his credits include Mrs. Winterbourne and The Fan, starring Robert DeNiro. He has written several features for television, including the Darrow & Darrow movies for Hallmark. Phoef has also written plays and novels, among them "Fifteen Minutes to Live" and his Crush mysteries; "Crush," "Heart Attack and Vine" and "Colorado Boulevard"—all of which received starred reviews from Kirkus. With Janet Evanovich he has co-authored "Wicked Charms" and "Curious Minds." His most recent novel is "From Awav."

He is currently producer and showrunner of the Hallmark series Chesapeake Shores.

He lives in South Pasadena, California and Vinalhaven, Maine with his wife and two daughters.

He also does a podcast with Mark Jordan Legan about weird and unusual cinema: FILM FREAKS FOREVER.

His first name is pronounced 'Feef.'

His website is phoefsutton.com and you can reach him on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram.

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"ARSENIC AND ADOBO" by Mia P. Manansala (Berkley; May 4, 2021): When Lila Macapagal moves back home to recover from a horrible breakup, her life seems to be following all the typical rom-com tropes. She's tasked with saving her Tita Rosie's failing restaurant, and she has to deal with a group of matchmaking aunties who shower her with love and judgment. But when a notoriously nasty food critic (who happens to be her ex-boyfriend) drops dead moments after a confrontation with Lila, her life quickly swerves from a Nora Ephron romp to an Agatha Christie case.

With the cops treating her like she's the one and only suspect, and the shady landlord looking to finally kick the Macapagal family out and resell

the storefront, Lila's left with no choice but to conduct her own investigation. Armed with the nosy auntie network, her barista best bud, and her trusted Dachshund, Longanisa, Lila takes on this tasty, twisted case and soon finds her own neck on the chopping block...

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Mia P. Manansala (M.P.M.): Either "Act Your Age, Eve Brown" by Talia Hibbert, a hilarious, sexy, and inclusive rom-com; or "Miss Moriarty, I Presume?" by Sherry Thomas, the latest in the excellent Lady Sherlock series. Each book somehow just gets better and better, and I'd hate her if I didn't love her so much.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

Photography

M.P.M.: "Homicide and Halo-Halo" (Book 2 in the Tita Rosie's Kitchen Mystery series) comes out February 8, and Book 3 (can't share the title yet) comes out October 2022. As for anything else, I can't say since nothing is official yet. Keep your fingers crossed that I'll have some big news to announce in 2022!

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

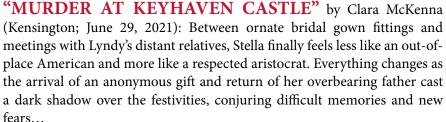
M.P.M.: My favorite superheroes are Wonder Woman (of course) and Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel. Kamala Khan is just a geeky Brown girl whose love and loyalty to her family, friends, and city drive everything she does, which I find so fun and relatable. My love for Wonder Woman is best encapsulated in this quote by comics writer Gail Simone: "If you need to stop an asteroid, you call Superman. If you need to solve a mystery, you call Batman. But if you need to end a war, you call Wonder Woman." •



**"LITTLE BLACK BOOK"** by Kate Carlisle (Berkley; First Edition; June 29, 2021): Brooklyn and her hunky husband, security expert Derek Stone, have just returned from a delightful trip to Dharma, where the construction of their new home away from home is well underway, when a little black book arrives in the mail from Scotland. The book is a rare British first edition of "Rebecca," and there's no return address on the package. The day after the book arrives, Claire Quinn shows up at Brooklyn and Derek's home. Brooklyn met Claire when the two women worked as expert appraisers on the television show *This Old Attic*. Brooklyn appraised books on the show and Claire's expertise was in antique British weaponry, but they bonded over their shared love of gothic novels.

Claire reveals that during a recent trip to Scotland she discovered her beloved aunt was missing and her home had been ransacked. Among her aunt's belongings, Claire found the receipt for the package that wound up with Brooklyn and Derek. Claire believes both her own life and her aunt's are in danger and worries that her past may be coming back to haunt her.

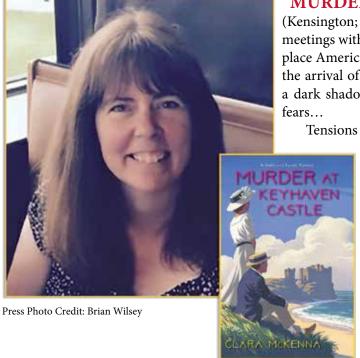
But just as Brooklyn and Derek begin to investigate, a man who Claire thinks was following her is found murdered, stabbed with a priceless jeweled dagger. With a death on their doorstep, Brooklyn and Derek page through the little black book, where they discover clues that will take them to the shadows of a medieval Scottish castle on the shores of Loch Ness. Under the watchful gaze of a mysterious laird and the irascible villagers who are suspicious of the strangers in their midst, Brooklyn and Derek must decode the secrets in "Rebecca" to keep their friend's past from destroying their future....



Tensions intensify when a daytrip to Southampton ends with a suspicious

stranger getting trampled by a horse-drawn cab. Before anyone can explain why the victim possessed a newspaper clipping about the upcoming ceremony at Morrington Hall, tragedy strikes again, this time resulting in a murder that turns Stella's world completely upside down while implicating one of Lyndy's well-regarded family members...

Facing loss, postponed nuptials, and uncertain threats, Stella and Lyndy rush to connect two very different crimes and identify the guilty culprit hiding among elite wedding guests. But as the couple blows the lid off of scandalous secrets, they realize that catching this killer—and living to tell the tale—may prove as impossible as closing the class divide.



Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Clara McKenna (C.M.): Agatha Christie meets Downton Abbey with horse racing!

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

C.M.: I'm thrilled that "Murder at the Majestic Hotel," the fourth book in the Stella and Lyndy Mystery series will be released in the fall.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

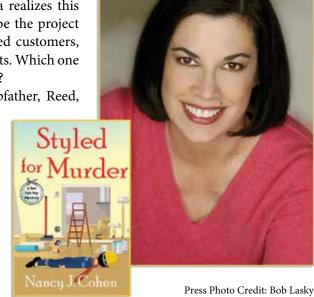
C.M.: Thanks for asking! I absolutely love "Medicus" by Ruth Downie and tell everyone who is willing to listen. Set in England during the Roman Era, historical mystery doesn't get any better than this!

"STYLED FOR MURDER" by Nancy J. Cohen (Orange Grove Press; November 15, 2021): When hairstylist and savvy sleuth, Marla Vail, gets a frantic call from her mother that there's a dead body in her shower, Marla realizes this wasn't part of the home renovation plans. The victim turns out to be the project manager, who had an untrustworthy reputation in town. Disgruntled customers, unpaid suppliers, and the design company's staff are among the suspects. Which one of them wanted the foreman to pipe down about their shady dealings?

Meanwhile, the lead investigator sets his sights on Marla's stepfather, Reed, who's keeping secrets from his family. Reed has a past connection to the victim and won't come clean about what he knows. As Marla drills deeper, she's showered with suspicions, but nobody's willing to leak any information. She needs to hammer down the prospects, or time will drain away and the murderer will strike again.

To flush out the culprit, Marla taps into her pipeline of resources. Can she assemble the clues and demolish the alibis to nail a killer? Or has someone designed the perfect murder?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?



Nancy J. Cohen (N.J.C.): This year, I breezed through the entire Star Kingdom science fiction series by Lindsay Buroker. I loved that the hero, Casmir Dabrowski, was a scientist and robotics specialist. His quirky but engaging personality captures your attention as he's swept into a conflict that spans the stars. Following his adventures was a true treat. Distinctive secondary characters, twisty plot threads, great world building and plenty of action made these books into page-turners.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

N.J.C.: I'll be working on the next Bad Hair Day Mystery (#18), revising another project, and publishing box set #5 in my series.

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

N.J.C.: I'll go with Harry Potter as the hero and Voldemort as the villain. Of course, I like Hermione Granger because she's a brainy heroine and an achiever in school like me. I've read all the books and love the movies.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

N.J.C.: I am truly thrilled for my book to be chosen as a Best of 2021 Cozy Mystery. It's sweet validation and makes me feel my writing is meaningful. I will be sharing the news and pasting the badge on my website and proudly claiming this designation. Thank you to Suspense Magazine for this exciting news.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

N.J.C.: I never thought I'd be writing a long-term series because when I started out, we only had one option in terms of publication. Now you have many choices. If you like your characters and setting, be sure you own the rights and then continue it on your own if that's your desire. Plan for a series from the beginning and keep detailed notes. Have faith in yourself and never give up. Follow the three P's—Professionalism, Practice, and Persistence.



"BLACKOUT" by Marco Carocari (Level Best Books; March 30, 2021): Strait-laced forty-something Franco definitely picked the wrong night to get freaky. A hook-up with a hot guy on his Manhattan rooftop, and a joint he's unaware is laced, leaves him dazed. And—if memory serves him—the sole witness to a murder across the street.

Except, the cops can't find a crime scene or a body, and Franco's perforated recollections and conflicting testimony leave the detectives unimpressed. When days later the mutilated body of a philanthropic millionaire is discovered, he's not only shocked to learn he knew

him, but with Franco's fingerprints all over the crime scene, he quickly graduates from unreliable witness to prime suspect. And the random trick who could alibi him has vanished into the anonymity of the Internet.

Unsettled, and confronted with forty-year-old memories, when Franco's father was murdered in front of him during Manhattan's infamous blackout, a shocking revelation finally unmasks the man who pulled the trigger that night. And painting Franco the perfect suspect.

With a target on his back and time running out, the truth will set Franco free, or earn him a toe tag at the morgue.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Press Photo Credit: 2021 Mark Gutkowski

Marco Carocari (M.C.): Razor Blade Tears / S.A. Cosby.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

M.C.: I'm blown away and incredibly moved that "Blackout" resonated with so many people. Thank you so much, Suspense Magazine, and everyone who voted!

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

M.C.: My short story, "All In The Planning" in the upcoming Malice Domestic 16: "Mystery Most Diabolical" anthology, and my wrinkled mug at SAS Fest, LCC, Malice Domestic, Thrillerfest, and Bouchercon.

**"FINDING TESSA"** by Jaime Lynn Hendricks (Scarlet; May 11, 2021): Jace and Tessa appear to be a young couple in love with nothing to hide. But looks can be deceiving.

When Jace Montgomery comes home late from entertaining clients, he discovers that his wife Tessa is missing. There's broken glass at the back door. Clumps of her hair. Blood. The cops in their small New Jersey town have him pegged as a suspect, especially after he explodes at a reporter during a press conference. Jace maintains his innocence despite the mounting evidence against him, but when a coworker he's accused of having an affair with also disappears and a search warrant turns up an illegal gun in Jace's home, all signs point to him as the culprit. What is he really hiding?

Meanwhile, Tessa finally feels safe, having set up her husband to take the fall for her disappearance—and someone close to

him is helping her put him away. Breaking her lifelong pattern of bad men is only one hurdle she has to overcome. The other is outrunning her secret past while trying to stay alive, especially when those in her new life aren't who they appear to be.

Jace's lies don't add up and the authorities are closing in. Will Tessa's old life catch up to her and drag her back to a life of abuse before justice is served?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Jaime Lynn Hendricks (J.L.H.): The best book I read in 2021 was a debut, "In my Dreams I Hold a Knife" by Ashley Winstead. It combined everything I love about thrillers: a fast pace, delicious twists, characters I love to hate, and a shocking ending.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

J.L.H. "It Could be Anyone" releases May 10, 2022. Five friends with life-ruining secrets are being blackmailed by the groom at their friend's destination wedding, and when he drops dead at the reception, one of them took him out. Was it one of the happily married couple, the playboy, the good guy, or the divorcee? Who had a secret worth killing for?

FINDIN

TESSA

NE LYNN HENDRICKS

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain?

J.L.H.: Without a doubt, Joe Goldberg from the You series by Caroline Kepnes. I never thought I'd root so hard for a sociopathic murderer, but Caroline writes him so loveable yet so creepy at the same time. She makes voice look easy, and I devoured those books in less than 24 hours each. I cannot wait for number four in the series!

**"SAVING GRACE"** by Debbie Babitt (Scarlet; March 16, 2021): "I'm the only one who knows what happened to those girls..."

For twenty-four years, Mary Grace Dobbs has been searching for salvation. Orphaned at eleven, she was forced to go live with her Bible salesman uncle, wheelchair-bound aunt, and a cousin who tortured and killed small animals. At school, a bully made her life a nightmare. Everything changed when a newcomer to town became her only best friend, and changed a second time when that friend and another classmate vanished two months later, never to be seen again.

Today, Mary Grace is the first female sheriff of her rural town, a position that doesn't sit well with some of the locals. Keeping order and her demons at bay becomes an impossible task when the Black drifter suspected in the earlier disappearances returns to Repentance...and another sixth grader vanishes.

With old prejudices and new secrets spilling out into the open, the modern world soon illuminates the village's darkest corners. The case becomes even more fraught as a cult of white supremacists brings its gospel of hate to Repentance and violence explodes, claiming more lives. Racing to find the missing girl while fearing for the

safety of her own sixth-grade daughter, Mary Grace must confront an unspeakable truth—and face a decision no parent should ever have to make.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Debbie Babitt (D.B.): "To Kill a Mockingbird" meets The Bad Seed!

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?



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Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

D.B.: My next thriller launches June 14, 2022. "First Victim" features a Manhattan Supreme court judge presiding over a murder trial whose past catches up with her, forcing her to choose between justice and revenge. I can't wait to share this new novel with readers. The art studio did a bang-up job with the cover, which I'm told looks like a poster for a movie. Keep fingers crossed!

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be \_\_\_\_\_\_.

D.B.: A Broadway musical book and lyrics writer. I adore musicals, especially the old ones. I am still deeply grieving the death of one of the world's greatest composers and lyricists—Stephen Sondheim. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning musical, Sunday in the Park with George, he wrote the seminal lyrics about the art of creativity: "Finishing the Hat." My fantasy would be to write a murder mystery musical! Maybe one day...

**"THE GUILTY HUSBAND"** by Stephanie DeCarolis (HQ Digital; March 19, 2021): *It only takes one lie to destroy a marriage.* 

THE PERFECT HUSBAND...

Vince Taylor has everything he could dream of. He's the CEO of a tech firm in New York City, owns a beautiful home, and most importantly, he is married to Nicole—the woman who stole his heart the first moment he set eyes on her. Together they have built the perfect life.

ONE GUILTY SECRET

But when Layla, a stunning young intern at Vince's company is found dead, all eyes are suddenly on him. Vince has a secret that threatens to tear their perfect world apart...

He was having an affair with Layla. And he'll do anything to cover his tracks.

DO YOU BELIEVE HIM?

When the police discover Vince lied about their relationship, they are convinced they have found Layla's killer.

If Vince kept quiet about the affair...what else is he guilty of?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

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STEPHANIE DECAROLIS
THE
GUILTY
HUSBAND

Press Photo Credit: Provided by
Author

Stephanie DeCarolis (S.D.): It looks like 2022 will be a big year for me! My new release, "Deadly Little Lies" (now available as an ebook), will have its first paperback run in February 2022, and the US paperback edition of "The Guilty Husband" will be hitting shelves here in March. I also have a new thriller in the works that I hope I'll be sharing with you all very soon!

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

S.D.: Go for it. Write the story. Publish the book. I don't think I'm alone in this when I say that publishing your first book can sometimes feel like you're on an emotional rollercoaster. It's both exhilarating and nerve-wracking to put your work out into the world. It can be a very vulnerable experience when you choose to share something so close to your heart. But I can say with certainty that the risk is worth the reward. There will be highs and there will be lows. There will be people who love your book, and people that don't. There will be days where you feel like you're on top of the world, and days when you wonder why you ever published a book in the first place. But don't lose sight of why you started on this journey—you have a story to tell, and a love for writing. So write the book. Put your whole heart into it, and don't be too afraid to share it with the world. Your story deserves to be heard. Your book will find its readers, and when it does, it makes it all worthwhile.

S. MAG.: What is the best book you read in 2021?

S.D.: This is a tough one as I've read some really incredible books this year across so many genres! But in the thriller/suspense space, I'd have to go with "Verity" by Colleen Hoover. It's one of those stories that will still give you chills long after you turn the last page!



**"A GOOD DAY FOR CHARDONNAY"** by Darynda Jones (St. Martin's Press; July 27, 2021): Running a small-town police force in the mountains of New Mexico should be a smooth, carefree kind of job. Sadly, full-time Sheriff—and even fuller-time coffee guzzler—Sunshine Vicram, didn't get that memo.

All Sunshine really wants is one easy-going day. You know, the kind that starts with coffee and a donut (or three) and ends with take-out pizza and a glass of chardonnay (or seven). Turns out, that's about as easy as switching to decaf. (What kind of people do that? And who hurt them?)

Before she can say *iced mocha latte*, Sunny's got a bar fight gone bad, a teenage daughter hunting a serial killer and, oh yes, the still unresolved mystery of her own abduction years prior. All evidence points to a local distiller, a dangerous bad boy named Levi Ravinder, but Sun knows he's not the villain of her story. Still, perhaps beneath it all, he possesses the keys to her disappearance. At the very least, beneath it all, he possesses a serious set of abs. She's seen it. Once. Accidentally.

Between policing a town her hunky chief deputy calls *four cents short of a nickel*, that pesky crush she has on Levi which seems to grow exponentially every day, and an irascible raccoon that just doesn't know when to quit, Sunny's life is about to rocket to a whole new level of crazy.

Yep, definitely a good day for chardonnay.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

Darynda Jones (D.J.): The third book in the Sunshine Vicram series, "A Hard Day for a Hangover," comes out in December '22, but expect about three more releases from me, including more in the Betwixt and Between series and a 1001 Dark Nights novella from the world of Charley Davidson.

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

D.J.: I love villains with incredible backstories, so Loki is pretty high on my list. Same with any protagonist. Right now I am madly in love with Daisy from Robyn Peterman's Good to the Last Death series.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

D.J.: Are you kidding? I am beyond honored! Thank you to everyone who nominated Chardonnay. It means the world to me that readers are loving the book so much.

**"SAY GOODBYE"** by Karen Rose (Berkley; August 3, 2021): For decades, Eden has remained hidden in the remote wilds of the Pacific Northwest, "Pastor" keeping his cult's followers in thrall for his personal profit and sexual pleasures. But the Founding Elders are splintering, and Pastor's surrogate son DJ is scheming to make it all his own.



Press Photo Credit: Donita Massey Privett

When two of Eden's newest members send out a cry for help, it reaches FBI Special Agent Tom Hunter, whose friend and fellow FBI Special Agent Gideon Reynolds and his sister, Mercy, are themselves escapees of the Eden cult, targeted by the Founding Elders who want them silenced forever. The three have vowed to find the cult and bring it down, and now, they finally have a solid lead.

Neutralizing Eden's threat will save captive members and ensure Tom's new friends can live without fear. But when his best friend, ex-Army combat medic Liza Barkley, joins the case,

it puts her life—and their blossoming love—in danger. With everything they hold dear in the balance, Tom and Liza, together with Gideon and Mercy, must end Eden once and for all.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Karen Rose (K.R.): Police procedure + Drama + Romance + Bad guys punished = Happily Ever After. (PS: I was a math teacher.)

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?



Deborah Feingold

K.R.: I have a brand new series coming out in August 2022! Set in New Orleans, it follows the private investigators of Broussard Investigations as they crack the cases that no one else has been able to. There is a whole new cast of characters, plus a few crossover characters, so readers will get a chance to visit with old friends and meet new ones. The first book is "Quarter to Midnight." I hope folks love it!

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

K.R.: Nearly ten years ago, I was signing books near London and a nice woman dragged in a rolling suitcase full of my books, asking me to sign them. I was honored of course! So, as I was signing the third book in the stack, she leaned in to whisper, "My husband used to get quite irritated with me when I read your books because I'd block out everything, including him. But then he realized that after I finished a book, he'd be quite happy." And she winked at me. I laughed and signed the next book, "I'm happy to help you keep your husband happy!"

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

K.R.: I'm honored when readers choose to spend time reading my books! To be chosen as a "Best of" makes it even sweeter. There was a time not so long ago when I had to carefully choose the books I'd read. I was working three jobs and money was very tight, so spending money on a book and taking the valuable "me-time" to read one meant that I had to make the most of that book. I'm grateful to every single reader who chooses to spend their money and their time with my characters—the good guys and the villains! Thank you all so very much! •

"THE ARRANGEMENT" by Kiersten Modglin (Independently published; June 11, 2021): The arrangement was just meant to fix their marriage.

*No one was supposed to get hurt.* 

But when the rules of this open marriage are broken, the consequences are sinister.

Ainsley Greenburg is a fixer.

It's what she prides herself on.

So, when she realizes her marriage is at its breaking point, she makes a decision to repair it, no matter the cost. Approaching her husband to propose the arrangement is supposed to be the hard part, but Peter agrees to the salacious plan almost immediately. *The rules are simple:* 



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

- They will each date someone new once a week.
- They will never discuss what happens on the dates.

Soon, though, the rules are broken, turning terrible mistakes into unspeakable consequences.

When the only person they can count on to keep their darkest secret is each other, new questions and deceits surface. Can they truly trust the person they share a life with, or will the vicious lies that have mounted over the years destroy everything they've built?

Once, Peter and Ainsley vowed to stand together forever, but as they push boundaries of deception, suspicion, and temptation, each begins to wonder if 'til death do us part may come sooner than they'd intended

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

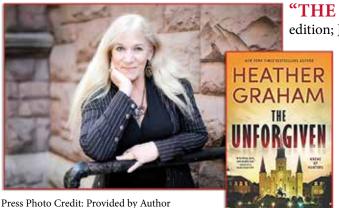
Kiersten Modglin (K.M.): An open marriage takes a wrong turn, with sinister consequences.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

K.M.: It honestly means the world to me. That's so cliche to say, but it's true. Indie authors are so often overlooked for literary contests and awards, so to find myself here among authors I greatly admire is just a dream come true. It's also a testament to how incredible my readers are. I have some of the best readers in the world, who will shout about my books from the rooftops and, without them, I wouldn't be where I am today. I'm so grateful for their support.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

K.M.: My advice to aspiring writers is this: Keep going. Keep writing. Keep believing in yourself. Keep searching for your readers. Trust me, they're out there and they're looking for your books. No matter how far it feels like you are away from your dreams, know that they can all come true tomorrow. In the blink of an eye. But you have to keep putting yourself out there and risking failure until you're able to get where you want to be. So often, we want to quit because it all feels impossible. It feels like we're screaming into the void, trekking up a huge mountain, and gaining no traction. But everything you do for this career, be it a baby step or a leap, is putting you that much closer to where you want to be. You can't succeed if you don't try. If you give up today, you'll never know if you would've made it tomorrow. Everyone's journey looks a little different in this career, but the one thing we must have in common is a love of what we're doing and a determination to find the readers who will love it as much as we do. Just keep going.  $\blacksquare$ 



"THE UNFORGIVEN" by Heather Graham (MIRA; Original edition; June 8, 2021): A tragic past. An uncertain future.

Twelve years after the grisly murder of her parents, Kaitlyn Delaney has finally found peace. She has friends, a good job, a place to call home and a new life to live. But then a shadow creeps in from Katie's past, reminding her that she will never completely escape its terrifying grip.

When private investigator Dan Oliver is called to the scene of a gruesome crime in New Orleans, he can't help but hear echoes of the Delaney case, the unsolved murder that made him leave law enforcement. As he digs deeper, he unearths more chilling similarities—including mysterious letters connecting the killer to a string of murders that terrorized the Big Easy in 1919.

Now reunited after all this time, Dan and Katie scour the streets together, desperate to find answers before more lives are lost. But the otherworldly roots of this evil run far deeper than they ever imagined...and only the most precious of sacrifices will bring its twisted reign to an end.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Heather Graham (H.G.): I went on a binge with old classics. So... "A Tale of Two Cities," an all-time favorite.

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

H.G.: Criminal Minds *meets* Supernatural.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

H.G.: I've started a series based on the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The first, "Danger in Numbers," was published this year and the paperback will be out in January. The second in the series will be out in April—both feature a lot of my home territory, the Florida Everglades, and an FDLA agent and an FBI agent who specializes in occult crimes, having come far too close to a cult tragedy in his youth. Also, the next three in the Krewe series will be out in summer, this time featuring triplets, each with a unique and special talent. All will be for Mira, and a Krewe novella will come out from 1001 Dark Nights. Readers also know short stories (5-7,000 words or so) come out with holiday newsletters and are available on Amazon for .99 cents—or my website for free.

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

H.G.: A wee bit scary. I was asked to sign his bicep at a BEA. The young man came back the next day to show me my signature as his new tattoo.

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

H.G.: No question! Maleficent. For heroine, I have to go with Wonder Woman!

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

H.G.: I'm honored and so grateful. I love what I do, and I'm so grateful that my work is enjoyed.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

H.G.: Never forget to read—a good book reminds us of why we long to write! Then, be disciplined. Even if life has you going crazy, be true to the time you dedicate, even if it's only an hour a week. If you fall down, get back up. And never, ever, let anyone dissuade you from your dreams. Keep going! We can be anything in the world first, any age, any anything—and it's the words and the story that matter.

S. MAG.: If you could be a superhero, which one would you be? And what is that one special gift of his/hers you want to have and why?

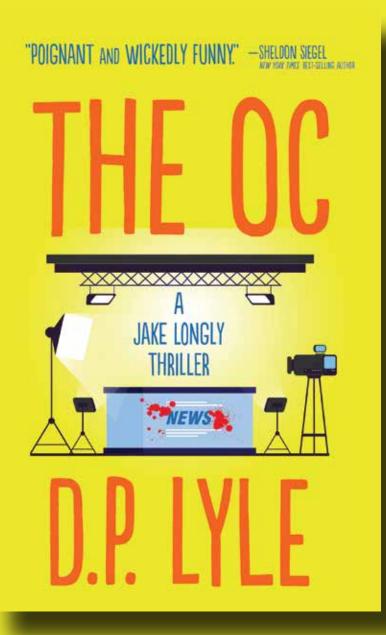
H.G.: LOL. Supergirl (I guess she grows into Superwoman) because I'd love to think that I'd fight for truth, justice, and the American way.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

H.G.: There are many wonderful books out there—that's impossible to choose!

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be\_\_\_\_\_\_

H.G.: I was working in dinner theater when it became too hard with a third child on the way. I always teased that I'd come back as Lady MacBeth's mom. Now, I'd have to be her grandmother, but hey...still love theater, and to that end, the Slushpile Players (having featured, at times, Charlaine Harris, Daniel Palmer, David Morrell, Don Bruns, Alexandra Sokoloff, Harley Jane Kozak, F. Paul Wilson and many more friends) create events at conferences. (When we can have conferences!)



## "Witty, fast-moving adventure."

-LEE GOLDBERG

New York Times best-selling author





### URBAN FANTASY/ PARANORMAL



"A TERRIBLE FALL OF ANGELS" by Laurell K. Hamilton (Berkley; August 17, 2021): Meet Detective Zaniel Havelock, a man with the special ability to communicate directly with angels. A former trained Angel speaker, he devoted his life to serving both the celestial beings and his fellow humans with his gift, but a terrible betrayal compelled him to leave that life behind. Now he's a cop who is still working on the side of angels. But where there are angels, there are also demons. There's no question that there's evil at work when he's called in to examine the murder scene of a college student—but is it just the evil that one human being can do to another, or is it something more? When demonic possession is a possibility, even angelic protection can only

go so far. The race is on to stop a killer before he finds his next victim, as Zaniel is forced to confront his own very personal demons, and the past he never truly left behind.

**"CHILDREN OF CHICAGO"** by Cynthia Pelayo (Agora Books; March 9, 2021): This horrifying retelling of the Pied Piper fairytale set in present-day Chicago is an edge of your seat, chills up the spine, thrill ride.



When Detective Lauren Medina sees the calling card at a murder scene in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood, she knows the Pied Piper has returned. When another teenager is brutally murdered at the same lagoon where her sister's body was found floating years before, she is certain that the Pied Piper is not just back, he's looking for payment he's owed from her. Lauren's torn between protecting the city she has sworn to

keep safe, and keeping a promise she made long ago with her sister's murderer. She may have to ruin her life by exposing her secrets and lies to stop the Pied Piper before he collects. ■

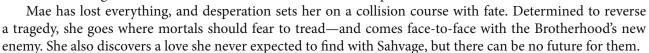


"LIGHTNING GAME" by Christine Feehan (Berkley; First Edition; March 2, 2021): GhostWalker Rubin Campo's rough upbringing made him into the man he is today: strong, steadfast and wary of outsiders. When he and his brother return to their family's homestead in the Appalachian Mountains, he can immediately sense that a stranger has taken up residence in their cabin—a woman who just happens to be a GhostWalker too.

Jonquille looks deceptively delicate but is clearly a fighter. She also doesn't seem to care that Rubin could kill her where she stands. She sought him out, wanting to connect on their shared interest in electrical charges.

As one of the first failed GhostWalker experiments, Jonquille can produce lightning with her body—but she can't control it. Their connection is magnetic, their abilities in sync. Rubin knows she's his match, the answer to a lifetime of pain and intense loneliness. But Jonquille came to him with hidden intentions, ones that threaten to destroy their bond before it can truly begin....

"LOVER UNVEILED" by J.R. Ward (Gallery Books; April 20, 2021): Sahvage has been living under the radar for centuries—and he has every intention of staying "dead and buried." But when a civilian female sucks him into her dangerous battle with an evil as ancient as time, his protective side overrides his common sense.



Knowing they will part, the two band together to fight against what Mae unknowingly unleashed—as the Brotherhood closes in to reclaim one of their damned, and the evil vows to destroy them all....



# HISTORICAL BEST 2021

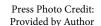
**"ABIGAIL OF VENICE"** by Leigh Russell (Bloodhound Books; September 24, 2021): When soldiers attack the inhabitants of a Jewish ghetto in sixteenth-century Lithuania, Abigail manages to escape both the attack and her abusive husband, Reuven. She travels over land and sea to Venice, where she settles in another ghetto. Believing Reuven is dead, Abigail falls in love with her widowed neighbour, Daniel. But before Abigail and Daniel announce their betrothal, her violent husband reappears.

Reuven is arrested for drunken brawling and sentenced to slavery in the galleys.

Abigail hopes she has finally seen the last of him, but he returns to Venice, and Abigail fears she will never be free of him...

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

Leigh Russell (L.R.): Some of you may have come across Daleks in the television series Doctor Who. Like many of my generation, as a young child I was terrified of them. A few years ago I was invited to sign my books at a fun event in London, where many members of the public attended in fancy dress. To my surprise, a



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Dalek approached my table asking for a signed book. The lid of the Dalek rose up and a hand appeared.

Of course I knew this was just a man being wheeled around in a plastic Dalek shell, but our childhood fears run deep and I had to ask someone else to hand him a book.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

Leigh Russell

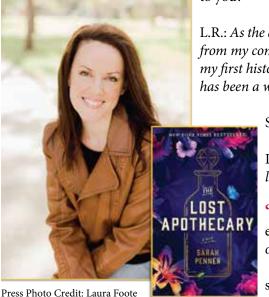
L.R.: As the author of a contemporary crime series, writing a historical novel was a departure from my comfort zone. The extensive research was fascinating, but I was nervous about how my first historical novel would be received. To be chosen as a 'Best of' by Suspense Magazine has been a wonderful validation of my work. Thank you to everyone who made this happen.

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be . .

L.R.: If I wasn't an author, I would return to my first passion and spend all my leisure time reading.

"THE LOST APOTHECARY" by Sarah Penner (Park Row; Original edition; March 2, 2021): A forgotten history. A secret network of women. A legacy of poison and revenge. Welcome to The Lost Apothecary...

Hidden in the depths of eighteenth-century London, a secret apothecary shop caters to an unusual kind of clientele. Women across the city whisper of



a mysterious figure named Nella who sells well-disguised poisons to use against the oppressive men in their lives. But the apothecary's fate is jeopardized when her newest patron, a precocious twelve-year-old, makes a fatal mistake, sparking a string of consequences that echo through the centuries.

Meanwhile in present-day London, aspiring historian Caroline Parcewell spends her tenth wedding anniversary alone, running from her own demons. When she stumbles upon a clue to the unsolved apothecary murders that haunted London two hundred years ago, her life collides with the apothecary's in a stunning twist of fate—and not everyone will survive.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Sarah Penner (S.P.): "We Keep the Dead Close" by Becky Cooper. Nonfiction, true crime. Intricate, spectacular investigation. With a feminist bent, too. I wish I could give it a thousand stars.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

S.P.: The announcement about my next book! The paperback for "The Lost Apothecary" also releases on February 22, 2022, and I'm looking forward to doing a US paperback tour as well as a visit to the UK.

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be \_\_\_\_\_\_.

S.P.: An archivist at the British Library! Preferably working in the Rare Books room.



Press Photo Credit: John Quin-Harkin

"THE VENICE SKETCHBOOK" by Rhys Bowen (Lake Union Publishing; 1st edition; April 13, 2021): Caroline Grant is struggling to accept the end of her marriage when she receives an unexpected bequest. Her beloved great-aunt Lettie leaves her a sketchbook, three keys, and a final whisper... Venice. Caroline's quest: to scatter Juliet "Lettie" Browning's ashes in the city she loved and to unlock the mysteries stored away for more than sixty years.

It's 1938 when art teacher Juliet Browning arrives in romantic Venice. For her students, it's a wealth of history, art, and beauty. For Juliet, it's poignant memories and a chance to reconnect with Leonardo Da Rossi, the man she

loves whose future is already determined by his noble family. However star-crossed, nothing can come between them. Until the threat of war closes in on Venice and they're forced to fight, survive, and protect a secret that will bind them forever.

Key by key, Lettie's life of impossible love, loss, and courage unfolds. It's one that Caroline can now make right again as her own journey of self-discovery begins.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Rhys Bowen (R.B.): "Once Upon a Wardrobe" by Patti Callahan.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

R.B.: Another WWII novel, this one about loss, the Blitz, and building a new life from the rubble. It's called "Where the Sky Begins." Also, after five years, a new Molly Murphy book called "Wild Irish Rose." This time written with my daughter!

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

R.B.: I got an email saying 'I'm listening to the audio of your "Royal Spyness" book in the car while I watch my house being destroyed in the flood (this was during a Texas hurricane). It is the only thing that's helping me hold it together. I had all your books!'

I wrote back and said she should let me know when she had a new place to live and I would send her a complete set of my

books, signed. She wrote later and I sent the books. Then, at a book signing in Houston this pretty girl came up to me. "I'm Lauren," she said. We hugged and cried. It's things like that that make an author's life worthwhile.

#### "THE WORLD PLAYED CHESS" by Robert Dugoni

(Lake Union Publishing; September 14, 2021): In 1979, Vincent Bianco has just graduated high school. His only desire: collect a little beer money and enjoy his final summer before college.

So he lands a job as a laborer on a construction crew. Working alongside two Vietnam vets, one suffering from PTSD, Vincent gets the education of a lifetime. Now forty years later, with his own son leaving



for college, the lessons of that summer—Vincent's last taste of innocence and first taste of real life—dramatically unfold in a novel about breaking away, shaping a life, and seeking one's own destiny.

ROBERT DUGON

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

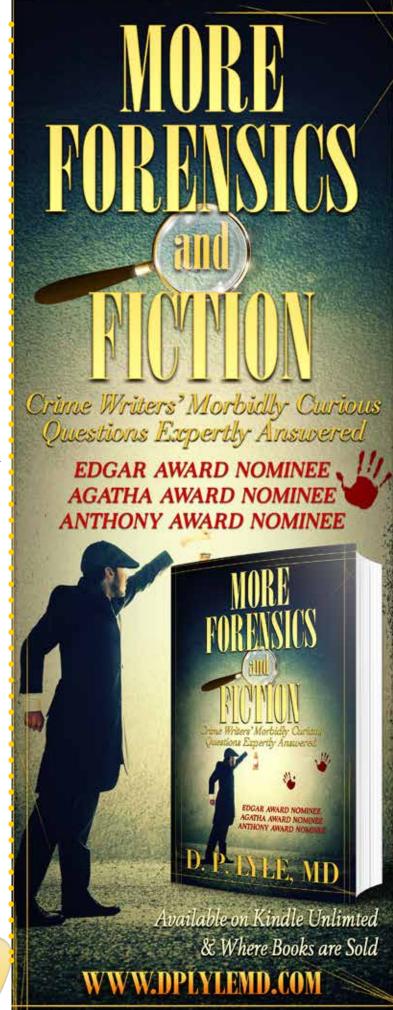
Robert Dugoni (R.D.): One Summer. One young man. The education of a lifetime.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

R.D.: In 2022, readers can expect from me, the next Charles Jenkins espionage thriller, "The Silent Sisters," the next Tracy Crosswhite thriller, "What She Found," and a new legal thriller with a new female defense attorney I'm very excited about.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

R.D.: Having "The World Played Chess" chosen by Suspense Magazine as one of the best books of 2021 is a validation that my work resonated with readers on a visceral level and had an emotional resonance. That's everything an author can ask of his work.

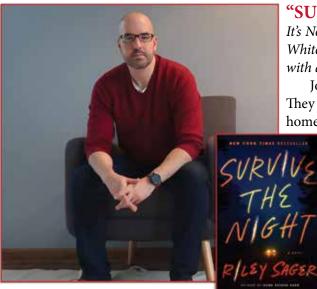




**"COME WITH ME"** by Ronald Malfi (Titan Books; July 20, 2021): Aaron Decker's life changes one December morning when his wife Allison is killed. Haunted by her absence—and her ghost—Aaron goes through her belongings, where he finds a receipt for a motel room in another part of the country. Piloted by grief and an increasing sense of curiosity, Aaron embarks on a journey to discover what Allison had been doing in the weeks prior to her death.



Yet Aaron is unprepared to discover the dark secrets Allison kept, the death and horror that make up the tapestry of her hidden life. And with each dark secret revealed, Aaron becomes more and more consumed by his obsession to learn the terrifying truth about the woman who had been his wife, even if it puts his own life at risk.



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

**"SURVIVE THE NIGHT"** by Riley Sager (Dutton; June 29, 2021): It's November 1991. Nirvana's in the tape deck, George H. W. Bush is in the White House, and movie-obsessed college student Charlie Jordan is in a car with a man who might be a serial killer.

Josh Baxter, the man behind the wheel, is a virtual stranger to Charlie. They met at the campus ride board, each looking to share the long drive home to Ohio. Both have good reasons for wanting to get away. For Charlie,

it's guilt and grief over the shocking murder of her best friend, who became the third victim of the man known as the Campus Killer. For Josh, it's to help care for his sick father—or so he says.

The longer she sits in the passenger seat, the more Charlie notices there's something suspicious about Josh, from the holes in his story about his father to how he doesn't want her to see inside the trunk. As they travel an empty, twisty highway in the dead of night, an increasingly anxious Charlie begins to think she's sharing a car with the Campus Killer. Is Josh truly dangerous? Or is Charlie's jittery mistrust merely a figment of her movie-fueled imagination?

One thing is certain—Charlie has nowhere to run and no way

to call for help. Trapped in a terrifying game of cat and mouse played out on pitch-black roads and in neon-lit parking lots, Charlie knows the only way to win is to survive the night.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Riley Sager (R.S.): This one's easy. It's the same six-word pitch I gave to my editor when I first got the idea for "Survive the Night": A girl. A killer. A car.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

R.S.: My next book, "The House Across the Lake," comes out in June. I had such a blast writing it. It truly was the most fun I've ever had working on a book, mostly because it goes to places I've never explored before in my writing. With this one, I had a lot of tricks up my sleeve, and I really enjoyed getting to employ them.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

R.S.: There are dozens. But if forced to pick just one, I'd say "Misery" by Stephen King. It's a master class in suspense and character building. Plus, with Annie Wilkes, King gave us one of the greatest villains in literary history.

#### LAST HOUSE **NEEDLESS** ON



STREET" by Catriona Ward (Tor Nightfire; 1st edition; September 28, 2021): In a boarded-up house on a dead-end street at the edge of the wild Washington woods lives a family of three.

A teenage girl who isn't allowed outside, not after last time.

A man who drinks alone in front of his TV, trying to ignore the gaps in his memory.

And a house cat who loves napping and reading the Bible. An unspeakable secret binds them together, but when a new neighbor moves in next door, what is buried out among the birch trees may come back to haunt them all. •

#### "CHASING THE BOOGEYMAN" by Richard

Chizmar (Gallery Books; August 17, 2021): In the summer of 1988, the mutilated bodies of several missing girls begin to turn up in a small Maryland town. The grisly evidence leads police to the terrifying assumption that a serial killer is on the loose in the quiet suburb. But soon a rumor begins to spread that the evil stalking local teens is



not entirely human. Law enforcement, as well as members of the FBI, are certain that the killer is a living, breathing madman—and he's playing games with them. For a once peaceful community trapped in the depths of paranoia and suspicion, it feels like a nightmare that will never end.

Recent college graduate Richard Chizmar returns to his hometown just as a curfew is enacted and a neighborhood watch is formed. Amid preparing for his wedding and embarking on a writing career, he soon finds himself thrust into a real-life horror story. Inspired by the terrifying events, Richard writes a personal account of the serial killer's reign of terror, unaware that these events will continue to haunt him for years to come.



"LAST TO DIE" by Tess Gerritsen (Random House Publishing Group: August 2012). For the second time in his short life, Teddy Clock has survived a massacre. Two years ago, he barely escaped when his entire family was slaughtered. Now, at fourteen, in a hadeous echo of the past, Teddy is the ione survivor of his foster family's mass marrier. Orphaned once more, the transmitted teenager has nowhere to turn—until the Boston PD puts detective Jane Rizzoll on the case. Determined to protect this young man, Jane discovers that what seemed like a coincidence is instead just one horsifying part of a releatless believe in the case.

Jane spirits Teddy to the exclusive Evensong boarding school, a sanctuary where young victims of violent crime learn the secrets and skills of survival in a dangerous world. But even behind locked gates, and surrounded by acres of sholtering Maine wilderness, Jane fears that Evensong's mysterious benefactors aren't the only ones watching. When strange blood-splaitered dolls are found dangling from a tree, Jane knows that her instincts are dead on. And when she meets Will Tablonski and Claire Ward, students whose tragic pasts bear a shocking resemblance to Teddy's, it becomes chillingly clear that a circling predator has more than one victim in mind.

Joining focces with her trusted partner, medical examiner Maura Isles, Jane is determined to keep these orphans safe from harm. But an unspeakable secret dooms the children's fate--unless Jane and Maura can finally put an end to an obsessed killer's twisted quest.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): If you were to write a book aring an animal as the protagonist, what animal would

Tess Gerritsen (T.G.): Cuts and dogs have been done to death as fictional protagonists, for good reason: they are humans' constant companions and they know us more intimately than any other animal. But to be new and different, I think I neight try a book from the point of view of a crow or raven. They have always struck me as beenly intelligent, they have the capacity

to mimic human speech, and I've watched them at their "conferences" in the trees, where dozens of them to communicate vortant message, and then fly off different directions again. I like magine they see and know more about see than we think.

S. MAG.: What is the first name that S. MAG.: What is the first name that comes to mind you would use to fit this description of a protagosist? Shoet, kind of padgy, white girl but tan year-round, loudmouth and crass, afraid of only fear itself, sensitive to criticism, has one of the best smiles you've ever seen and is

T.G.: Korla





"SHE'S TOO PRETTY TO BURN" by Wendy Heard (Henry Holt and Co. (BYR); March 30, 2021): The summer is winding down in San Diego. Veronica is bored, caustically charismatic, and uninspired in her photography. Nico is insatiable, subversive, and obsessed with chaotic performance art. They're artists first, best friends second. But that was before Mick. Delicate, lonely, magnetic Mick: the perfect subject, and Veronica's dream girl. The days are long and hot—full of adventure—and soon they are falling in love. Falling so hard, they never imagine what comes next. One fire. Two murders. Three drowning

bodies. One suspect...one stalker. This is a summer they won't survive.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

Wendy Heard (W.H.): I have another YA thriller out on 5/10/22 titled "Dead End Girls." It's about two girls who fake their own deaths and go on an adventure that gets darker around every corner.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

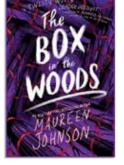
W.H.: I would say there are three areas to focus on: the craft of writing, seeking and welcoming constructive criticism, and learning about the publishing industry. You have an important voice the world needs to hear, and I really believe that if you have the dream and passion to write, and you're willing to put in the time to learn, it's well within your grasp.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

W.H.: "Interview with the Vampire"! I have always longed to write a vampire book, but I can only dream of writing one so iconic.

"THE BOX IN THE WOODS" by Maureen Johnson (Katherine Tegen Books; June 15, 2021): Amateur sleuth Stevie Bell needs a good murder. After catching a killer at her high school, she's back at home for a normal (that means boring) summer.

But then she gets a message from the owner of Sunny Pines, formerly known as Camp Wonder Falls—the site of the notorious unsolved case, the Box in the Woods Murders. Back in 1978, four camp counselors were killed in the woods outside of the town of Barlow Corners, their bodies left in a gruesome display. The new owner offers Stevie an invitation: Come to the camp and help him work on a true crime



podcast about the case.

Stevie agrees, as long as she can bring along her friends from Ellingham Academy. Nothing sounds better than a summer spent together, investigating old murders.

But something evil still lurks in Barlow Corners. When Stevie opens the lid on this long-dormant case, she gets much more than she bargained for. The Box in the Woods will make room for more victims. This time, Stevie may not make it out alive.

**"THE MARY SHELLEY CLUB"** by Goldy Moldavsky (Henry Holt and Co. (BYR); April 13, 2021): When it comes to horror movies, the rules are clear:

- X Avoid abandoned buildings, warehouses, and cabins at all times.
- X Stay together: don't split up, not even just to "check something out."
- X If there's a murderer on the loose, do *not* make out with anyone.

If only surviving in real life were this easy...

New girl Rachel Chavez turns to horror movies for comfort, preferring stabby serial killers and homicidal dolls to the bored rich kids of Manhattan Prep...and to certain memories she'd preferred to keep buried.

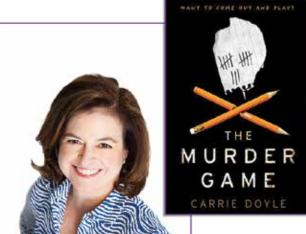
Then Rachel is recruited by the Mary Shelley Club, a mysterious society of students who orchestrate Fear Tests, elaborate pranks inspired by urban legends and movie tropes. At first, Rachel embraces the power that comes with reckless pranking. But as the Fear Tests escalate, the competition turns deadly, and it's clear Rachel is playing a game she can't afford to lose.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

Goldy Moldavsky (G.M.): An adaptation of "Lord of the Flies" called "Lord of the Fly Fest." It's an absurdist satire about influencers abandoned on an exotic island. But it also has a mystery at its core.

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

G.M.: Faith from Buffy the Vampire Slayer, because she's both hero and villain, depending on her mood.



S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Press Photo Credit:

G.M.: Like Scream, but instead of one Jamie Kennedy there's five.

**"THE MURDER GAME"** by Carrie Doyle (Sourcebooks Fire; April 6, 2021): Boarding school has never been more dangerous.

What if your roommate is a murderer? Or what if he's being framed and only you can save him?

Luke Chase made history as a child when he escaped a kidnapping. Now, all he wants is to be a normal teenager. So when he sneaks out to the woods one night to drink with friends and flirt with the new British girl at school, he's excited to feel some freedom.

Except the next morning, one of their teachers is found murdered—in the exact same spot where they had been partying. Soon, Luke's roommate and best friend Oscar is the #1 suspect.

As the evidence and list of suspects builds, Luke attempts to use his famous survival skills to find the killer and clear Oscar's name. But as Luke gets closer to the truth, the killer is getting closer to Luke.

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



And the Winner is...

"SEDUCTION" by M.J. Rose (Atria Books: May 2013); A gothic tale about Victor Hugo's long-buried secrets and the power of a love that never dies... In 1843, novelist Victor Hugo's beloved nineteen-year-old daughter drowned. Ten years later, still grieving, Hugo initiated hundreds of seances from his home on the lale of Jersey in order to restablish contact with her the process, he claimed to have communed with Placo, Calileo, Shaksepeare, Dante, Jesus--and even the devil himself. Hugo's transcriptions of these conversations have all been published.

transcriptions of these conversations have all been published.

Or so it has been believed..

Recovering from a great loss, mythologist Jac L'Etoile thinks that throwing herself into work will distract her from her grief. In the hopes of uncovering a secret about the island's mysterious Cellic roots, she arrives on Jersey and is greeted by ghostly Noolithic monuments, medieval castles, and hidden caves. But the man who has invited her there, a troubled soul named Thro Gaspard, hopes she'll help him discover something quite different—transcripts of Hugo's lost conversations with someone he called the Shadow of the Sepaulcher. Central to his heritage, these are the papers his grandfather died trying to find. Neither Jac nor Theo anticipate that the mystery aurrounding Victor Hugo will threaten their sanity and put their very lives at stake.

owe Magazine (S. MAG.); What does having your book awarded the Crimson Scribe by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

M.J. Rose (M.J.R.): It means the world to me especially because there was so much suspense surrounding this book's very existence. For a long time I never thought it would get written. I found it so difficult take on writing in Vistor Heggli voice that I gave up on it three times. But each time telling the story of Hugo's desperation to reach his dead daughter— -called me back whom he couldn't stop mourning

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine

M.J.R.: Count Dracula—jest writing his name makes my skin crawl.

Jenny in "Portrait of Jenny!" Her faith in and mastery of the impossible impired me and forever changed my perceptions about the elasticity of time.

S. MAG.: Thinking of your character, what would be on their backet list of things to do!

M.J.R.: Victor Hugo lived such a large life—not denying himself smeh—but I think he would have wanted to find truly undertable proof of the afterlife.



"As with this author's last literary gift, the sensuality, and the pure and utter dreamlike state with which she writes is effortless and engaging, producing yet another story that's impossible to leave behind. Each page feels as if it's actually breathing on its own, drawing the reader into the depths of a sensual mystery

that they will truly never forget! THIS deserves a standing ovation."

—Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Hero's Companion: Tallent & Lowery Book Three" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Carrie Doyle (C.D.): The best book I read in 2021 was "The Spy and the Traitor" by Ben Macintyre. I do not usually read a lot of nonfiction, but this true story about a Russian KGB agent who becomes a double agent during the Cold War reads like fiction and is so astonishing you cannot believe it is real. I was a Russian language and literature major and lived in Moscow for three years, so I consider myself a Russophile and this book was right up my alley. I had never heard this story before and it had me on the edge of my seat. I highly recommend and cannot wait for them to make a movie! (I'd like to see Matt Damon star.)

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

C.D.: My favorite fictional villain is the Enormous Crocodile from "The Enormous Crocodile" by Roald Dahl. I love his unabashed and defiant attitude as well as his pernicious determination to eat juicy children even though it is disdained by other creatures he comes across in his muddy river. When my boys were young, we listened to this book on tape in the car read by the author himself, and if you have not listened to it, I suggest you do it immediately! Dahl does a marvelous job, clearly relishing how dastardly and cunning his crocodile is, and it is a story for all ages.

My current favorite heroine is Agatha Raisin, from the M.C. Beaton stories. I suppose I love a flawed heroine who is somewhat of an underdog. Agatha is scrappy, had little advantages and has made a life and career for herself. Even though she has sharp edges, she is dogged and unflappable and her heart is always in the right place. I find her a riot, also, and I love that she has no filter and will say exactly what is on her mind.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

C.D.: I think "The Secret History" by Donna Tartt is a perfect book that I wish I had written. I gobbled this book up when I discovered it my sophomore year of college and did not leave my sofa until I finished it. Although Richard, the narrator, is somewhat bland—a mediocre student, of average looks, from a nondescript town—he is the perfect protagonist to lead us through this haunting masterpiece. Tartt's prose are beautiful, her descriptions so precise and evocative and her plotting well-paced. It's no wonder that it took her ten years to write it and that she only writes one book a decade, because you cannot rush perfection.

## TRUE



Liza Rodman Press Photo Credit: Joel Benjamin Jennifer Jordan Press Photo Credit: PC Nicole Morgenthau

#### "THE BABYSITTER: MY SUMMERS WITH A

**SERIAL KILLER"** by Liza Rodman and Jennifer Jordan (Atria Books; March 2, 2021): Growing up on Cape Cod in the 1960s, Liza Rodman was a lonely little girl. During the summers, while her

mother worked days in a local motel and danced most nights in the Provincetown bars, her babysitter the kind, handsome handyman at the motel where her mother worked—took her and her sister on adventures in his truck. He bought them popsicles and together, they visited his "secret garden" in the Truro woods. To Liza, he was one of the few kind, understanding, and safe adults in her life.

But there was one thing she didn't know; their babysitter was a serial killer.

Though Tony Costa's gruesome case made screaming headlines in 1969 and beyond, Liza never made the connection between her friendly babysitter and the infamous killer of numerous women, including four in Massachusetts, until decades later.

Haunted by nightmares and horrified by what she learned, Liza became obsessed with the case. Now, she and cowriter Jennifer Jordan reveal "a suspenseful portrayal of murderous madness in tandem with a child's growing loneliness, neglect, and despair, a narrative collision that will haunt" (Sarah Weinman, author of "The Real Lolita") you long after you finish it.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Jennifer Jordan (J.J.): "A Gentleman in Moscow" (Amor Towles). Liza Rodman (L.R.): "Travel Light, Move Fast" (Alexandra Fuller).

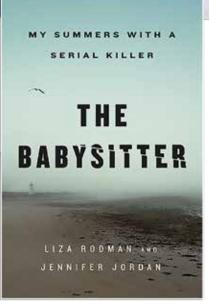
S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

L.R.: One of my babysitters was a serial killer.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

J.J. and L.R.: Given the caliber of your membership and other picks, it is truly an honor to be in such august company.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

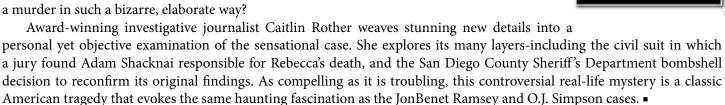


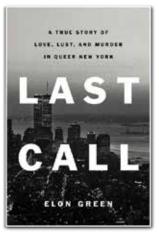
J.J.: "A Gentleman in Moscow." (Again! Truly one of the best books I've read in my life.)
L.R.: "Bastard Out of Carolina." •

"DEATH ON OCEAN BOULEVARD" by Caitlin Rother (Citadel (April 27, 2021): "I got a girl, hung herself in the guest house."

The call came on the morning of July 13, 2011, from the historic Spreckels Mansion, a lavish beachfront property in Coronado, California, owned by pharmaceutical tycoon and multimillionaire Jonah Shacknai. When authorities arrived, they found the naked body of Jonah's girlfriend, Rebecca Zahau, gagged, her ankles tied and her wrists bound behind her. Jonah's brother, Adam, claimed to have found Rebecca hanging by a rope from the second-floor balcony. On a bedroom door in black paint were the cryptic words: SHE SAVED HIM CAN YOU SAVE HER.

Was this scrawled message a suicide note or a killer's taunt? Rebecca's death came two days after Jonah's six-year-old son, Max, took a devastating fall while in Rebecca's care. Authorities deemed Rebecca's death a suicide resulting from her guilt. But who would stage either a suicide or a murder in such a bizarre, elaborate way?





**"LAST CALL"** by Elon Green (Celadon Books; March 9, 2021): The gripping true story, told here for the first time, of the Last Call Killer and the gay community of New York City that he preyed upon.

The Townhouse Bar, midtown, July 1992: The piano player seems to know every song ever written, the crowd belts out the lyrics to their favorites, and a man standing nearby is drinking a Scotch and water. The man strikes the piano player as forgettable.

He looks bland and inconspicuous. Not at all what you think a serial killer looks like. But that's what he is, and tonight, he has his sights set on a gray haired man. He will not be his first victim.

Nor will he be his last.

The Last Call Killer preyed upon gay men in New York in the '80s and '90s and had all the hallmarks of the most notorious serial killers. Yet because of the sexuality of his victims, the skyhigh murder rates, and the AIDS epidemic, his murders have been almost entirely forgotten.

This gripping true-crime narrative tells the story of the Last Call Killer and the decades-long chase to find him. And at the same time, it paints a portrait of his victims and a vibrant community

navigating threat and resilience.

**"THE FAMILY ACROSS THE STREET"** by Nicole Trope (Bookouture; August 4, 2021): Sometimes, the most perfect families are hiding the most terrible secrets. How well do you know the people next door?

Everybody wants to live on Hogarth Street, the pretty, tree-lined avenue with its white houses. The new family, The Wests, are a perfect fit. Katherine and Josh seem so in love and their gorgeous five-year-old twins race screeching around their beautiful emerald-green lawn.

But soon people start to notice: why don't they join backyard barbecues? Why do they brush away offers to babysit? Why, when you knock at the door, do they shut you out, rather than inviting you in?

Every family has secrets, and on the hottest day of the year, the truth is about to come out. As a tragedy unfolds behind closed doors, the dawn chorus is split by the wail of sirens. And one by one the families who tried so hard to welcome the Wests begin to realise: Hogarth Street will never be the same again. •



CAITLIN ROTHER

Inside the Corenado Mansion Case

"Burge's debut thriller kicks down the door and comes at you with both barrels blasting."

-Ronald Malfi, Award-Winning Author of COME WITH ME, DECEMBER PARK, and FLOATING STAIRCASE

"Assured, gritty, expertly paced, and sleek as a bullet...
I could not put it down!"

-Greg F. Gifune, Bestselling Author of THE BLEEDING SEASON, SAVAGES, and MIDNIGHT SOLITAIRE

A whirlwind of tragic, terrifying events...

A vodoun priest is brutally slain in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

On American soil, a man stands atop his car—naked from the waist down—and suddenly succumbs to a mysterious death.

Within the silence of a state park, an abducted child is found dead; yet another in a series of similar slayings. In the small city of New Warfield, ODs have skyrocketed from the use of cocaine tainted with an undetermined substance.

Detective Ezekiel Marrs may just have the wealth of strength and skills needed to fight these dark forces, to uncover the facts behind these hideous cases and how they relate to one another. With his team, Ezekiel takes on the immense task of putting the pieces together...making the connections that will hopefully solve this puzzle and stop the seemingly endless death and destruction.

But when Ezekiel and his fellow police officers find themselves facing two of the most vicious adversaries they've ever encountered, more lives hang in the balance as they battle to survive a deadly, inevitable confrontation with unimaginable evil.



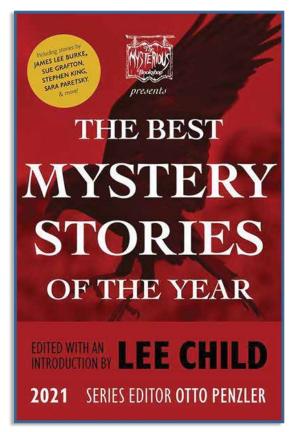
AN EZEKIEL MARRS THRILLER

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#### "THE MYSTERIOUS BOOKSHOP PRESENTS THE BEST MYSTERY STORIES OF THE YEAR: 2021" Edited

by Lee Child and Otto Penzler (Mysterious Press; September 14, 2021): Under the auspices of New York City's legendary mystery fiction specialty bookstore, The Mysterious Bookshop, and aided by Edgar Award-winning anthologist Otto Penzler, international bestseller Lee Child has selected the twenty most suspenseful, most confounding, and most mysterious short stories from the past year, collected now in one entertaining volume.

Includes stories by:

- Alison Gaylin
- David Morrell
- James Lee Burke
- Joyce Carol Oates
- Martin Edwards
- Sara Paretsky
- Stephen King
- Sue Grafton (with a new, posthumously-published work!) And many more!

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Otto Penzler (O.P.): Although I am afraid of offending the other authors I published in 2021, the best was "When Christmas Comes" by Andrew Klavan. Everyone who has read it has been stunned by an apparently

impossible situation: The beloved librarian in an idyllic town is violently murdered by her boyfriend in front of multiple witnesses and immediately confesses. His lawyer calls on a former boyfriend, tells him the situation, and tells him he MUST prove his innocence.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

O.P.: I will have two anthologies released in 2022. For American Mystery Classics this year, I edited a collection titled "Golden Age Detective Stories," featuring tales by authors we publish in that series: Ellery Queen, Erle Stanley Gardner, Charlotte Armstrong, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Cornell Woolrich, etc. New year's book will be titled "Golden Age Locked Room Mysteries" and will feature some of the same authors (Queen, Gardner, Woolrich) but also John Dickson Carr, C. Daly King, etc. We began a new series titled "The Mysterious Bookshops Presents the Best Mystery Stories of the Year," for which I serve as series editor and Lee Child was the guest editor. It included stories by Sue Grafton, James Lee Burke, Sara Paretsky, Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, etc. The next volume will feature Sara Paretsky as the guest editor—with stories to be named later.

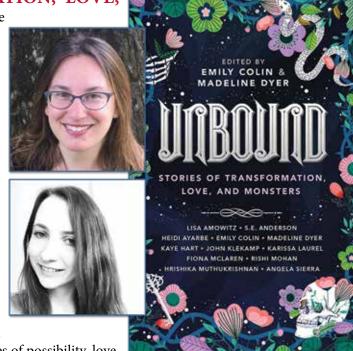
O.P.: There are thousands of books by authors I wish I'd written. I'm in awe of those god-like people who can create people and stories from a blank page. Even bad books are hard to write and I applaud everyone who tries and succeeds in accomplishing it. Especially, of course, those who do it well.

"UNBOUND: STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION, LOVE,

AND MONSTERS" Edited by Emily Colin and Madeline Dyer (Five Points Press; February 15, 2021): A dull AP English assignment interrupted by the resurrection of a 5,000-year-old mummy. A "boy meets boy meets time travel" tale. An ancient evil summoned from the Scottish moors. A sentient garden turned matchmaker. A troubled teen who rehabilitates monsters. A sinister society where love is punishable by death. A medieval pirate queen in love with a ghost. A demon who rebels against her birthright. A mysterious Power that turns people to stone. A girl who guards the secret behind her best friend's disappearance. A violinist on the brink who learns to listen to her heart.

The stories in this anthology have one common theme: Transformation. They include international own-voices perspectives; a *New York Times* bestselling author; Emmy, SIBA, and ILA award-winning writers; and emerging, independent voices in YA fiction. The collection's authors, like its stories, are UNBOUND-diverse voices exploring identity, love, betrayal,

and becoming. They give us a glimpse into what can be: stories of possibility, love, friendship, the monsters around us and within us.



Emily Colin Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author Madeline Dyer Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Emily Colin (E.C.): Pirate queen. Sentient garden. Mummy in a break room. 12 tall tales.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

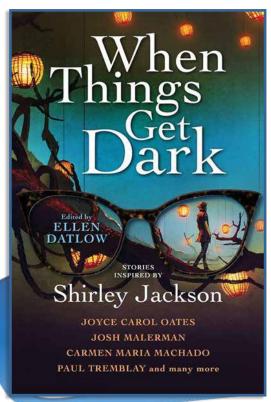
E.C.: Unbound's co-designer and contributor Lisa Amowitz says, "The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue, by V.E. Schwab."

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be \_\_\_

E.C.: Asleep right now.

**"WHEN THINGS GET DARK: STORIES INSPIRED BY SHIRLEY JACKSON"** Edited by Ellen Datlow (Titan Books; September 28, 2021): A collection of new and exclusive short stories inspired by, and in tribute to, Shirley Jackson.

Shirley Jackson is a seminal writer of horror and mystery fiction, whose legacy resonates globally today. Chilling, human, poignant and strange, her stories have inspired a generation of writers and readers.





#### And the Winner is ...

"I AM PILGRIM" by Terry Hayes (Atria/Emily Bestler Books: May 2014): A breakneck race against time...and an implacable enemy.

An annoymous young woman murdered in a run-down hotel, all identifying characteristics dissolved by acid.

A father publicly beheaded in the blistering heat of a Saudi

Arabian public square.

A notorious Syrian biotech expert found eyeless in a Damascus junkyard.

Smoldering human remains on a remote mountainside in Afghanistan.

A flawless plot to commit an appalling crime against humanity. One path links them all, and only one man can make the journey. Pilgrim.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): If your book had a soundtrack what would be its signature song!

Terry Hayes (T.H.): "A Hard Rain's A-Gorma Fall" by Bob Dylan. Given the apocalyptic nature of the plot of Phlgrim—a vaccine-ensister virus being vorloathed—it secens carriously appropriate. A hard rain, indeed! I also think when Dylan isage the haunting, "Oh where have yow been my blue-eyed sort" about a young man who has been on an incredible and frightening journey, it could easily apply to Scott Murdoch or Phlgrim or whatever particular

Murdoch or Pilgrim or whatever particular name our covert intelligence agent is using this week.

S. MAG.: If you could go 'into' a book (any book) and live there for a bit, which book would it be? And which character would you be?

T.H.: "The Catcher in the Rye." I would really like to hang out for a while with Holden Caulifield. Maybe even both rins a bit with ait this growing up stuff, if I could. I guess I would be the character D.B.—Holden's older brother. You rem

would be the character D.B.—Holderis older brother. You remember the guy—the used to be just a regular writer before he went out to Hellywood and prostituted himself! There's a mussage there somewhere. The same of the really phony peep school that Pilgrim went to in Connecticut is called Catalfield Academy—that was no accident, just a small homage from me to what I think is a really great book.

S. MAG.: What is the best book you read in 2014

T.M.: "The Goldfinch" by Domin Tarti. It's a big book—not just in length but in scale, unbition and talent! Beyond that, though, the characters are just terrifle. Of course, I do have a weakness for long books that span many years, so it's hardly a surprising choice. \*

This anthology, edited by legendary horror editor Ellen Datlow, will bring together today's leading horror writers to offer their own personal tribute to the work of Shirley Jackson.

Featuring Joyce Carol Oates, Josh Malerman, Carmen Maria Machado, Paul Tremblay, Richard Kadrey, Stephen Graham Jones, Elizabeth Hand, Kelly Link, Cassandra Khaw, Karen Heuler, Benjamin Percy, John Langan, Laird Barron, Jeffrey Ford, M. Rickert, Seanan McGuire, Gemma Files, and Genevieve Valentine.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Ellen Datlow (E.D.): 18 stories inspired by Shirley Jackson begging for film adaptions.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

E.D.: "Screams From the Dark: 29 Tales of Monsters and the Monstrous" (ed)-Tor Nightfire June 2022.

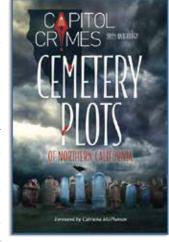
S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

E.D.: I'm surprised, delighted and very grateful for the honor bestowed on myself and all the contributors.

### "CEMETERY PLOTS OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA: A 2021 CAPITOL CRIMES ANTHOLOGY" (Capitol Crimes; September 28,

2021): 15 amazing authors. 15 tales with "cemetery plots." Welcome to the Capitol Crimes 2021 Anthology. A cadre of superlative judges selected the best of the best to put between these covers.

With a foreword by best-selling author Catriona McPherson, delve into the creative minds of Capitol Crimes members. The setting: Northern California. The theme: that place we all finally



must visit, the cemetery. The plots and characters are as diverse as the authors. And their stories will touch your spirit where adventure and fear intersect.

Sweet dreams!

2014

## SUSPENSE THRILLER





**"FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT"** by Elle Cosimano (Minotaur Books; 1st edition; February 2, 2021): Finlay Donovan is killing it...except, she's really not. She's a stressed-out single-mom of two and struggling novelist, Finlay's life is in chaos: the new book she promised her literary agent isn't written, her ex-husband fired the nanny without telling her, and this morning she had to send her four-year-old to school with hair duct-taped to her head after an incident with scissors.

When Finlay is overheard discussing the plot of her new suspense novel with her agent over lunch, she's mistaken for a contract killer, and inadvertently accepts an offer to dispose of a problem husband in order to make ends meet... Soon, Finlay discovers that crime in real life is a lot more difficult than its fictional counterpart, as she becomes tangled in a real-life murder investigation.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Elle Cosimano (E.C.): Struggling suspense novelist/single mother of two accidentally becomes hitwoman.

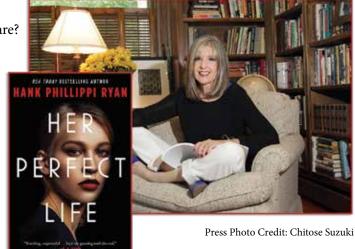
S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

E.C.: The second book in the series, "Finlay Donovan Knocks' em Dead," releases on February 1, and this follow up to the series starter is a wild and hilarious romp! Meanwhile, I'm hard at work on book #3 and eagerly awaiting casting news on the TV option.

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

E.C.: I was in the grocery store when I received an email from one of my earliest fans of my YA mystery/thrillers. She had been in high school when she had first discovered my books and was now an adult, working at the DC crime lab. She wrote to tell me that my books had inspired her to pursue her degree in forensic science and had changed the course of her life. I have never been so moved by a letter from a reader, and I cried all the way through the checkout aisle.

"HER PERFECT LIFE" by Hank Phillippi Ryan (Forge Books; 1st edition; September 14, 2021): Everyone knows Lily







Olivia Taylor Jones's life has exploded. She's discovered she is not only adopted, but her real parents are comicted serial killers. Fleeing the media fremy, she took refuge in the oddly secluded town of Cainville. She has since solved the town's mysteries and finds herself not only the target of its secretive elders, but also her stalker ex-fiance.

Visions continue to haunt her: particularly a little blood girl in a

years sandress who insists he has an important measure for Olivia, one that may help her balance the light and darkness within herself. Death stalks both Olivia and the two ones most important to her, as she desperately searches to understand whether ancient

scripts are dictating the triangle that connects them. Will darkness prevail, or does Olivia have the power to prevent a tragic fate!

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

Kelley Arasatrong (K.A.): My message to aspiring writers would be "don't give up." If you traily enjoy writing, you don't need publication to justify it, bust write. Trying to get published is great—and it's an awazing career—but don't let rejection squash your love of storytelling. Just keep writing and keep trying.

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you

K.A.: This is one of my most memorable, I was speaking in a library, and there was a man there who didn't look like my hypical reader, I presumed hell just come in for a cool place to rest during a heat wave. At the end of the signing, he came up with a battered copy of Dawn Store Magic! (my 3rd novel.) He told me hell storted reading my books in prison and looked formed to finishing the series when he went back. Not "if" but "when." That's one case where I actually hope he doesn't get a chance to finish my series, not if it means going back to prison to do it!

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

K.A.: It means a lot. I've always written auspense nevels, but most have a supernatural twist to them, which means it can be much harder to 'fet in' to the suspenselmysterythriller genre. I've always considered my books to be more thriller than famings, but I've learned it's easier to just go along with the famings label. Being recognized this way by Suspense Magazine is hugely validating. Thank you! Atwood—and that may be her biggest problem. The beloved television reporter has it all—fame, fortune, Emmys, an adorable seven-year-old daughter, and the hashtag her loving fans created: #PerfectLily. To keep it, all she has to do is protect one life-changing secret.

Her own.

Lily has an anonymous source who feeds her story tips—but suddenly, the source begins telling Lily inside information about her own life. How does he—or she—know the truth?

Lily understands that no one reveals a secret unless they have a reason. Now she's terrified someone is determined to destroy her world—and with it, everyone and everything she holds dear.

How much will she risk to keep her perfect life? And what if the spotlight is the most dangerous place of all?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

Hank Phillippi Ryan (H.P.R.): One of the most terrifying things in a writers life, mine at least, is the realization that actual real people are going to read your book. I know that sounds ridiculous, because of course they are! But that moment, that heart-stopping moment, when the thing I worked on every moment of every day for a year is now in the real world. What will people think? Will they understand it? Will they love it? So having "Her Perfect Life" chosen as one of the best of is more than a terrific honor—it is reassurance that this life I chose, to be a storyteller, is a wonderfully shared journey. My books are not fully realized, I truly think, until someone reads them. And if someone reads them and loves them—and gives them an honor like this—that makes them blossom and flower and explode. And, frankly, gives me the fuel and courage to continue.

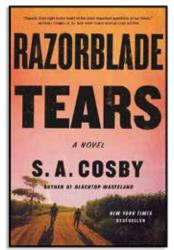
S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

H.P.R.: Four little words: everything will be fine. One of the most life changing things I've learned over the past years is that there is no way to predict what will happen, there is no way to plan what will happen, and there is certainly no way to control what will happen. No matter what anyone tells you, there's only thing you can do, only one thing you can control, only one thing you have power over is that you are writing the best book you possibly can—every word, every page, every single time. There are infinite numbers of things that might happen after that, but none of your author life will

take its shape without that one key element: Your fantastic book.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

H.P.R.: It's difficult for me to say that "I wish I had written it," because, and I guess I am being too persnickety, that would mean I was not me, right? In order to write that particular book, I would also have to take that author's entire life—because a book can only come from our individual self, that's what makes them unique. And I like my own life quite a bit. But if I just wildly answer this question, (which is a great one), I would say: the "Custom of the Country" by Edith Wharton. Or "Winter's Tale" by Mark Helprin. But if you mean in the suspense genre: "Citizen Vince" by Jess Walter. "The Stranger Diaries" by Elly Griffiths. "My Sweet Girl" by Amanda Jayatissa. James Patterson's Alex Cross books. "The Last Mrs. Parrish" by Liv Constantine. "Lavender House" by Lev A. C. Rosen (coming soon!). "A Line to Kill" by Anthony Horowitz. "The Night She Disappeared" by Lisa Jewell. I could go on. (And I won't even mention "The Stand" by Stephen King, because Olympus.) •



"RAZORBLADE TEARS" by S.A. Cosby (Flatiron Books; July 6, 2021): A Black father. A white father. Two murdered sons. A quest for vengeance.

Ike Randolph has been out of jail for fifteen years, with not so much as a speeding ticket in all that time. But a Black man with cops at the door knows to be afraid.

The last thing he expects to hear is that his son Isiah has been murdered, along with Isiah's white husband, Derek. Ike had never fully accepted his son but is devastated by his loss.

Derek's father Buddy Lee was almost as ashamed of Derek for being gay as Derek was ashamed of his father's criminal record. Buddy Lee still has contacts in the underworld, though, and he wants to know who killed his boy.

Ike and Buddy Lee, two ex-cons with little else in common other than a criminal past and a love for their dead sons, band together in their desperate desire for revenge. In their quest to do better for their sons in death than they did in life, hardened men Ike and Buddy Lee will confront their own prejudices about their sons and each other, as they rain down vengeance upon those who hurt their boys. •

"THE DEVIL'S HAND" by Jack Carr (Atria/Emily Bestler Books; April 13, 2021): It's been twenty years since 9/11, two decades since the United States was attacked on home soil and set out to make the guilty pay with their lives. In the shadows, the enemy has been patient—learning, and adapting. And the enemy is ready to strike again.

A new president offers hope to a country weary of conflict. He's a young, popular, self-made visionary...but he's also a man with a secret.

Halfway across the globe a regional superpower struggles with sanctions imposed by the United States and

her European allies, a country whose ancient religion spawned a group of ruthless assassins. Faced with internal dissent and extrajudicial targeted killings by the United States and Israel, the Supreme Leader puts a plan in motion to defeat the most powerful nation on earth.



Press Photo Credit: Clay Goswick

Meanwhile, a young PhD student has gained access to a bioweapon thought to be confined to a classified military laboratory known only to a select number of officials. A second-generation agent, he has been assigned a mission that will bring his adopted homeland to its knees.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What was the best book you read in 2021?

Jack Carr (J.C.): Rarely will you find me using the words "best," "worst," or "favorite" with something as subjective as art, the eye of the beholder being a key factor in evaluations. I was very fortunate that in an extremely busy year I was still able to get quite a bit of reading in. I read books written by guests on my podcast, Danger Close: Beyond the Books with Jack Carr, and I read a lot of books as research for my next novel, "In the Blood." I am going to cheat a bit here and pick two works for different reasons. My first is "Basil's War" by the incomparable Stephen Hunter. I had such fun reading it and then discussing it with Stephen on a Facebook Live event with Poisoned Pen. The second is a non-fiction choice, "The Afghanistan Papers" by Craig Whitlock. For those who have questions about the past twenty years in the graveyard of empires, this book is a must read.

S. MAG.: How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

J.C.: I do like to have a very short thematic catch phrase to keep me on track as I write. I used 'a story of revenge without constraint' to describe my debut thriller, "The Terminal List." "True Believer" was a novel of 'violent redemption.' "Savage Son" 'explored the dark side of man through the dynamic of hunter and hunted.' "The Devil's Hand" 'investigated what the enemy has learned by watching us on the field of battle over the past twenty years and what they have incorporated into their battle plans.' Okay that was longer that ten words. My upcoming thriller, "In the Blood," is one of 'violent resolutions.'

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

J.C.: 2022 is already shaping up to be a busy one. "In the Blood," my fifth novel in the James Reece saga hits shelves on 31 May. I'll be hard at work on book six and recording two episodes a week for my Danger Close Podcast. "The Terminal List" is coming to Amazon Prime Video as an eight-part series starring Chris Pratt as my protagonist, Navy SEAL Sniper James Reece. The release date is still top secret... I may have a couple other projects in the works but for now those remain classified... •

October 5, 2021): The DNA results are family tree...

Liz Catalano is shocked when an she could never have imagined conner plunge her into an FBI investigation of The Tri-State Killer has been abduleaving no clues behind—only bodies.

Can Liz figure out we can she save his newest suppose Magazine (S. N. 1992).

**"THE FAMILY TREE"** by Steph Mullin and Nicole Mabry (Avon; October 5, 2021): The DNA results are back. And there's a serial killer in her family tree...

Liz Catalano is shocked when an ancestry kit reveals she's adopted. But she could never have imagined connecting with her unknown family would plunge her into an FBI investigation of a notorious serial killer...

The Tri-State Killer has been abducting pairs of women for forty years, leaving no clues behind—only bodies.

Can Liz figure out who the killer in her new family is? And can she save his newest victims before it's too late?

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2021?

Nicole Mabry (N.M.): For me, it was "The Family Plot" by Megan Collins. As a true crime lover, this book is filled with true crime tidbits within the larger mystery.

Steph Mullin (S.M.): I would say "Never Saw Me Coming" by Vera Kurian. It was such a smart, unique thriller that combined

*crime with psychology and really interesting characters that had me rooting for psychopaths.* 

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

N.M.& S.M.: 23andMe reveals Liz is adopted...and related to a killer.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

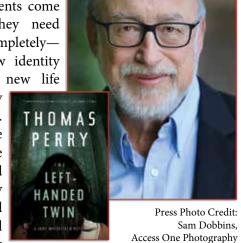
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N.M. & S.M.: We have a new psychological suspense novel called "When She Disappeared," coming out March 2022. In it, Margo returns to her small mountain town fifteen years after her childhood friend had gone missing, only for her friend's body to be discovered the day she arrives. A famous unsolved mysteries show that covered the disappearance at the time it occurred, comes back to town to film a follow up on the case. Margo teams up with them as they try to uncover the truth in a town where everyone has something to hide. •

**"THE LEFT-HANDED TWIN"** by Thomas Perry (Mysterious Press; November 16, 2021): Rescue artist Jane Whitefield leads a deadly crime syndicate on a wild chase through the Northeast.

Jane Whitefield helps people disappear. Fearing for their lives, fleeing dangerous situations, her clients come to her when they need to vanish completely to assume a new identity and establish a new life

somewhere they won't be found. And when people are desperate enough to need her services, they come to the old house in rural western New York



where Jane was raised to begin their escape.

It's there that, one spring night, Jane finds a young woman fresh from LA with a whole lot of trouble behind her. After she cheated on her boyfriend, he dragged her to the home of the offending man and made her watch as he killed him. She testified against the boyfriend, but a bribed jury acquitted him, and now he's free and trying to find and kill her.

Jane agrees to help, and it soon becomes clear that outsmarting the murderous boyfriend is not beyond Jane's skills. But the boyfriend has some new friends: members of a Russian organized crime brotherhood. When they learn that Sara is traveling with a tall, dark-haired woman who disappears people, the Russians become increasingly interested in helping the boyfriend find the duo. They've heard rumors that such a woman existed—and believe that, if forcibly extracted, the knowledge she has of past clients could be worth millions.

Thus begins a bloodthirsty chase that winds through the cities of the northeast before finally plunging into Maine's





"ORPHAN X" by Gregg Hurwitz (Minotaur Books; January 2016): Who is Orphan X? The Nowhere Man is a logendary figure spoken about only in

The Nowhere Man is a Jegendary figure spoken about only in whispers. It's east that when he's reached by the truly desperate and deserving, the Nowhere Man can and will do anything to protect and save them. But he's not merely a Jegend.

sive them. But he's not merely a legend.

Even Smook is a man with skills, resources, and a personal mission to help those with nowhere else to turn. He's also a man with a dangerous past. Chosen as a child, he was raised and trained as an Orphan, an off-the-books black box program designed to create the perfect deniable intelligence asset: An assassin, Evan was Orphan X—

until he broke with the program and used everything he learned to disappear. But now someone is on his tail. Someone with similar skills and training who will exploit Fean's secret new identity as the Nowhere Man to eliminate him.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What's the best book you read in 2016?

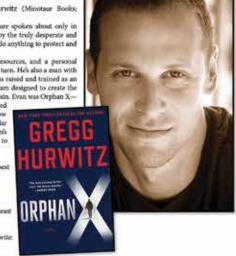
Gregg Hurwitz (G.H.): Joe Ide's "JQ"

S. MAG.: What is your favorite word? Lear favorite?

G.H.: Favorite: 'Rombunctious.' Least fovorite. 'Arestons.'

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are often very brief. How would you pitch your book in ten words or less?

G.H.: Black program assassin with unbroken movel compass goes pro bono,



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#### And the Winner is ...



"THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER" by Karen Dionne (G.P. Putmaris Sons; 1st Edition; June 13, 2017); Helema Pelletier has a loving husband, two beautiful daughters, and a business that fills her days. But she also has a secret: she is the product of an abduction. Her mother was

kidnapped as a teenager by her father and kept in a remote cabin in the marshlands of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Helena, born two years after the abduction, loved her home in nanare, and despite her father's sometimes brutal behavior, she loved him, too...until she learned precisely how savage he could be. More than twenty years later, she has buried her

More than twenty years later, she has buried her past so soundly that even her husband doesn't know the truth. But now her father has killed two guards, escaped from prison, and disappeared into the marsh. The police begin a manhuan, but Helena knows they don't stand a chance. Knows that only one person has the skills to find the survivalist the world calls The Marsh King—

because only one person was ever trained by him: his daughter,

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2017?

Karen Dionne (K.D.): The best book I read in 2017 is "The Hunger" by Alma Katsu, a tense and gripping reimsgiving of the Donner Party tragedy with a supernatural twist. Katsu's take is so fresh, her characters so real, and the story so involving, I knew after just a few pages that I wasn't going to put this book down until Id dervorred it in one gulp (pun intended). "The Hunger" publishes in March 2018, but can be precedered now. I product this will be one of the big books of 2018, and can't wait to hear what others think of at

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

K.D.: My most memorable fan experience happened some years ago al ThrillerFest in New York. I had just gotten off the elevator in the Grand Hyatt hotel lobby, when I save Inflery Deaver step into another elevator going up. His elevator was empty, so I quickly changed course and get on with him. Deaver got off after only two floors, but the ride was long enough for me to go all fangels on him and gust about how much I love his books. It is a exciting to met an exiting to met an analysis about how much I love his books. It is a exciting to met an exiting to me the exiting to met an exiting to met an exiting to met an exiting to me the exiting to met an exiting to the exiting th

much their work means to you. Or mait—was this question supposed to be about a memorable experience I had with our of my func?

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" mean to you?

K.D.: When I found out that "The Marsh King's Daughter" had won Suspense Magazine's Crimson Scribe Award, I was absolutely staggered. There were so many wooderful books poblished in 2017, it's astonishing that mine was singled out in this way. I love that Helena's story resonates with readers, and now to receive recognition from my peers us well is incredibly exciting. I'm truly howered, and more grateful than I can say. • Hundred Mile Wilderness. But in a pursuit where nothing can be trusted, one thing is certain: only one party—Jane or her pursuers—will emerge alive.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

Thomas Perry (T.P.): Having "The Left-Handed Twin" chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine is both an honor and a pleasure. I know that honors don't help a writer get better at writing—negative criticism is better for that—but being included on this list is much more pleasant, and much rarer. I'll enjoy it right now and worry about learning how to do better another time.

S. MAG.: Is there a book written by another that you wish that you'd written?

T.P.: This year there is. It's Jo Perry's "Pure" published by Fahrenheit Press. The fact that the "another" was my colleague working in universities, and then my television writing partner, and has been my wife for 41 years is irrelevant, because some terrific writers here and in the UK are just as enthusiastic as I am about "Pure." When the pandemic took over our lives I didn't know what to say about it, so I left it alone. What she did was to write a mystery in which a young woman discovers a suspicious death and finds her way through the obstacles—a quarantine, the lockdowns, and her own inexperience in order to find out the truth about what happened to an elderly lady she did not know. It's philosophical, wise, and in the end, exhilarating.

S. MAG.: Finish	this sentence:	If I wasn't an	author, I would
ne.	_		

T.P.: If I wasn't an author, I would be an unpublished amateur writer. Writing fiction isn't something you choose. It's something that attracts, and then devours you. One day you start playing with an idea, and suddenly you realize that you've spent forty years at it. I wrote before I had any reason to believe anyone else would want to read it, and if they lost interest now, I probably wouldn't know how to stop. •

"THE NEXT WIFE" by Kaira Rouda (Thomas & Mercer; May 1, 2021): Kate Nelson had it all. A flourishing company founded with her husband, John; a happy marriage; and a daughter, Ashlyn. The picture-perfect family. Until John left for another woman. Tish is half his age. Ambitious. She's cultivated a friendship with Ashlyn. Tish believes she's won.

She's wrong.

Suspense Magazine Winter 2021 / Vol. 093

Tish Nelson has it all. Youth, influence, a life of luxury, and a new husband. But the truth is, there's a lot of baggage. Namely, his first wife—and suspicions of his infidelity. After all, that's how she got John. Maybe it's time for a romantic getaway, far from his vindictive ex. If Kate plans on getting John back, Tish is one step ahead of her.

She thinks.

But what happens next is something neither Kate nor Tish saw coming. As best-laid plans come undone, there's no telling what a woman will do in the name of love—and revenge.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

Kaira Rouda (K.R.): Two new stand-alone suspense novels! "Somebody's Home" is out in January and "The Widow" is slated for November of 2022.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?



K.R.: Don't give up. It's up to you to make your dreams come true and if writing a novel is one of them, sit down and write that novel.

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be \_\_\_

K.R.: SAD. I love this career and feel blessed to be part of the suspense writing community. For many years, I was everything but an author, circling around the career like a shark. Ha. I was a reporter, magazine

editor, public relations executive, ad copywriter, brand builder, and finally, now,

"THE STRANGER IN THE MIRROR" by Liv Constantine (Harper; July 6, 2021): Addison's about to get married, but she's not looking forward to the big day. It's not her fiancé; he's a wonderful man. It's because Addison doesn't know who she really is. A few years ago, a kind driver found her bleeding next to a New Jersey highway and rescued her. While her physical wounds healed, Addison's memory never returned. She doesn't know her real name. Or how she ended up injured on the side of a road. Or why she can't

> shake the notion that she may have done something very, very bad...

> In a posh home in the Boston suburbs, Julian tries to figure out what happened to his loving, caring wife, Cassandra, who disappeared without a trace two years ago. She would never have left him and their seven-year-old daughter Valentina of her own free will—or would she?

> Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Authors

Lynne Constantine & Valerie Constantine (L.C. & V.C.): An



#### And the Winner is ...

"THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF SAM HELL" by Robert Dugoni (Lake Union Publishing, April 24, 2018): Sam Hill abuyas saw the world through different eyes. Born with red puglis, he was called "Devil Boy" or Sam "Hell" by his classmates; "Gods will" is what his mother called his ocular albinism. Her weeds were of little comfort, but Sam persevered, buoyed by his mother's devout faith, his lather's practical visdom, and his two other misfit friends.

Sam believed it was God who sent Ernie Cantwell, the only African American kid in his class, to be the friend be so desperately needed. And that it was God's idea for Mickle Kennedy to storm into Our Lady of Mercy like a tornado, uprocting every rule Sam had been taught about boys and girls.

Forty years later, Sam, a small-town eye doctor, is no longer certain anything was by design especially not the tragedy that caused him to turn

his back on his friends, his locusetown, and the life hed always known. Running from the pain, eyes closed, served little purpose. Now, as he looks back on his life. Sam embarks on a journey that will take him halfway around the world. This time, his eyes are wide open—beinging into clear view what changed him, defined him, and made him so afraid, until he can finally see what truly matters.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2018?

Robert Dugoni (R.D.): Andrew Gross's "Button Men."

S. MAG: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

R.D.: "A Prayer for Owen Meany" meets "Benjamin Button."

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2019?

R.D.: An espionage novel based on true events is coming April 2019, "The Eighth Sister," followed by another Tracy Crossishite novel, "A Cold Lend,"

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can

B.D.: I still love the woman who was perplexed to discover I was a male. She thought I used a nom de plume.

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero



From Posto Credit: Provided by Publicia R.D.: Favorite hero is Paul Edgecomb, "The Green Mile." Envorite villain is any book featuring Nazi Germany as the

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of' by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

R.D.: It's a tremendous honor, It is a validation that all the hard work translated into a book that meant something to so many.

 MAG: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

R.D.: Learn the craft.

S. MAG: If you could be a superhero, which one would you be? And what is that one special gift of his/hers you want to have, and why?

R.D.: Superman. Abonys wanted to fly.

S. MAG.; Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be \_\_\_\_\_\_

R.D.: Miserable.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

R.D.: "The Nightingale" by Kristin Hormals. •



amnesiac starts over with a stranger claiming to be her husband.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

L.C. & V.C.: Suspense Magazine is such an outstanding publication in its field, that to be chosen as a "best of" is an incredible honor; and to be included with so many talented authors is a thrill and a privilege.

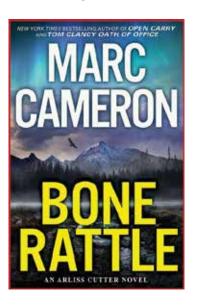
S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be

L.C.: If I wasn't an author, I would be an actress. V.C.: If I wasn't an author, I would be a singer.

#### "BONE RATTLE"

by Marc Cameron (Kensington; April 27, 2021): In the icy heart of Alaska, a series of gruesome murders leads Deputy US Marshal Arliss Cutter into a firestorm of searing corruption, clashing cultures, and bone-chilling fear...

In Juneau, a young Native archeologist is sent to protect the ancient burial sites uncovered by an Alaskan gold mining company. He never returns.



In Anchorage, a female torso—minus head, hands, and feet—is washed ashore near a jogging trail by the airport. It is not the first.

At Alaska's Fugitive Task Force, Arliss Cutter and deputy Lola Teariki are pulled from their duties and sent to a federal court in Juneau. Instead of tracking dangerous fugitives, Cutter and Lola will be keeping track of sequestered jurors in a high-profile trial. The case involves a massive drug conspiracy with ties to a mining company, a lobbyist, and two state senators. When a prosecuting attorney is murdered—and a reporter viciously attacked—Cutter realizes they're dealing with something much bigger, and darker, than a simple drug trial. The truth lies deep within the ancient sites and precious mines of this isolated land—and inside the cold hearts of those who would kill to hide its secrets…

What's buried in Alaska stays in Alaska.

Suspense Magazine Winter 2021 / Vol. 093



#### And the Winner is . . .

#### HOME BEFORE DARK"

five years ago, Maggie Holt and her parents, Ewan and Jess, moved into Baneberry Hall, a rambling Victorian estate in the Vermont woods. Three weeks later they fled in the dead

of night, an ordeal Ewan later recounted in a nonfiction book called "House of Horrors." His horror memoir of ghostly happenings and encounters with

malevolens spirits became a worldwide phenomenon, rivaling The Amityville Horror in popularity and skepticism.

Today, Maggie is a restorer of old homes, and too young to remember any of the events mentioned in her father's book. But she also doesn't believe a word of it. Ghosts, after all, don't exist. When Maggie inherits Baneberry Hall after her father's death, she returns to renovate the place to prepare it for sale. But her homecoming is anything but warm. People from the past, chronicled in "House of Horrors," lurk in the shadows. And locals aren't thrilled that their small town has been made infamous thanks to Maggie's father. Even more unnerving is Baneberry Hall, itself—a place filled with relics from another era that hint at a history of dark

deeds. As Maggie experiences strangs was more fact than fiction. currences straight out of her father's book, she starts to believe that what he w

Alternating between Maggie's unessy homecoming and chapters from her father's book, "Home Before Dark" is the story of a house with long-buried secrets and a woman's quest to uncover them—even if the truth is far more terrifying than any

me Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fins expect to see from you in 2021?

Riley Sager (R.S.): There'll be a new book conting out at the end of hore. It's called "Survive the Night," and it's unlike anything else I've ever written in thet it takes place mostly in real time. It's short and fest and very suspenseful, I con't must until readers. get to experience it.

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

R.S.: I did a signing at Book Expo America right before "Lock Every Door" was released. When i got to the signing booth, there was a large line of people there, all eager to get their ARCs signed. It was crazy. The signing was supposed to last thirty minutes but was extended to eithour, and even thour, people had no be turned away: I was so grateful for that moment is felt bile my work was not only being read by a bunch of people but but at resonated with them, too. So being able to chat with all of them one on one, even if just for a minute or two, was an

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish yould written?

R.S.: "Beautiful Rums" by Jess Walter, which is one of my favorite books. It's about so many things—love, the movies, the scars left by World War II, Italy, Richard Borton—and involves so many characters that it could have been a complete mess. Instead, it's gorgeous and funny and true, and everything ties together perfectly in the final, transcendent chapter.

SuspenseMagazine.com



And the Winner is.

"THE PEARL DAGGER" by L.A. Chandlar (Kensington; August 27, 2019): As the Great Depression loosess its grip on New Fork City, Mayor La Guardia and his team meet their greatest foe in the fight against organized crime... Lame Sanders and her fiery boss, Mayor Fiorello "Fio" La Guardia have managed

to contain the explosive underground conspiracies of New York's most sinister schemers. But after a seemingly harmless pinball racket claims the life of a trusted ally, a new ringleader signals the rebirth of an all-too-familiar crime ne ne and across the pond . . .

Spurred on by the possibility of a violent syndicate spreading like wildfire through rope, Lane sets sail for London-the city where her parent began the undercover work that led to their tragic undoing. And this time, she won't chase down childhood nightmares without Finn Brodie, who vows to dispel his own difficult secrets abroad

> Orson Welles's Voodoo Macheth, Lane discovers that a dazzling pearl dagger may wield the ultimate clue to goide their hunt for stice on two sides of the ocean. With terrors from the past and present converging. Lane can't save herself unless she starts believing that, like her weapon of choice, she also has the power to be both beautiful and dangerous.

> se Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read

L.A. Chandlar (L.A.C.): Oh man, that's like asking which is my favorite child, You know what really stuck with me, is David Morrell's "Morder as a Fine Art." It's the first in the Thomas De Quincy novels ("The Opium Enter") and it offers a dark and gritty world like Caleb Carr) "The Alienia" with memorable characters and a remarkable plot.

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less!

L.A.C.: The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel meets Gangster Squad.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

LA.C.: I have a stand-alone book that my agent is currently shopping about a modern day journalist sent on a mission to New York to dig up lost stories about the Christmas holidays. The idea of getting to be a vicarious witness to historical events, especially lost ones that we may not know much about, has always been a delicious thing for me. I also om writing a modern day suspense novel that is like Stand by Me meets Big Little Lies.

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

L.A.C.: My biggest fan is a man named Ron from Chicago, In his eyes, L.A. (which he



WINTER 20 riting Thriller Velcome 2021 with TURGOUSS a [rio of Suspense Inspired by Actual Events with Jon Jand Get a Sneak Peek with When Your Only Weapon is Inaction





Eldridge (Agora Books; September 14, 2021): Things get personal for Chinese-Norwegian modern-day ninja Lily Wong in Hong Kong when she dives into the dangerous world of triads, romance, and corporate disaster during the height of the prodemocracy protests.

Lily's mother has been summoned by her grandfather, Gung-Gung to attend an emergency board meeting. Lily is happy to take her father's place for exotic travel, family reunions, and romantic dates with her new boyfriend, Daniel Kwok, who's there for business. Lily and her mother stay at her grandparents' hillside home on Hong Kong Island, but tension between Gung-Gung and Ma makes it hard to enjoy the beautiful surroundings, especially with the city in turmoil. Gung-Gung won't say anything about the meeting and Ma is worried that her career is in jeopardy. Meanwhile, the teenage daughter of Gung-Gung's driver is pulled into the dangerous

As Lily and Ma discover shaky finances, questionable loans, and plans for the future involving them both, Lily's escalating romance with Daniel puts her heart at risk. Will

her ninja skills allow her to protect her mother, the family business, and the renegade teen while navigating love, corporate intrigue, and murderous triads?

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Tori Eldridge (T.E.): A Los Angeles-born Chinese-Norwegian modern-day ninja in Hong Kong!

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2022?

T.E.: I can't wait to share my thrilling Brazilian horror novel, "Dance Among the Flames" (out May 24, 2022) about a desperate mother who rises from the slums of Brazil to become a fearsome wielder of Quimband magic. It spans across three continents, forty years, and a past incident in 1560 France as Serafina Olegario tests the boundaries of love, power, and corruption.

And...one month earlier, on April 19, look for my short story "Missing on Kaua'i," a Hawaiian Homeland mystery, in "Crime Hits Home" A Collection of Stories from Crime Fiction's Top Authors (Mystery Writers of America Series, 3). I really enjoyed bringing authentic Hawaiian culture to contemporary crime fiction and hope readers will enjoy it as well.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

T.E.: My very first short story, "Call Me Dumpling," was published in Suspense Magazine's 'Best of 2014' issue and went on to inspire my Lily Wong thriller series, so I have a special place in my heart and great admiration for John and Shannon Raab and the entire Suspense Magazine team. I'm overwhelmed by the outpouring of love my Lily Wong fans have shown by voting for "The Ninja Betrayed" (Lily Wong #3), and I am truly honored to win the 2021 Crimson Scribe Award for Best Book of the Year!



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

## "GUARANTEED TO KEEP READERS BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL WELL INTO THE WEE HOURS."

-Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

## HAPPENS AFTER

MIDNIGHT

A SUSPENSE MAGAZINE ANTHOLOGY

### JEFFERY DEAVER





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## LOST AND FOUND

An Orson Holt Mystery

#### PART TWO: A LINK ON THE LINKS



By Kris Polaha Illustrations by Marco Magallanes

Larly the next day, I made my way into the County Records Office and asked to see the specs on every structure built between 1933 and 1945 on the Monterey Peninsula. There was an explosion of building activity on Cannery Row, but they were all factories and fish canning plants. There was a railroad that led to Cannery Row, but nothing this far south. The Carmel area was very sleepy during that time period.

It's too bad I can't go back in time and buy this property when it was ten cents an acre.

Then I stumbled onto something very interesting. The records showed that the Del Monte Properties Company, in conjunction with the Pacific Improvement Company, started building homes in the Pacific Grove, Carmel, and Pebble Beach areas around 1907. They built The Links at Pebble Beach, which opened in 1919, but not many houses populated the forest until the 1950s.

After hours of combing through the records, nothing jumped out at me until I noticed three particular properties which caught my attention for two reasons. The first is that all three homes were built close together in 1941. Even more interesting to me, however, is the fact they were built in close proximity, not only to each other but to that natural alcove I spotted

from the boat. The second reason they stuck out to me is for the simple fact that the records show the original owners still own them. If you were to smuggle art into America at night from a huge ship, couldn't you easily rendezvous with a smaller craft that could ferry the artwork to land via the alcove? And couldn't the artwork be very easily smuggled into one of these three nearby homes, where no one would ever suspect the owner of such a conspiracy? Like my days hunting elk, I need to look for a broken branch, a tuft of hair, a smell on the wind or a divot in the sand, and follow my gut.

It was still an hour before noon. I figured it was time to go knocking on some doors. Any one of those homes would be a good place to start looking for stolen Nazi art.

The first house I visited that met the profile was a humble, dark wooden cottage that was comfortably nestled in the surrounding forest just off a gently sloping street called Padre Lane. I knocked on the door, and a young African American

woman answered. I asked if she lived there, and she relayed to me that her boss did.

"Is he home?"

"No, sir, she's not home. She'll be out till late afternoon. May I tell her who called?"

"Please let her know that Orson Holt stopped by to ask her a few questions. In fact, may I ask you a few questions?" She nodded that she was okay with a few questions lobbed her way, so I asked, "The lady of the house, she lived here long?"

"Her whole life. She and her husband built this home, and then he passed on some time ago. May I ask what this is regarding?"

"It's regarding an art collection."

"Oh, well, Mrs. Burke doesn't have any art collections. A few photographs and pictures here and there, and one painting that hangs over the fireplace, but it's nothing special. Something her husband painted when he was young."

"Okay, well, I'll stop by later this evening if that's alright. Perhaps I can catch Mrs. Burke in person. Would you mind letting her know I stopped by?"

"Of course, Mr. Holt. Bye-bye for now." She smiled kindly at me and slowly closed the door.

I could hear sea lions barking in the distance. A chill drifted off the ocean and began to cool the forest. The moss gently swayed in the trees, and I could see a fog bank rolling in. The weather was about to change.

The fog in Pebble Beach is unlike fog anywhere else in the world, on account of the warm air from the peninsula that juts out into the deep, cold Pacific. It makes for a unique environment. Spanish Moss hangs off the Cypress trees as if suddenly one were transported to the Deep South. I made my way up Padre Lane, turned onto Cypress Drive, and walked to the second house with a roof covered in the moss. Trees grew close to the foundation. It looked run down, considering the highbrow zip code, and it looked empty. Perhaps the entire house was a storage shed for stolen Nazi art. I decided to take a closer look.

The fog grew even thicker, and the sunlight was blotted out. It was even darker for the density of trees that surrounded the property. I hated to trespass, but sometimes you need to go where you're uninvited.

This house was built at the intersection—I say intersection, but there isn't a sleepier intersection in the lower 48, where Stevenson Drive merges with Cypress Drive and intersects with 17 Mile Drive. In that triangle of land sits an old house, built of brick and wood, with dark windows that had the curtains pulled down. Sensor lights were triggered as I approached. I knocked on the front door, no answer. I knocked again, this time with more authority. No answer. I

decide to make my way around the back of the house and what I saw made me jump with fright.

As soon as I turned the corner to the back of the house, I saw a bedroom. In it, a little old man sat in a leather recliner illuminated by his television set. He had an IV attached to his arm, but he was awake and breathing. I decided to gently knock on the sliding glass door to his bedroom. His old, frail body jumped in the chair. He looked my way, and when we made eye contact, he just stared at me. He gave me the chills. After about fifty seconds passed, with him just staring at me without blinking, he waved his feeble hand and beckoned me to enter. The sliding door was unlocked, so I rolled it open and entered his abode. The air was stagnant, and it reeked of death. The walls were decorated neatly with framed photographs depicting, I could only deduce, this man and his wife, some children, and many dogs. An all-American family. The photos were mostly in black and white. His wife was in very few of them, which made me think she was the photographer.

"Hello, may I ask who you are?"

"My name is Orson Holt, and I'm doing an interview for the local paper on long-time residents of Pebble Beach and The Links." I can lie when I need to; it's one of the perks of being a private eye. "I was hoping you'd answer a few questions for me."

"I would be very happy to." He told me where he was born, Ohio. He talked about his late wife and their five children and his nine grandkids.

As he talked, I examined the photographs, most 8x10, but some larger portraits as well. Other things hung on the walls, like what looked to be a giant rosary made out of stone and lots of dried flowers. At the end of nearly an hour spent listening to his stories, I was nowhere closer to finding the stolen art. I left the old man and made my way towards the third and last house on my list.

I walked down 17 Mile Drive to the address I had written down, and when I arrived, all I saw was an empty lot. There was no house. *Curious*. I walked onto the property, which was open to the public, and looked around to see if there was a footprint of the house from the specs. I saw what could have been a foundation line buried under the pine needles, which made me think. *What if there is an underground cellar buried here?* I picked up a branch, more like a staff, from a fallen tree and started pacing while thumping the ground. I listened for a hollow thump and hopefully a new ending to the Goldstein family history. The ground was solid, and there were a few indications that a house stood on this spot, but it was long gone. Maybe a fire took it down? Not only was I getting wet and cold, but I was also getting hungry. I decided to make my way back to the first house, and perhaps I could

talk to Mrs. Burke.

I walked back up to the same dark door, rang the bell, and the same housekeeper opened it. It was closing in on a quarter to five, and I was hoping Mrs. Burke was home.

"Oh, hello again, Mr. Holt. It's so nice to see you. Mrs. Burke is home. Just hang on a second, and I'll go get her for you," she said as she shut the door on me. Not the invitation inside I was wanting. Five minutes later, perhaps she was hoping I'd simply leave, a plump little lady in her late seventies or eighties came to the door. She smelled strongly of roses.

"Hello, I'm told you're here to inquire about an art collection?"

"Yes, Mrs. Burke, my name is Orson Holt, and I am inquiring as to whether or not you have any artwork that might be of interest to the Carmel Art Association Gallery. We are looking for new pieces on-loan, and we know that as a long-time resident of the forest you may have something worth sharing with the community for a season." The CAA was the oldest art gallery in Carmel-by-the-Sea. Founded in 1927, it often boasted works from several local artists. It was a wild swing, but I took it. As soon as I did, she leveled me with her eyes.

"I've been a long-time member of the CAA. Who do you work for?"

Shit. I missed, but I knew a guy and took another swing. "Hamish Taylor, he's been the head of the Search for New Art Committee since they introduced it to the program last fall. He's very eager to see what works of art are hiding in the community." The guy was real; his job was not.

"Hmm, interesting. I've heard good things about him but haven't been as active lately. I'm glad to hear they are thinking outside the box, but door to door seems very aggressive. Invasive."

"We try not to be... Do you have any art that would be of interest?"

She waved her hand as if shooing a fly away from her face. "No, not really. Something my husband painted, but I don't think it would be as valuable to you as it is to me." I stood there and began to shiver. I pulled my collar up for effect. She bit, "Would you like to come in, Mr. Holt?"

"I'd love to." She opened the door wide, and I entered her home. I had a mission, but her home was warm and dry. The walls were colored in light greens and yellows. Beautiful ornate lamps lit the rooms with warm light, and heavy curtains kept the cold at bay. The inside of the home was a stark contrast to its haunted, wood exterior.

"Here is the painting in question." It was a very rudimentary painting of whom I could only assume was a much younger Mrs. Burke.

"Is that you?"

"Yes."

"How long has he been gone?"

"For many years. And I still miss him. This is a nice reminder."

I looked around the house, not knowing what to look for. Where would one hide art? In the walls? Under the floors? In a cellar, an attic, a garage? What if it was smuggled in all those years ago, and piece by piece, it was smuggled out over the years? There is no telling where the art is.

"Have you lived here long?"

"Almost all my life. I am the original owner, along with my husband."

"You have done a beautiful job with the interior. I had no idea what to expect from the outside, but it feels like a trip to Venice in here. It's beautiful."

"Thank you. Would you like a little tour?" She asked as if she were reading my mind.

"I would love to see the house. Thank you."

She showed me the spacious master bedroom and en suite, the three extra bedrooms, the dining, and the living rooms. There was a sitting room and a family room. I asked if they allowed basements in the homes at the time it was built, and she claimed that they did not. I didn't see any doors that would lead to one, but even if I did, shy of a warrant and a full search of the property, this was a fool's errand. Plus, I just didn't have a hunch, no gut feelings whatsoever. Three properties, two houses, no stolen art. I was hungry, and I knew a guy who worked for The Lodge at Pebble Beach. Every once in a blue moon, it made a nice place to eat and grab a Guinness.

I walked into The Lodge and my old friend Hector was there to greet me.

"Orson."

"Hector. Good to see you, pal." We sat down at a deep red booth. All the dark wood and brass with a view of the 18th hole and the Pacific raging behind it could have doubled for a castle in the Highlands of Scotland. The fog had lifted a bit, and the sun was setting. Hector and I ordered some food, and after some small talk, we cut to the chase.

"So, what brings you my way?"

"Nazis."

"Excuse me?"

"You ever hear any stories about Nazis out this way?"

He was laughing at me. "No, never. What's all this about?"

"Stolen art, a drop point, possible smuggling of said art into this area, all done by the Nazis. I've been tasked to find it or find clues that can help them find it. So far, I've come up with nothing but dead ends."

"What have you got?"

I proceeded to tell him about the coordinates—the ones I was given, and the ones Jenny decoded. I told him of the scar

at the bottom of the bay, the natural alcove, my Internet deep dive, and the discovery that a huge number of Californians were members of the American German Bund and had plotted to lynch Louis B. Mayer and Charlie Chaplin, to name a few. "They had erected swastikas in public parks and built a bunker at Murphy Ranch in the Palisades. It made me think that perhaps sympathizers built a warehouse here in the very unprotected seaside community of Carmel to hide stolen art. That search led to three houses, but only two still stand, and now I'm at a loss."

We finished our food, he paid the bill, and then Hector walked me to the natural alcove that I'd seen from the boat the day before. It was everything I thought it was, a smooth, protected dock made of rock...but it wasn't natural. I noticed that someone had taken the time to smooth and carve the landing out at some point. The markings were old and subtle, but I knew that what appeared nature made was, in fact, man-made. The trail heated up again.

"Tell me about the empty property at number 15 on 17 Mile Drive. Do you know anything about it?"

"Yeah, it belonged to David and Erika Miller. They had

it torn down and kept the land for their daughter, a

very attractive woman. She's single. They built a new house back in the '90s."

"Where?"

"Right there." He pointed to a mansion on the bluff above us. The house was lit up like a battleship and was perched above the ocean.

Patting my old friend on the shoulder, I took off running to meet David and Erika.

Up close, the home was even more spectacular. It overlooked the exact spot on the water where I was sleuthing the day before. The house was built in the style that makes California architecture famous. I rang the bell at the gate, and a female voice answered.

"Hello?" She said this as if to greet me and ask who I was at the same time.

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Orson Holt and I'm doing a story on homes built in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. According to the public records, you helped design this house. I was wondering if I may ask you a few questions for the article? Is now a good time?" "Yes, it's fine. I can let you in." She said this last bit, and that's when I heard it, a German accent. *My first link on The Links*.

The gates opened and I walked up the stone driveway to a pebble path that led to a tall front door. I rang the doorbell, and after a few moments, a beautiful, older woman answered. She was in her eighties.

"Hello. Welcome to my home. I am Erika. Who are you again?"

"Orson. My name is Orson Holt. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me."

"I haven't agreed yet. Please enter," she said, letting me in. "I'll make you an espresso. You must try it with the crème fraiche that I put in." She led me to a drawing room, set between the kitchen and her dining room, adorned with grand windows that overlooked the bay. "Would you like a chocolate?"

I stared at the lovely glass tray she offered to me, took one, and popped it in my mouth. "So, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"No, not at all. What paper did you say you are writing for?"

"I didn't say, but it's for *The New Yorker*." Why not? Go big or go home.

"Oh, and they are interested in this subject of Spanish colonial homes in Pebble Beach? All the way in New York City?" She looked at me through squinted eyes.

"You have a wonderful accent," I said. "Where is it from?" She smiled. "Bremerhaven. A coastal town in the north of Germany. Very much like this place in the winter."

"When did you come to America?"

"When I was twelve, just a girl. I came by boat and have been here ever since. I never went back to Germany. I was married at the age of fourteen, if you can believe that? To a man my parents had chosen for me, but it was a good match, and he was a good man. American, he was in the oil business. Very successful."

"Any children?" I took out a little pad of paper to jot down fake notes.

"Yes, a boy named Erik and a girl named Danica. Erik moved far away, but our daughter lives in Salinas. I have four grandchildren."

"And your husband?"

"He has been gone for almost twenty years now. He was much older than I was, twice my age when we were married. Different times."

It made me wonder about the arrangement. Would parents use their daughter as an art mule? What American would agree to marry this child? It was the things she wasn't saying that piqued my interest. Those summers tracking elk as a boy, I learned to listen to my gut and follow hunches

like a bloodhound. My gut was telling me Erika might have something to do with the divot at the bottom of the bay. Or maybe I was too eager to solve this case, and I had started seeing connections that weren't there.

"I find it interesting that a magazine as prominent as *The New Yorker* wouldn't call me first to set up a proper interview. Who is your editor?" She took out her phone to start a search. She had me dead to rights. I might as well have had my hand in a can of red paint.

"Alright, you got me. I'm not a journalist. The truth is, I'm a private eye. I was hired to find art stolen by the Nazis believed to be stashed in the Carmel area. The artwork was stolen from a man who owned a gallery in Austria. His family is still searching for what rightfully belongs to them. I was given the location of a drop, believed to be the location of an underwater locker where the artwork may have been hidden at the bottom of the sea. Instead of a sunken treasure chest, I found...let's call it a scar, on the bottom of the bay. Someone had dropped anchor at the exact spot where coordinates had been discovered in a Nazi officer's journal. I put two and two together and imagined what I would do if I were sneaking into an enemy's country by ship, likely at night. I'd stay in deeper water. To do that, I'd need a heavy anchor, which means a bigger ship, especially if I had a lot of cargo, like artwork. Following that logic, I scanned the bay and noticed what I thought was a natural alcove, but now I know it was built to be the perfect place to launch a smaller craft. It's about thirty yards away from your property, just down the hill. If I'm a Nazi smuggler, I'd set up a rendezvous and build a house to stash the art in, but how far would I go to keep it hidden? Send a young girl? She marries an American. They start a life; they blend in, they have a family. They are told to keep the art hidden until it cools down, but it never cools down, so it stays hidden for generations. Am I close?" During my monologue, she made my shot of espresso with a dollop of crème fraiche. She served it to me silently, listening to my story, and finally sat down, joining me at the table.

"So close, Mr. Orson Holt. That is your real name, no?" "Yes, that part was true."

"You are so close, and I am so tired of running and hiding." She took a sip of her espresso. "I had imagined what this moment would be like my whole life. Who would come? How would they catch us?"

"Us? Are there more of you?"

"There's plenty more of us, always has been Mr. Holt. America was home to close to a million Germans at the start of the war. Some of them believed in the Third Reich. Men like my husband, second-generation American but of German descent. Arrangements were made. I would come at night by boat with the precious cargo, and he would be here to greet me. We would, as you said, start a life together.

He was wealthy and made wealthier by the Party. I was well taken care of."

Her truth hung in the air like a rung bell. Resounding. We sat quietly for a few moments, each of us tending to our espresso. I finally broke the silence. "Where is the art, Erika? I believe it's time to return it to the rightful owners."

"The Jews?"

"The Goldstein's, Erika. The family whose greatgrandfather was killed by the Nazis after his entire life's work was stolen. Theirs' is an unfinished story, and yours, Erika, is a story that is untrue, but you still have time to do the right thing."

"Where do you suppose the artwork is, Mr. Detective? If you can find it, you can have it back."

"I don't know, Erika. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"You're a detective, so detect."

"You'll tell me the truth?"

"Yes. The truth. Finally."

"Do you have a cellar?"

"No."

"Do you have any land or property further inland? Any storage sheds anywhere?"

"No." She popped a piece of chocolate into her mouth.

"Is the artwork in this house?"

She took a long look at me, long enough for me to know she was thinking about how to respond, which was my answer. Before she could lie, I asked, "If it's not in a cellar, perhaps it's in an attic or the garage?"

"You don't even know what you're looking for, Mr. Holt. Statues? Armor? Religious relics?"

"I'm looking for a painting by Vincent van Gogh called *The Painter on His Way to Work*. I'm looking for a painting by Raphael entitled *Portrait of a Young Man*. I'm looking for paintings by Pablo Picasso, Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, and Monet. Works of priceless art because they tie a family to its past. A past that has been stolen and left them wondering. The evil acts that happened eighty years ago are very much alive and are causing real pain. Finding this artwork will give them closure. It will give all parties involved closure. Why put this on your children and grandchildren? They are innocent."

"I was innocent. I was a child, sold to and stolen by the Party, just like this art! If I had to carry this burden, my children can carry it, and their children can carry it."

When she said, 'this art,' I noticed she looked at a painting that hung on the wall. The painting was an oil on canvas of The Links. In fact, all the artwork on her walls depicted the area in oil on canvas. Like spotting a tuft of hair on a broken branch of sagebrush, I had another hunch. I stood up and walked over to the painting of the golf course.

"This painting. Why do you have a painting of something

you can see from your window on a sunny day?"

"So I can still see it when it's foggy."

"Why did the Nazis steal art? Was that ever explained to vou?"

"So that it wasn't hanging on the walls of a Jewish home. Simple as that."

And suddenly, it struck me like a golf ball to the head. "What better location is there for priceless art to hang than on the walls of a German home?" I ran my finger along the canvas, feeling the oil's rough, yet smooth texture in greens and blues.

"Please don't touch the painting. The grease from your fingers will ruin it."

I noticed something where the color met the frame. The frames. They were beautiful. My gut was yelling at me now. Suddenly pieces of the puzzle started falling into place. Where would I hide artwork? In a place where I could keep an eye on it, grab it and go in case of a fire, somewhere close by. Like on my wall. How easy would it be to put another painting on top of a masterpiece? A painting so bland that no thief would want to steal it. And then it dawned on me, why stop at one young girl? Why not ten? Why stop at one house? Why not as many as they could get away with? My head was spinning with theories.

"Do you mind?" I asked her as I took the painting off her wall.

She let out a scream and begged me to stop. I made quick work of removing the backing from the frame, and once I did, there it was between the frame and the painting of the golf course—a canvas in pastels and gold. The stolen artwork was hiding in plain sight.

"Erika. I need you to stay calm and sit down. I'm calling a friend of mine over at the F.B.I."

To my surprise, she didn't pull a gun. She gave me a longwinded story about how she had her reasons, then laid her head on the table and began to quietly weep.

And every painting was taken off Erika's walls. Every frame was hiding a priceless masterpiece, even an old family photo, which made me think of the old man and his wall of family photos. A few of my friend's friends went to his house where they found hidden artwork behind the photographs. I owed Mrs. Burke another visit. She was surprised when I walked over to the painting her husband had created, removed it from the wall, and found Van Gogh's, *The Painter on His Way to Work*.

In the following weeks, my archaic algorithm was put into an actual database, and six more homes were flagged as potential Nazi hiding places in Pebble Beach, Pacific Grove, Carmel, and one in Monterey. In all, over 3,000 works of art stolen, smuggled, and hidden by the Nazis were discovered. The Goldstein's got their artwork back, most of it, but more importantly, Nick was able to write a new ending to his family's story.

"Mr. Holt. I never expected you to find the artwork, I just assumed you would help us get a little closer to the truth, but you did it. You did the unimaginable, and now my grandchildren will have a happy ending when they tell their story. You've given us closure and, well...quite frankly, you've given us victory. After all these years, we have won." He shook my hand, wrote me a check with more zeros than I'd ever seen in a row, and said goodbye.

Later that week, *The New Yorker* called me to set up an interview regarding what had become my internationally sensational case. I remembered that gut feeling I had when Nick first walked into my office and, well, my life was about to change.

Also, Erika was right. *The New Yorker would* have called first. ■

Kristoffer Polaha is best-known for his long starring role in the critically acclaimed series Life Unexpected (The CW). Other TV series credits include Get Shorty with Ray Romano and Chris O'Dowd, the limited series Condor opposite William Hurt and Max Irons, The CW's Ringer (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and Valentine, as well as North Shore (FOX). In addition to co-starring with Rainn Wilson in Backstrom (FOX), he had a multi-season role on the acclaimed series Mad Men (AMC) and Castle (ABC). Polaha is also well-known for starring in Hallmark Channel movies such as Dater's Handbook with Meghan Markle, and the Mystery 101 franchise on Hallmark Movies & Mysteries. Polaha first received attention for his portrayal of John F. Kennedy, Jr. in the TV movie America's Prince: The John F. Kennedy Jr. Story opposite Portia de Rossi. He has appeared in numerous independent features, including Where Hope Grows, Devil's Knot (Colin Firth, Reese Witherspoon), and the Tim Tebow film, Run the Race. Polaha has a featured role opposite Gal Gadot in Wonder Woman 1984 and in Jurassic World: Dominion. In addition to his work as an actor, producer, and director, Polaha is branching into the book world by co-authoring a new series, From Kona with Love, and he celebrated his first release from that series entitled "Moments Like This." He is also involved with several charitable organizations, including being an ambassador for World Vision, a board member for herARTS in Action, and The Polaha Family Circus Foundation. He is also the creator of a live show titled The Polaha Chautauqua on IGTV. He is married to Julianne Polaha and together they have three sons.

## PAUL KEMPRECOS

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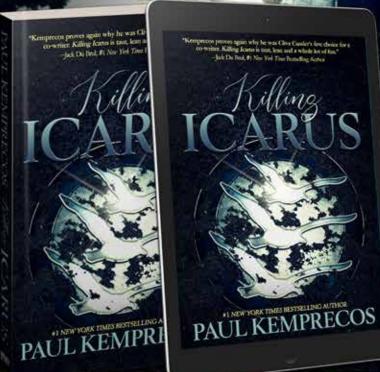
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## The Last Mission

By Tom Hallman, Jr.

Earl Johnson was elected president of the Grove Retirement Community book club for reasons that had nothing to do with literature. He simply possessed what the other old-timers who now called the place home lacked. Just over 90, Johnson not only had a valid driver's license, but a car.

He enjoyed this title, smiling when fellow residents of the Grove—an independent and assisted living facility—called him "Mister President," and returning their salutes when they passed him in the halls. Johnson considered himself a lucky man because he didn't need a wheelchair, walker or cane to get around.

Yet, there were days when Johnson, a Marine who earned the nickname "Iron Clad"—he always kept his word—while fighting in the Pacific Theater during the late stages of WWII, wished he was still a young man physically able to fight. A month earlier Johnson's world was upended when homeless street thugs claimed a spot on the sidewalk in front of the used bookstore where he shopped for members of the retirement center's book club.

Three young men, their meager belongings stuffed into old rolling suitcases, spent the day and night on that corner, drinking, begging for money, and harassing those who refused their demand for spare change. Police had been called, but those who complained were told there was nothing authorities could do. Living on the street and begging, it turned out, wasn't against the law. At first, Johnson ignored the group when he arrived at the bookstore. Then Carl, the group's de facto leader, began picking on the old man.

Carl's face and arms were covered with tattoos. He carried a hunting knife in a sheath looped through his belt. Johnson could handle Carl's cussing. But everything changed the day when Carl purposely bumped into Johnson, at the same moment, dropping a paper bag to the sidewalk. Johnson heard glass breaking.

"Hey, old man, you broke my Courvoisier."

Johnson looked at the bag. It was dry. No way was there a bottle of cognac in there.

"You owe me eighty bucks."

"I...ah..." Johnson stammered.

"Eighty. Now."

Always polite, Johnson instinctively pulled his wallet from his back pocket. Carl pounced, moving closer and forcing Johnson up against the bookstore's outside wall.

"Pay me."

Johnson hesitated.

Inside the wallet was money from the book club members.

"Pay me."

Johnson opened his wallet. He withdrew three \$20 bills and two \$10 bills.

"Now, go on."

Johnson slowly walked to his car. He started the motor and pulled away from the curb. He knew that if his daughter, Sara, found out what had happened she'd take away his car.

On the way back to the Grove, Johnson came up with a lie. He'd tell the 25 book club members—men and women, eighty years and older—that he'd been unable to buy books. A sign on the store's front door, he'd say, noted the owner was on vacation. He knew club members would be disappointed. He was the club's lifeline to a world that, truth be told, no longer had much use for any of them. Johnson admitted to himself that he was now just an old fart marking time until the clock ran out.

That night, Johnson called the book club meeting to order, using a microphone in the small room so even those with double hearing aids could clearly hear. He told his story, promising to return to the bookstore in two weeks. Meeting over, Johnson took the elevator to the building's third floor, walked down the long hallway and stepped inside the one-bedroom apartment he considered a jail cell.

He'd spent most of his life in a sprawling house where he and his wife of more than 65 years had raised their daughter. On top of the bookcase was a framed photograph of Mildred. Gone more than 15 years now, he wondered when he'd join her. He'd worked, supported his family and launched his daughter into the world. His life, he realized, had no purpose.

He opened a cabinet, poured himself a small bourbon and added a bit of ice. He eased himself into a recliner to watch TV: *Jeopardy!* followed by *Wheel of Fortune*.

In two weeks, he'd have to go back to the bookstore where he knew Carl would be waiting.

Oh...to be young.

He sipped his bourbon and raised his glass, a symbolic toast to the ghost of the man once called "Iron Clad."

\*\*\*

Two weeks later, Johnson drove his 1977 Cadillac from Grove, located in the suburbs, to the inner city. He parked down the street from Pages, a used bookstore in a run-down district that seemed to perpetually sit on the verge of improving.

Once inside, he'd shop for club members who'd given him money—the \$80 he'd paid off Carl came out of his own pocket this trip—and a list of the books and magazines they wanted him to purchase and bring back to the care facility. Magazines were less than \$1 and books ranged from \$2 for a paperback to \$5 for a hardcover. Johnson was still agile and strong enough to carry the box of books and magazines to his car.

Without Johnson's shopping trip, book club members at the Grove had nothing to read. Well-meaning children had given their parents iPads and eBook readers, but the book club members hated the technology. A password wouldn't work because they'd forget to add @, # or \$ to the long line of letters and numbers. The damn fingerprint button seemed to never work, and they couldn't understand how to download a book or magazine. This led to frustrated calls to sons, daughters and even grandchildren, young people who patiently guided them through all the required steps, none of which made sense.

"What do you mean control, shift?"

"What cloud?"

"Where's the on and off button?"

What book club members longed for was the simplicity of holding a real book or magazine in their hands. They wanted to read in bed, turn down the corner of a page, set the book on a nightstand and start again in the morning without the infernal prompt to sign in. They wanted to take a magazine to the Grove's dining room, read it and then toss it in the garbage without worrying about losing a \$500 gadget. They wanted to read in a bathroom without worrying that water would destroy the device.

Johnson joined the book club after his daughter made him move into the Grove. He saw a notice of upcoming events in the elevator and needed something to get him out of his apartment. During the book club meeting, while everyone grumbled about the electronic devices, Johnson mentioned a chapter from his old life—Pages, a used bookstore that had opened in the city in 1935. Since then, only three people had owned the store, and Johnson knew all of them.

Born and raised in Bayview, Johnson had visited the store as a kid and made it a lifelong habit. That store, more than any classroom, taught him the love of reading and exposed him to the mystery of discovery by wandering the aisles, looking at titles and stumbling over something unexpected. Even after Mildred died, he visited the store. He stopped only when his daughter made him sell the family home and move into the Grove to enjoy his so-called "golden years."

When book club members heard about Pages, they begged Johnson to return there and shop for them. He agreed, and for that reason (plus owning the car) he was named the book club president. At the next meeting everyone brought a list of what they wanted: Louis L'Amour paperback westerns; issues of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* from the 1950s, and vintage copies of *Life*, *Look* and *True*—iconic magazine staples from years gone by. For more than a year, everything had been perfect. Then Carl and his pack of thugs arrived....

Johnson looked out the car's front window. He saw the gang.

Backing his car into a spot at the end of the block, he watched Carl asking people for money and flipping them off when they shook their head. Maybe, Johnson thought, it would be best to return to the Grove and tell members he was quitting the book club. Make an excuse. Tell them he felt uneasy driving. But he'd be a quitter and spend the last chapter of his life knowing he was a coward.

He remembered WWII. He'd never been more scared. He'd found some measure of courage only when he realized he was fighting for something bigger than himself, even bigger than the United States as a whole. He was fighting for his buddies, the men who served with him. He tapped the steering wheel with his hand. Maybe, he told himself, he was fighting for the Grove Retirement Community book club.

He opened his car door.

He walked up the block.

\*\*\*

Shattered glass covered the sidewalk in front of the bookstore. Without breaking stride, Johnson pulled his wallet from his back pocket and tucked it deep into his front pocket.

"Welcome back, old man."

Johnson felt his heart race. His hands trembled as he pulled on the handle to step inside the musty bookstore. The

interior of the store had never changed. Not too big, not too small; the store was a warren of aisles and shelves that held books and magazines, some current, but most from another era. Daily, people brought in publications to sell, often when they were cleaning out basements and attics. Sellers were glad to be rid of it all; buyers could always find something to read. Two long aisles featured nothing but old magazines.

Johnson walked to the front counter and found Emily, the store's most recent owner, crying. In her late 20s, she'd borrowed money from her family and secured a bank loan to buy the store from the previous owner, a man forced to retire because of poor health. Her straight, black hair and the lean build of a dancer reminded Johnson of his own daughter.

"Excuse me," he said softly.

Emily wiped her eyes. She tried to smile.

"Hello, Mr. Johnson."

"What happened?"

Emily pointed to the front of the store. Johnson turned. He saw a sheet of plywood covering what once had been a window facing the sidewalk.

"Those guys," said Emily.

Johnson waited.

"It started last week. After bugging customers, they came into the store. They were just hanging out and reading. I told them it wasn't a library."

"Oh, Emily, I'm sorry."

She sighed.

"Carl threw a book at me. Then the rest of them started knocking books off the shelves as they ran out the store."

Johnson shook his head.

"I called the police," Emily continued. "Took about ninety minutes for a cop to show up. He told me it was low priority. He went outside, talked with Carl and gave him a warning. He said it was the best he could do."

That, Emily told Johnson, was when the vandalism started. Spray paint on the front door, a pile of human waste in the entryway, broken windows. Everything done in the middle of the night when the street, except for thugs, was empty. And when her workday was done and it was time for Emily to walk to her car in a parking lot two blocks away, she said Carl followed her, telling her how nice she looked and how he couldn't wait to get to know her better one day.

"Last night they busted the window. I just got off the phone with the insurance company. One more claim and they're going to cancel my policy."

"And the police?"

"Another report," she said with a shrug. "Another warning."

The phone rang.

"I have to get it," she said. "I think it's my father."

Johnson walked through the store, getting the books and magazines requested by the club members. He stacked them

interior of the store had never changed. Not too big, not too i on the front counter. He stood quietly while Emily tallied the small; the store was a warren of aisles and shelves that held i bill and carefully stacked the items in a cardboard box.

"How's your father?"

"Worried."

"I understand."

"I'm scared of those guys." Emily reached under the counter and pulled out a can of bear spray. "I carry this with me when I walk to my car."

She handed Johnson a receipt and his change.

"You've been this store's longest customer, Mr. Johnson."

"Quite an honor."

Emily patted the top of his hand. "I want you to be the first to know. Unless something changes, I'm closing this place."

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That night, after distributing the books at the meeting, Johnson poured himself one bourbon and then another. With each sip he grew angrier. If local cops wouldn't deal with Carl and the thugs, the federal Drug Enforcement Agency sure as hell would. But someone had to force their hand.

And with that, Iron Clad had a final mission.

At the next book club meeting, Johnson closed the doors to the room. He needed privacy.

"No shopping next week," he said.

He told the group what was happening to Pages, and proceeded to give them their assignment. In their rooms, each member had various medications prescribed by doctors and dentists. They were each to take three tablets—hydrocodone, oxycodone, Ambien—and bring them to Johnson during the next week. If a caregiver asked about the missing pills, they were to play dumb. After all, young people always assume old people are forgetful.

Soon, Johnson had nearly 100 pills. Johnson learned from a 60 Minutes episode that possession of just four pills without a prescription resulted in a two-year sentence in a federal penitentiary. Imagine the hammer from having 100 pills.

On the chosen day, Johnson kissed Mildred's photograph. "You'd be proud of me."

He parked down the block from Pages. He walked past Carl and the thugs, looking at the sidewalk when they called to him. He wanted them to consider him weak and old.

The bookstore was empty. Emily stood behind the front counter. He walked the aisles, looking for a specific book. He found it in the history section. It was a collection by Ernie Pyle, a legendary WWII newspaper correspondent who gave Americans a first-hand look of the reality of war, showing readers the fear, sadness, and the enduring struggles the men faced. Johnson took the book to the front counter. He handed it to Emily.

She studied the cover of "Brave Men" and looked at the

old man in front of her. "You in the war?" she asked.

"Semper fi."

"What's that mean?"

"Always faithful."

He gave Emily \$3 for the book. He slipped on a pair of black driving gloves.

"I'll be back next week for the book club," he told Emily. "We love this store. We need this store."

"I'm hanging in," said Emily. "But I don't know if I can keep this up."

She pointed to the front door at the sidewalk where Carl waited for Johnson.

"I know," Johnson said. "They make me nervous, too. Will you keep an eye on me when I leave? Just to make sure I'm okay."

She nodded and walked up the aisle with Johnson. In her hand, she carried a cellphone, hiding behind a stack of books and peering through the one unbroken window.

Johnson stepped onto the sidewalk.

"Old man," said Carl. "Been missing you."

He bumped Johnson. He dropped a paper bag.

"Another bottle of Courvoisier."

Carl stepped closer, inches from Johnson.

"Pay up. What you got for me, old man?"

"Nothing."

"What the...?"

Johnson reached into his pocket and discretely pulled out the bag containing the narcotics. Earlier, back at the nursing home, he'd used rubbing alcohol to rub his fingerprints from the bag. The driving gloves would keep the bag clean. The evidence would lead directly to Carl and his crew.

"Last chance, old man."

"Nothing."

Johnson felt the first blow upside his head. He dropped his book and stepped into Carl's body. Quickly, he slipped the bag of pills into the opening of the punk's overalls. He held onto Carl. Together, they fell to the sidewalk. Carl's two buddies jumped in, kicking Johnson. He heard Emily, who'd run from the store, screaming that she'd called the police to report a beating.

The thugs kept up their attack. Johnson held on tightly to Carl.

He thought of Mildred.

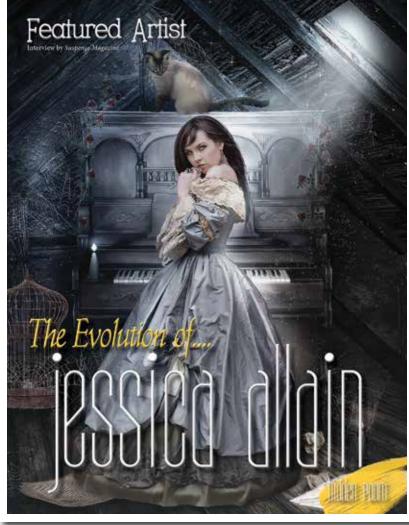
He thought of his daughter.

He thought of Emily.

He thought of the book club.

He hung on. He tasted his own blood. In the distance, he heard police cars, sirens blaring, squeal to a stop in front of the store. Two cops pulled Carl off Johnson. One cop tended to Johnson while his partner searched Carl.

"What's this?" the cop yelled. He held the bags in front



of Carl's face.

"These aren't mine," Carl shouted.

The cop smirked, spun Carl around and snapped on the handcuff.

"Charlie," the cop spoke to his partner, "contact DEA. We got a situation here. Big score."

Johnson sat up; he watched the agents in their blue DEA windbreakers arrive on the scene and take over. An ambulance attendant checked out Johnson. No injuries. Just cuts and scrapes. He asked if Johnson wanted to go to the hospital. Johnson shook his head and stood up. A young cop began questioning him, filling out an official report. Johnson watched Carl and his gang, all in handcuffs now, being questioned by a team of men in windbreakers labeled DEA.

Carl yelled.

"Shut up," a gray-haired man told him. "We got you cold. You and your group are going down."

Johnson tapped the young cop on his arm. "My book. I want my book."

The cop handed it to him.

"Semper fi," Johnson muttered. "Semper fi."

He walked to his car.

Iron Clad was going to have a bourbon tonight.

Maybe even two. ■

# 3 HARD TRUTHS About Writing



By Dennis Palumbo Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

In my therapy practice, I try to help writers come to terms with a variety of issues associated with writing. Together, we endeavor to explore and challenge their expectations, their fears and fantasies, the very personal *meanings* that they assign to the peaks and valleys of a writer's life. Hopefully, the most painful, most debilitating beliefs guiding a patient's self-experience can be illuminated and integrated. At the very least, writers can learn coping strategies to help them coexist with many of the internal conflicts that plague them.

That said, there're some particular aspects of the writing life that exist over and apart from our experience *of* writing. These are aspects of writing itself that cannot be "resolved" or "integrated," and certainly not "cured." They are intrinsic to writing. They're what I call the Three Hard Truths about writing.

The First Hard Truth: Writing is a craft as well as an art, and that craft takes time to develop. Forget genius, forget inspiration. It takes time—measured not in weeks or months, but years. Hemingway said, "Write a million words." He wasn't kidding.

Yes, *time*...page after page, draft after draft, month after month, year after year. Scenes and more scenes, characters and events and images, discarding and changing and shuffling and re-shuffling, and throwing it all out and starting over again. That's the writer's commitment, and that requires time. Or, should I say, a lifetime?

The Second Hard Truth: With every new project, you have to teach yourself how to write it. Each new piece of writing is unique unto itself. To put it another way, you and the thing you're about to write are encountering each other for the first time. The book or short story you wrote last year, or last month, can't help much, regardless of its similarities in style or content to the new project. For one thing, you're in a different place emotionally, creatively, perhaps even professionally. You bring a different set of feelings, beliefs and attitudes, whether or not you can even articulate these to yourself. Even if you're trying consciously to re-create what you've done before, it's not really possible.

This is not, by the way, a bad thing. In fact, it's the lifeblood of creativity, this always-newness. For centuries, writers have labored to explore and explicate what Faulkner called "the eternal verities," yet every time a writer sits down to write, it's new. A wise writer knows this, and revels in it. He or she can also take comfort in knowing that, despite the unknown path

Hemingway said, "Write a million words."

He wasn't kidding.

that lies ahead, the previous writing has its own history. A history of having walked such a path before, and of having solved whatever unique problems it presented, which can embolden the writer to accept the challenge of whatever issues may come up in the new project at hand.

Despite the solace of history, however, each new writing project is a journey into the unknown. So that, ultimately, regardless of your years of experience as a writer, or your level of success, you come to the blank page (or screen) with anticipation for what you'll discover, in effect, as a beginner.

Which is fine. To quote Suzuki's famous adage, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind, there are few."

#### The Third Hard Truth: Writing carries no guarantees.

You can never know how a piece will turn out—whether it'll be any good, whether anyone will like it, whether it will ever be sold. Writing, to put it flatly, is all about risk.

No matter how hard you work, how studiously you apply yourself, no matter even how innately talented you may feel you are, there are no guarantees. You can't really know the outcome of any writing endeavor. Writing, like life (and baseball, for that matter, or marriage, or politics), is totally unpredictable.

Every time you start a new writing project, you're sailing off into uncharted waters. Whether or not you make it to shore depends on a hundred variables, few of which (outside of effort and commitment) are under your control. And when you finally get there, when the new novel or story is finished, it may fall far short of your hopes.

On the other hand, it may not. The writing may sing, the narrative might very well quicken the heart. You may just pull off the alchemist's trick and have some real gold on your hands. But you can't know until you get there. You just can't know.

Well, there they are, the Three Hard Truths. And, frankly, they scare the hell out of me! They seem so implacable, so non-negotiable, so...well...hard.

Besides, these Three Hard Truths may not be Truths at all. They're just my ideas, one man's opinion... I could be way off base here.

But I don't think so.

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is a licensed psychotherapist and author. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, The Strand and elsewhere, and is collected in "From Crime to Crime." His series of mystery thrillers (the latest of which is "Panic Attack") features Daniel Rinaldi, a psychologist and trauma expert who consults with the Pittsburgh Police.

For more info, visit www.dennispalumbo.com.

## When Your Only Weapon is

Writer Dennis Palumbo gives quarantined writers permission and perspective amid COVID-19.

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

With the COVID-19 pandemic in its third month in the US, Connect spoke to psychotherapist Denni Palumbo about recurring themes in his therapy practice, with writers who are under extended stay at home orders and grappling with an entertainment industry on indefinite pause.

For three decades, Palumbo has been a licensed psychotherapist for working writers and others in creative fields. To the therapy setting, Palumbo brings his own experience as a sitcom writer, screenwriter and, more recently, crime novelist (2018's "Head Wounds" is the fifth installment in his Daniel Rinaldi series). Palumbo's non-fiction book, "Writing from the Inside Out" (2000), was an adaptation and expansion of his regular columns for Written By.

Connect: You're both a therapist for other writers and a writer yourself. So how is your writing going?

Deanis Palumbo (D.P.): I'm a little more desultory because, like anyone else, I feel some of the stress of the uncertainty of this Plus, you know, dealing with deliveries and putting on my mask and gloves when I go to get the mail.... It's certainly having an effect on my patients. My own writing is going ok. I have patients who are writing up a storm and I have patients who car' focus for more than ten minutes because they're thinking about the pandemic, and especially if they have young children becaus they're doing homeschooling or trying to keep them entertained. Plus, there's the annipresent media. I have patients who just cannot stop watching CNN. As this thing has gone on and on, one of the first things I'm recommending to people is to curtail their watching of the news as much as possible.

Connect: It's a slippery slope between staying informed and getting lost in it all.

D.P.: Check it in the morning and then check it in the evening to make sure there hasn't been an alien invasion or so Other than that, I think one of the problems that is endemic brings to this situation is, we have an enemy, this virus, and the weapon we use against the enemy is inaction—just sitting in your house. I think that's very hard on the psyche. We have a fight-or-flight mechanism. When someone throws a rock at you, you pick up a rock and throw it back, or else you run away. And we can't run away, we have to stay in the house, and we can't fight it. So, I think our cortisol levels are always being elevated be we're in a state where there's no tool we can use against the virus, other than staying put. I think the body doesn't like that. The psyche certainly doesn't like it. Therefore, no matter how busy you are, either with your children or with your writing, this sense of impotence contributes to depression and anxiety. And then you add to that the fact there's no end date. Most people don't like uncertainty. One of the real problems with the quarantine is the uncertainty.

ect: So much of anxiety is typically about what you invent in your mind, but COVID-19 is a very real external crisis How does this affect the tenor and substance of your practice?

SuspenseMagazine.com

#### WRITING WITH A PARTNER: THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Autho

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Now and again a screen- or TV writer patient of mine wrestles with the idea of taking on a writing Partner. Having done dozens of therapy sessions with writing teams over the years—plus having begun my former career in Hollywood as half of a sitcom-writing partnership—I have more than a few thoughts about the potential benefits, liabilities and turmoil of doing so. Let's call these (with apologies to Sergio Leone) the Good, the Bad and the Ugly.

The Good: The obvious benefits of a writing partner can be reduced down to the familiar adage "Two heads are better than one." With a partner you have the advantage of a sounding board for your ideas, a straight man (or woman) for your jokes, and a life-raft when your inspiration is sinking.

A partner brings less obvious benefits, as well. If you're prone to procrastination, just knowing that your partner is waiting impatiently for you to join in will help motivate you. A writing partner can pull

the two of you up when you're feeling down. Moreover, when pitching a story to a producer or studio exec, your memory might suddenly flag, or you'll get the narrative elements out of order and panic sets in. In which case, a good writing partner can step up and pinch-hit for you. (It helps, too, when a pitch goes badly to have someone with whom to commiserate over beers at the inevitable post-mortem.)

Finally, a writing partner can be the obvious solution to a well-known downside to the profession: it can be lonely. For many TV and film writers I know, taking on a partner rescued them from an experience of loneliness that, after a number of years, had grown literally intolerable.

Next up, the Bad: For just as many writers I know, the thought of having to compromise their vision, negotiate seen and dialogue, and split credit (and fees) is equally intolerable. The inverse of the loneliness to which writers often succua is the sublime privacy and freedom from interference that a solo writer enjoys. "It's bad enough," one of my patients told me, "to have to take notes from agents, producers, directors and actors. But having to take them from a writing partner is

me, we nave to use moves from agents, producers, successor and actors, but naving to use mean from a writing partner in maddening." This patient, as you may have guessed, had worked with a partner for years before going her own way.

Which brings up another dilemma that plagues writing partnerships: how you're each perceived in the marketplace. Is one of you considered the more talented, funnier, easier to get along with? Within the partnership itself, is the division of labor fair, effective, logical? And who decides these concerns? Which of the two of you assumes the role of team spokesperson, agent liaison, the one who has the star's ear on set?

And, lastly, what happens when the two writers grow in different directions? When, for example, one has ambitions to write dramatic film or TV scripts, while the other prefers to stay in comedy? When one writer wants to try his or her hand at a novel or play? Or decides to go on a three-month spiritual retreat? What does the partner do, sit around and wait? Or start looking for a new partner?

Which brings me, regrettably, to the aspect of writing partnerships that I've dubbed, the Ugly: As I mentioned up

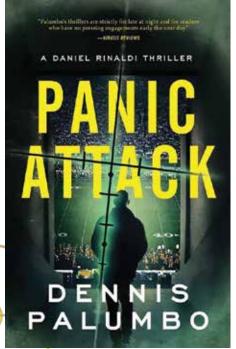
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#### **SPECIAL PREVIEW FROM DENNIS PALUMBO**

## PANIC ATTACK

#### Daniel Rinaldi Mystery, #6

By Dennis Palumbo



#### **CHAPTER ONE**

On a bitterly cold afternoon in late October, I was one of twenty thousand witnesses to a murder.

Not ten minutes before, I was sitting next to Martin Hobbs, Dean of Teasdale College, sipping spiked cider from a thermos, my head sunk low in the collar of my winter coat.

Above, enormous white clouds loomed like a chain of floating islands, backlit by a wan sun whose diffused light crowned the trees still boasting autumnal colors. Beyond, a carpet of crisp, freeze-dried grass stretched to meet the ancient Allegheny Mountains. A typical fall landscape in Western Pennsylvania, yet less than twenty miles from downtown Pittsburgh. In a small, formerly thriving farming community called Parkville.

"Isn't this great, Dr. Rinaldi?" Dean Hobbs rubbed his gloved hands in excitement. "Perfect football weather, eh?"

I nodded, shivering. We were in the cushioned VIP seats, right on the fifty-yard line in the small private college's new football stadium. I'm more of an NFL fan, especially when it comes to the Steelers, and hadn't been to a college game since my undergraduate days at Pitt. But when the Dean asked me to join him for Saturday's

match-up against the team's division rivals, I didn't see how I could refuse.

The evening before, I'd given the Commencement address in the Reynolds Auditorium, another newly-built facility on the rural campus, a gift of billionaire alum William Reynolds. Having amassed a fortune in real estate, the late philanthropist had earmarked the funds for the stately building in his will.

Now, with kick-off only a few minutes away, I let my attention drift from Dean Hobbs' relentless boosterism and replayed my speech from the night before. It had gone reasonably well, though both the school's faculty and its graduating class were perplexed by the phalanx of print, online and broadcast journalists who rushed me as soon as I'd finished.

I couldn't believe I was still news, now more than eight months after the Sebastian Maddox case. Although I'd done my best to keep a low profile, the media wouldn't let the story go. Just last month, I was approached by a cable news producer who said they were planning a special about the crimes, and would I agree to be a participant in the program?

Naturally, I refused. Not that they needed my onscreen presence, anyway. There was enough news footage from that period—the various bloody crime scenes, the smoking remains of the fire that had raged through the psychiatric clinic; there'd even been coverage of the last victim's funeral. After all, the mayor himself—never one to pass up a photo-op—had attended that gaudy affair.

To me, this proposed "special" was nothing but a particularly gratuitous exploitation of a real tragedy. What my late wife

used to call "murder porn." And I was having none of it. Those horrific days left psychic scars on me as fresh as when they'd first been inflicted. Not to mention what had happened to friends, colleagues and patients. Eight months of therapy later and I still barely slept at night.

But the Maddox case, following on the numerous high-profile investigations I'd been involved with in recent years, had cemented my reputation as both a psychologist and consultant to the Pittsburgh Police. A PR guy even called, offering to help me enhance my "brand." I couldn't hang up fast enough.

Nowadays, unlike in those earlier cases, and especially in recent months, I made sure to stay out of the public eye. No more interviews with the *Post-Gazette*, no more "expert" commentary on CNN about the possible motives behind the latest mass shooting or new string of serial killings. Like the victims of violent crime that I specialized in treating, I needed time and therapeutic support to address my own traumatic reaction to what Maddox had put me through. Lately, other than a few intimate meals with close friends and my ongoing clinical practice, I'd kept mostly to myself.

So when the invitation came to speak at Teasdale College, a modest private institution east of the city, my initial reaction was to politely decline. Until I mentioned it to my own therapist, who suggested it might aid in my recovery to, in his words, "return to the land of the living."

Which is how I ended up cupping a thermos of not-quite-spiked-enough cider and smiling as attentively as I could while Dean Hobbs prattled on about his school. In his late fifties, reed-thin and balding, his neck swathed in a scarf emblazoned with Teasdale's colors, he'd finally taken a breath and glanced at his watch. Small, inoffensive eyes gleaming merrily.

"Almost time for the tiger."

"What tiger?"

"The Teasdale Tiger. Our team mascot. The fans love him. Especially the kids."

He nodded at the home team's sidelines, where in addition to legendary local coach George Pulaski and his heavily-jacked players, a two-legged tiger was doing deep knee-bends.

It was a full-body costume, complete with a head cover whose dark, whiskered snout and muff collar looked appropriately tiger-ish. There were also impressive-looking claws on the furry hands and feet, and a floppy tail. For a moment, I wondered how the guy inside the costume could breathe. On the other hand, he was probably warmer than anyone else in the stadium.

Dean Hobbs nudged me. "Know who's in the tiger costume?"

"No."

A conspiratorial chuckle. "Neither does anyone else. Only Coach Pulaski and I know. It's an idea we borrowed from Pitt. Their Pitt Panther mascot."

Of course, I knew what he was talking about. For years, my *alma mater*, the University of Pittsburgh, kept the identity of its similarly-costumed football mascot, the Pitt Panther, a secret. All anybody knew was that it was one of four undergrads who rotated in the job, all of whom had been sworn to secrecy. Even after they graduated, they kept their promise not to reveal that they'd worn the fabled costume. Only the university's Provost and the football coach knew their names.

Hobbs took a sip of hot chocolate from his own thermos, embossed with the school's logo. The guy was a walking advertisement for the campus store.

"Now in *our* case, Doc," he said casually, "we only have one student per year who dresses as the Tiger. This year it's a sophomore bio major named Jason Graham. Great kid. Really likes to put on a show for the crowd." A worried frown creased his brow. "I assume you'll keep that information to yourself."

"I'm a psychologist, Martin. I keep secrets for a living."

He breathed a sigh of relief as I swept the tiers of seats all around the stadium.

Since many of the fans were returning alumni of Teasdale, I found myself wondering which, if any, had himself once worn the tiger outfit. And who, many years later, having weathered the pains and indignities of life, now looked down at the energetic student doing push-ups on the sidelines and recalled the carefree days of his youth.

Or maybe I was thinking about myself. All the unexpected twists and turns of my own life since my early years at Pitt.

The long, complicated journey that's led to where I am now.

Suddenly, my reverie was broken by a tremendous uproar from the crowd. No surprise why. The Teasdale Tiger had taken to the field, doing cartwheels on his way to the middle of the artificial turf.

Dean Hobbs had joined the rest of the fans in jumping to his feet, whistling and shouting. I hauled myself out of my seat as well.

I had to admit, it felt good being enveloped by the enthusiastic energy of the crowd. After all these somber, halting months, obsessed with what Sebastian Maddox—in his fury at me—had done to those closest to me. The grief, the guilt. But now something about that lunatic mascot cavorting on the field, leading the fans in a protracted "tiger roar," gave my spirits a lift.

Until a few seconds later, when, as the crowd noise lessened, it was replaced by another sound. A loud, booming crack, like a tree branch breaking in a storm.

A gunshot. From somewhere above and behind where Hobbs and I stood.

I whipped my head around, eyes sweeping the mass of people behind me, some of whom had themselves frozen in place.

Then another sound, a massive collective groan from the stands, brought my gaze back to mid-field.

It was the mascot. The Teasdale Tiger.

On the ground. Motionless.

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haos. There's no other word for it.

People yelling, screaming, crying. Some so stunned they stood rooted at their seats, others scrambling over seat backs and down the slanted aisles toward the field.

Given our VIP seats, Hobbs and I had been among the first to reach the fallen student, though the Dean had just as quickly back-stepped away, hand on his mouth. Meanwhile, the entire team had poured from the sidelines and stood, wide-eyed, stricken, in a loose semi-circle around the body. One of them bent and retched, while others cried out or moaned in terror. By then one of the campus security guards had reached the body and, shouting and waving his arms, began pushing the student athletes back.

Only Coach Pulaski, his face old and cracked as drying clay, refused to move. Merely stared down at the costumed body at his feet. His beefy frame slumped, as though having collapsed in on itself. Mouth chewing air, trying to form words.

"Jesus Christ." His anguished whisper over my shoulder echoed my own horror as I crouched by the body. Forcing myself to look.

Almost immediately, I turned away, the bile rising in my throat. Willing myself, I swallowed a couple huge breaths. Trying to tamp down my fear, my revulsion. Then I caught sight of another security guard and motioned him to my side.

"Bend down across from me." I managed to gesture across the body. "Help me shield him from onlookers."

The man's face was white as a paper plate, but he nodded and scrambled to the other side of the body. Keeping his own eyes averted from the fallen boy, he unzipped his coat and spread it wide behind him, like sheltering wings.

Steeling myself, I reached with both hands and gingerly peeled the torn, bloodied hood from the victim's head. What came away with the ragged strips of cloth and plastic was a horrible mixture of brain, fleshy pulp and jagged shards of bone.

Gulping more frigid air, I struggled to comprehend what I was seeing. And holding in my cupped, trembling hands.

Seeping through the shredded cloth, dripping bright red droplets to the ground, was the shattered top of the victim's head. Literally sheared off. Exposing a scalloped divot of scorched brain tissue, swimming in blood...

By now, more security had arrived. A quick backward glance revealed that they were having a hard time keeping the fans at a distance. A throng of people, varsity hand banners drooping at their sides, breaths misting in the biting cold, moved like a living thing toward the scene. I knew the overwhelmed guards wouldn't be able to contain them for long.

Meanwhile, his own breathing quick and shallow, Dean Hobbs had finally joined me, falling to his knees beside the body. "Poor kid. This will kill his parents. This will—"

His voice caught as he stared down at the dead boy. For the first time, I too registered the victim's white, nondescript features. And received another shock.

It was perhaps the most horrific thing of all. A grotesque joke. A final, nightmarish touch.

Below the severed skull cap, rivulets of blood ran down the sides of an impossibly unmarred face. Like a manikin's molded visage, the victim's smooth, clean-shaven features looked essentially undisturbed. Frozen, lifeless, but obscenely intact. Lips slightly parted, as though about to speak. Eyes wide open, staring up at Hobbs and myself.

I took another deep breath to steady myself. The victim looked to be about the same age as the players themselves. What was the kid's name again? Jason something...?

Then the Dean made a strange, garbled sound. Peering down at the still, achingly young face, he blinked in confusion.

"What is it?" I gripped his arm.

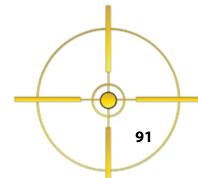
He turned, aiming that same bewildered stare at me.

"This... I don't know who it is..."

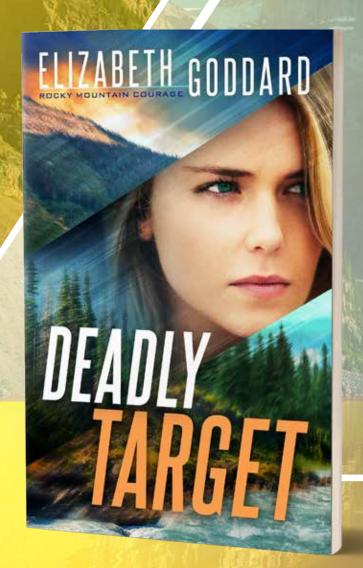
"What do you mean?"

"I mean, this boy...he isn't Jason Graham."

Learn more at: www.dennispalumbo.com.



## This cold case has suddenly warmed up. She only hopes they won't get BURNED.



Criminal psychologist Erin Larson's dreams of a successful career come to a screeching halt when she nearly loses her life in a boating accident and then learns that her mother tried to commit suicide. She leaves her job to care for her mother in Montana. At least there Erin is able to produce her podcast, which focuses on solving missing persons cold cases.

Nathan Campbell's father was investigating such a case when he was shot, and now Nathan needs to enlist Erin's help to solve the case. She's certainly good at what she does. The only problem? She's his ex.

As the two dig deeper, it becomes clear that they, too, are being targeted—and the answers to their questions are buried deep within the past Erin struggles to explain and longs to forget.

ElizabethGoddard.com

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## DEBBIE BABITT

Talks Career, Debut and...a "Saving Grace" Part 2?

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Debbie Babitt came onto the scene with her debut novel, "Saving Grace" and became the "talk of the town," to say the least. Named "One of the Most Anticipated Thrillers of 2021" (She Reads), a "Best Mystery & Thriller book of 2021" (A Book and a Dream), and a "First Mystery Crime Club Pick" (Mysterious Bookshop), "Saving Grace" also took its place in the #1 spot as being the "Best and Most Popular Mystery and Psychological Suspense Thriller Book of 2021" on the Worldwide Web.

Now that she has the world in her grasp, the collective group is waiting with bated breath to see what the creator of "Saving Grace" comes up with next. Well...not only did she share that information with *Suspense Magazine*, she also shared her life's work, her love of acting and writing plays, her outlook for the future, and even how her now famous character from her debut, Mary Grace Dobbs, first "whispered" in her ear at the grocery store and went on to become her faithful muse.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Your list of "creative incarnations" in the world of publishing and art began by being a Copy Director for two Manhattan publishing companies. Now that you have experienced both sides of the coin, per se, what would you like to tell authors from an editor's point of view?

Debbie Babitt (D.B.): Timing is everything. You need to deliver your manuscript in as timely a manner as possible so that we can successfully market your book. The publishing process takes many months to complete, and ideally, a twelve-month schedule (or longer, if we receive your opus sooner), from delivery to publication gives us the time we need to create a fabulous cover and winning copy—especially if this is your debut novel.

While we want a good book as opposed to a fast book, we need time to promote. We will also try to seek out authors—the bigger the name the better—to provide blurbs. This often validates your book for the would-be-buyer (aside from fabulous word-of-mouth, of course, which takes time for momentum to build), and lets them know that this is a special book. And whatever you as an author can do to help (reach out to fellow authors on your own, post on social media, etc.) will only add to the sales and success of your books!

S. MAG.: And vice versa...what would you love to tell an editor from the author's side of the fence?



D.B.: Do everything you can to help market and promote my book! That means creating a fabulous cover that I can then post on social media in my cover reveal (which my publisher, Penzler Publishers did—in spades—with my debut thriller "Saving Grace" and my forthcoming thriller "First Victim"). The earlier the better because I need time for readers to discover me. Write wonderful catalog copy for the sales team and irresistible flap and back cover copy to entice readers—especially if this is my debut. While the art is vital and helps to tell the book's story, the copy can sometimes mean the difference between making a sale or not. Send my book to every outlet (i.e., newspapers, magazines, for review, submission for awards, etc.) and leave no stone unturned in the quest to turn my novel into a bestseller!

S. MAG.: Actress, playwright, and drama critic. What was it about the acting industry that led you in the direction of writing? In addition, what plays were you most interested in writing—musicals, humor, etc.?

D.B.: I have always been writing—from the time I was eight and penned a 200-page novel! But I got sidetracked by the lure of performing, which I also loved. When I started rewriting my lines, I knew I had to get back to writing. That segued into playwriting—a murder mystery and absurdist plays that broke the fourth wall, a la Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author," a great play. I loved playwriting (and dreamed one day of writing book and lyrics for a Broadway musical—still do), but something was missing. I adore writing dialogue, but *I also loved reading novels, and enjoyed the breadth and scope* of a book that went beyond dialogue to tell a story. I was also reading plays for literary agents at the time, which led to a stint at William Morris, where they groomed me to be an agent. But I wanted to be the talent! Then I met a woman in a bookstore. I ended up writing back cover copy for Harlequin, which led to freelance copywriting for all the major Manhattan publishing houses and, ultimately, a career as a Copy Director at two of those houses. In between, I was a drama critic for the New York Law Journal, which gave me the chance to see all the plays in the best seats, free of charge! While writing copy helped hone my craft and discipline me—packing as much information as you can into a few sentences—I credit acting with teaching me the most important thing about novel writing: Always start with character. As the great Russian director Constantin Stanislavski famously said, "Character IS action." Boy, is that true. Characters start talking to me—in "Saving Grace" it was eleven-year-old orphan Mary Grace Dobbs, who lived in an as yet unnamed town in the South.

S. MAG.: In your youth, were you one of those writers who loved penning haunting/thriller stories? Did you keep a journal, perhaps?

D.B.: I loved reading mysteries and suspense. My mom, God:

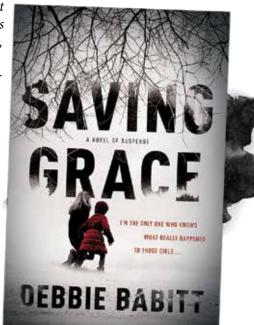
rest her soul, was an avid fan of the genre and books were always in the house. I also loved scary films. I did keep a journal, although it was more about my life at the time, not the fictional world. Except for the novel I wrote at eight, but that was a family saga about a girl who goes to live with her aunt. Funny—my young heroine in "Saving Grace" goes to live with her aunt, uncle, and cousin!

S. MAG.: You are quite obviously, with your article background, a mystery/suspense fan. Did/do you have a particular writer that you adore? Or, perhaps, one you wished to emulate when it came to their career path?

D.B.: Yes! There are so many writers I love and respect, all for different reasons. For me, though, the most important thing is that they write well! My favorite thrillers and mysteries are character-driven, with structure and sentences I savor. Although I'm not necessarily a fan of the supernatural, I consider Stephen King an author who focuses on character and whose stories pack an emotional wallop. Remember the brouhaha about some elitists not considering him to be a literary writer because they boxed him in as a genre author? I couldn't agree less. That being said, no mention of mystery authors would be complete without Agatha Christie, for sheer love of a whodunit, and her beloved detectives and some of her atypical books (i.e., "The Murder of Roger Ackroyd"). Of late, though, perhaps with the proliferation of women writing thrillers, my book of choice is suspense, with the focus on the psychological (character!). At the moment, the why-dunit intrigues me more than the whodunit, although "Saving Grace" is a hybrid in that it's both a thriller and a mystery (with a killer whom readers have told me they never guessed—music to an author's ears!). There are so many wonderful authors out there today writing great books. For me, a prerequisite in a book is that I love to be

surprised, with plot twists and reversals I don't see coming, rooted in character. Not a twist simply for the sake of a twist.

S. MAG.: You're sitting at your desk...outside... walking through the grocery store. (LOL) Set scene for us, simply because your debut was a "knock it out of the park book," to say the least. When, where...did



"Saving Grace" come into your mind? Is any of Mary Grace: trigger? Would you?" Dobbs' story based in fact?

D.B.: I like the idea of walking through a grocery store because I love food (although I didn't as a child) and my husband and I love nothing better than planning our meals! And, yes, sometimes the muse speaks to me there. And in other places. I never quite know where or when, which adds to the allure and mystery for me. "Saving Grace" started with young Mary Grace's voice in my ear. Her voice was soon joined by the voice of the adult Mary Grace who, twenty-four years later, is sheriff of Repentance—her Arkansas town. So, no, Mary Grace's story isn't based on a real person (though she's real to me!) or anything that really happened (that I know about, anyway!). But once she started talking to me, her story began to take shape—in both time periods. I began taking down the information flowing to me, both on my recorder and then on the keyboard. Mary Grace took me on quite a journey, and readers have told me they felt as if they were sharing Mary Grace's odyssey, which has been very gratifying.

S. MAG.: When did you "know" you had a hit? Or were you not ready for the accolades and groups that came out already calling out "Saving Grace" as being one of the most anticipated thrillers of 2021?

D.B.: I must say that I was surprised, and of course thrilled, at the reception my debut novel received so many months prior to publication. You live with your (gestating) characters for such a long time, and as an author I was so emotionally invested in Mary Grace's story that I wasn't looking at the book in a truly objective way. It was hard to separate myself from the creative process. But I was delighted that so many people responded to Mary Grace, who holds such a powerful place in my heart. I'm not sure that she's finished talking to me, either. Many people have asked if I plan on writing a sequel, and the answer is maybe! I left some loose ends (subconscious?) that could pave the way for another 'Grace' novel. That would be very exciting for me.

S. MAG.: I am already covered in goosebumps knowing that on your website you are working on the next "psychological suspense." Is there any way a sneak peek can be given at the next title?

D.B.: Absolutely! I recently shared my cover reveal on social media. I think the art studio did a bang-up job. I really love it—to me, it looks like a poster for a movie. And I think it would make a helluva film! The title is "First Victim" and the book comes out in June of 2022. The main character is a Manhattan Supreme Court judge presiding over a murder trial. The judge has a secret in her past, and the novel's theme is justice vs. revenge. The copy line I wrote for the book is: "Will she pull the

S. MAG.: I know with the pandemic, authors haven't been able to participate in many book signings, etc. Have you been able to converse or speak with your countless fans? Can you also supply sites where readers could reach you?

D.B.: Publishing my debut novel during a pandemic was something not only completely unexpected, but a real challenge. I had been dreaming about book signings in bookstores, where I could interact with readers. That being said, I was grateful for all the virtual events which actually reached more people who might not have been able to travel to a particular bookstore. That was a plus. I also participated in online panels and interviews where I was able to "chat" with people. But oftentimes readers had to type in comments, which isn't the same thing at all of course. I did participate in one event that was both live and streamed: An author chat at the East Hampton Library in the Baldwin Room (named after Alec Baldwin), which can be viewed on YouTube. That gave me a taste of how things could—and will be, one hopes—in a future not constrained by a virus and its mutations. I loved reading from "Saving Grace" and then answering questions from audience members and having that wonderful give-and-take I felt as a performer. I really love the interactive part of the publishing process after the book is out, and love to connect with readers. I enjoy speaking with book clubs too, so if anyone out there has a group or is a member of one, please let me know. You can join my mailing list on my website where I share all the latest news. And you can connect with me on social media: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, and Goodreads.

S. MAG.: Being related to a former federal judge, and married to a criminal defense attorney, are you interested in the "real" horrors throughout history? Is there one "event" or "evil person," perhaps, that you would love to research and write about one day; even solve what was once an unsolvable crime?

D.B.: I am particularly interested in evil in the world and its many manifestations. I love watching murder trials; Perry Mason was one of my favorite TV shows as a kid. While I know that real life is never that tidy, many cases remaining unsolved—and killers never blurt out the truth of their guilt in the courtroom—I still like the idea of justice being served. I think that's why many of us write mysteries and thrillers: To bring the unsolvable to a satisfactory conclusion and create order where often there is none. I am fascinated by articles I read in the metro section of the newspaper (where Michael Crichton said he often glommed onto the germ of an idea for a story), especially cold cases that are back in the public eye thanks to new evidence, DNA, etc. Wrongful convictions overturned intrigue me; how do you give an innocent person

#### PETER STRAUB

#### SHINES THE LIGHT INTO "INTERIOR DARKNESS"



Interview by Suspeme Megazine Press Photo Credit: Jennifer Calivas

Peter Straub, one of the greatest hornor writers of our time, has just released his latest book of short stories, "Interior

Many don't know that Peter didn't start out writing stories that scare the hell out of readers, his first published works were of poetry. It was back in the late 60's and early 70's that Peter published "Ishmael" and "Open Air."

Like many horror writers he, too, was bitten by the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. He and his wife Susan bought a house on Hillfield Avenue in Crouch End, London, and had their first child, Benjamin, born during the writing of "Ghost Stocy," the book he is best known for. Then in 1984, "Talisman" was published, co-authored by Stephen King, with the sequel being a 2001 release called "Black House." In between those two iconic books, Peter had several books nominated for the Bram Stoker award, with

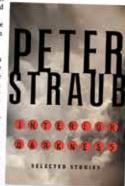
winning the title. He is a member of HWA, MWA, PEN, and though he is without "hobbies," remains intensely interested in jazz, as well as opera and other forms of classical music.

Let's take a quick look at his latest book, "Interior Darkness," and then we avite you to enjoy our exclusive interview with Peter for his first feature in Suspense Magazine.

An American icon renowned for his bestselling novels, Peter Straub displays his full and stunning range in this crowning collection. He has consistently subverted the boundaries of genre for years, transcending horror and suspense to unlock the dark, unsettling, and troubling dissonances that exist on the edges of our perception. Straub's fiction cracks the foundation of reality and opens our nblinking experience of true horror, sold in his inimitable a

of the with skill, wit, and impeccable craft.

With uncomy precision, Straub writes of the city and of the Midwest, of
the depraved and of the righteous, of the working class and of the wealthy nothing and us one is safe from the ever-present durintees that he understands as well. Blue Rose follows the cycles of violence and power through the most innocent among us, leading to a coreclusive that is audicious and devastating to the darkly interval musterpieca, "Mr. Chabb and Mr. Cuff" a stern estate lawyer known as the Doocon hires a pair of "Private Detectives Extraordinaire" to investigate and seek revenge on his unfaithful wife. "The Ballad of Balland



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#### Opening Minds to New Possibilities



and beother are builders who own a respected construction company, and her mother worked for many years in personnel management before becoming Kay's personal assistant, a position she held until her untimely death in March 2002. Her sister Linda works as her business manager, events coordinator, and regional publicist. Kay and Linda also co-own an independent bookstore, Fireside Books and

Kay graduated from East Rutherford High School and sttended Isothermal Community College. It was there that she quickly discovered business classes held no interest for her whatsoever. Switching to more involved courses such as history and literature, she also started concentrating on writing, which had been a longtime interest.

It wasn't long before she was in all the way. She asked for a

typewriter as a Christmas gift and began steadfaulty working on her first novel. That book was a Regency romance titled "Lady Thief," She now has more than sixty novels and four wellas published.

Kay is single and lives in a small town in North Carolina, not far from her father and siblings. Living with her are a flock of cats that feel that sleeping on manuscripes and whatever research happens to be spread across Kay's desk is their lot in life. And living amongst the many felines are two cheerfully tolerant dogs a shelter rescue. Bandit, who looks when the life is a shelter rescue. Bandit, who looks rather like a small sheepdog; and a Sheltie named Lizzie



Kay also fosters cats and kittens for the Community Pet Center, a non-profit rescue organization on whose board she

Suspense Magazine is thrilled to bring you our exclusive 2013 interview with best-selling author Kay Hooper.

back those lost years? I do think about one day penning a historical thriller. Bringing another time and place to dramatic life would be exciting, especially if I could travel there for research. I love England and almost moved there years ago to attend the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Although I write from my imagination, there is one case that continues to *fascinate me—and the world—that would be thrilling to delve* into: The true identity of Jack the Ripper. Of course then I'd be tempted to fictionalize and spin a "what if" scenario!

A quick personal story that impacted me as a person and a writer follows. My family was sitting down to dinner one night when my dad, a federal judge at the time, got a call. An armed man was in the courthouse. He'd taken a cleaning woman hostage and refused to let her go until he could talk to my father. My dad told the police to wait for his arrival. Then he, my mom, and I drove down to Manhattan from our home in Yonkers. But we were too late. A police officer, dressed in my father's judicial robe, had shot the man dead. I vividly remember seeing the bullet hole behind my dad's desk (where the bullet had passed through the gunman). My dad was furious, believing that the tragedy might have been avoided had he been there to talk to the man. I can't recall now, it was so long ago (and my dad's no longer with us), but the man might have been a debtor who (or whose business) was in bankruptcy. Also I came home from college one year to find out that our phones had been tapped by the FBI! All grist for the creative mill.

S. MAG.: What are your goals/outlooks for 2022? And let us know here anything you wish to say to your readers out there.

D.B.: To stay healthy and strong and write the best books I can! To be discovered by more readers I can connect with and share this incredible literary journey. Now that I'm a published author—a dream come true and a long time in the making my life has changed in so many ways. As has the world, and I fervently hope that 2022 marks a new and better time for us

To the readers who have discovered "Saving Grace," I would love to hear how her story has affected you. And if you'd like to share more of her journey in a sequel. And, of course, I can't wait to share the Honorable Alice D. McKerrity's story when "First Victim" launches next June! In the meantime, Happy Holidays, and stay healthy, safe, ever curious, and lovers of the written (and spoken!) word! Thank you. What could be more thrilling and life-affirming than a world full of readers?

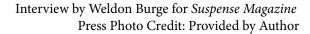
There you have it, folks; that's your "to do" list for the New Year. To keep up with all the upcoming action and events in Debbie's ever-blossoming career, head to: https:// debbiebabitt.com/. •

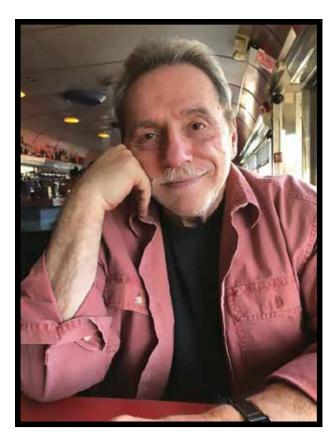


Suspense Magazine Winter 2021 / Vol. 093

## LANNY LARCINESE:

### A Master of Noir





Lanny Larcinese didn't begin writing fiction until his late sixties, but he has already established himself as a respectable noir writer. His two crime novels, "Death in the Family" and "I Detest all my Sins," are prime examples of his talent. He is currently shopping a third novel, and just completed his fourth. Lanny is also active in the writing community, helping other writers establish themselves in the market, particularly in developing the Crime Writers Caravan to coordinate public events for fellow authors. Interviewing him proved to be enlightening.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Your novels, "Death in the Family" and "I Detest all my Sins," are excellent examples of modern noir. Why your focus on noir?

Lanny Larcinese (L.L.): I'm philosophically and temperamentally prone to see the dark side of human nature, as reflected by the Seven Deadly Sins. Also, my work is character-driven. Combining those two things led me to noir, especially a character who knows what he's about to do is wrong but does it anyway. He can't help himself. Or can he?

W.B.: What makes your fiction unique?

L.L.: Not unique but not typical in that my work is theme-driven via characters experiencing events created to bring out their conflicts concerning moral themes. The genesis of my stories in my head always begins with a character with a problem. Also, my writing voice is unique, a weird combination of highly articulate and "street," or vernacular.

W.B.: What do you enjoy most about writing?

L.L.: The art of expression. Knowing I can create sentences that have never been said before by anyone, ever—neither as to form nor content. Not all of course, but many. It's a combination of being well-spoken or having a facility with language and an otherwise moral/immoral take on life.

W.B.: I'm interested in your next novel, "Fire in the Belly." What can you tell us about it? What inspired you to write the book?

L.L.: I lived in Philadelphia as the event it's based on unfolded. As a maven of all things urban, I saw it as a dramatic microcosm of governmental incompetence, racism, and the unintended ricochet of hostile militance by a group whose cause was otherwise worthy. In 1985, the Philadelphia police dropped a bomb from a helicopter on the rowhouse headquarters of an anarcho/primitive/Black liberation cult. The resulting fire, at first allowed to burn, got out of hand and killed twelve cult members including five children, and burned sixty-one adjacent rowhouses to the ground. The homes were mostly owner-occupied by middle-class Black Philadelphians. They had been vacated pursuant to the police action against the cult. Nobody involved had clean hands except the neighbors who were victimized by both the cult and the police—which is not to say death was justified by the negligence which caused it. I wrote the book substantially modifying the facts, yet capturing the pros and cons of the positions of each of the entities involved—civic authorities, cops, and cult victims. The original event was grim, with not much edifying about it. My book reflects that. In my effort to be non-judgmental about the controversial event, I wrote purposely in a flat, quasi-reportorial tone. I want the reader to make the judgements. Dialogue by my main characters hews closely to the actual principals which inspired them, though much is added.

W.B.: What research was involved when writing "Fire in the Belly"? Did you talk with police? Former MOVE members or neighborhood folks who witnessed the conflagration?

L.L.: I lived through it, read books regarding it, read the MOVE Commission report, and re-read contemporary news and magazine articles. I hesitated to interview MOVE members since one of the original principals is still alive. I sought to keep my story a work of fiction and avoid a "true crime" treatment. "Fire in the Belly" adds many fictional story elements, especially to characters, while conforming to the overall arc of the actual event and much of their rhetoric gleaned from actual public pronouncements. The "take" of each of the three groups involved were/are well-publicized, but I wanted the freedom to add my own take.

W.B.: Who was the author who most inspired you to write?

L.L.: Gosh, I was very well-read as a kid—fiction, history, poetry, classics, pot-boilers, philosophy, etc. so it's hard to pinpoint any one. I am partial to Faulkner, and more modernly, Cormac McCarthy, for the rhythm of their language. Crime-wise, George V. Higgins, David Goodis, and James M. Cain are inspirations. I'm not a big Chandler guy but respect his place in the canon. Peter Blauner is also a contemporary writing crime in graceful fashion.

W.B.: What has been your greatest challenge as a writer?

L.L.: *A) finding my own writing voice; b) ignorance of online publicity techniques and social media in general; and c) getting my work out there.* 

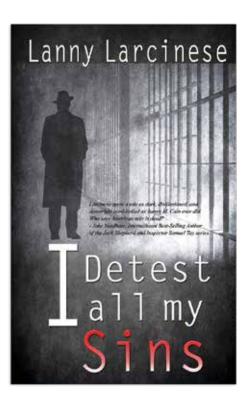
W.B.: What's your worst nightmare?

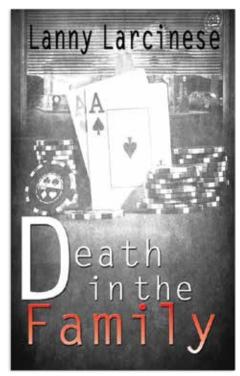
L.L.: A book or story gets published and distributed laden with errors.

W.B.: You've attended writers' conferences, such as the Crimes, Creatures, and Creativity con. How would you convince writers to attend such events?

L.L.: Community is so important, and writers are the most forthcoming, egalitarian group I've ever been associated with. Nobody asks you what your publishing credits are, what awards you've won, or who you know; rather will happily exchange with you from minute-one as if you're one of them—which you are. Writing is a glorious gift, publishing a nightmare and not for the faint of heart. Hearing that the big guys endure the same stuff while happily sharing what they know is a vaccine against discouragement.

W.B.: You do readings at events, such as Noir at the Bar. Many writers would like to participate in readings but are hesitant because they fear public speaking. Any





advice?

L.L.: Only what works for me, i.e., a mindset that this piece is really good. It is well-written, clever, and unique and unusual. No one else but me could have written it this way and the world needs to hear it.

W.B.: Last book you read? What are you reading now?

L.L.: Now: Fellow Philadelphian James McCrone's "Faithless Elector." Recent: "Prelude to Intimacy," a memoir by Ira Einhorn, Philadelphia guru and murderer and quasimodel for my work in progress titled "Get Bek." That manuscript currently awaits editing.

W.B.: Dashiell Hammett, James Ellroy, or Patricia Highsmith?

L.L.: Hammett all day.

W.B.: What five books do you think are "must reads" for novice writers?

L.L.: How-to? None. Just write your damn book. Otherwise, find and dissect books or stories which grip you. Try to identify passages that set you up for an aha-moment or gave you a thrill or warmed your heart, etc. Note how they were done, how the author

did it. Finally, write, write, write. It's like playing tennis—sooner or later your body tells you the optimum muscles and angles for the best shot. IMO, encouragement to keep writing is much more valuable than any substantive technique or silver bullet some "expert" will impart. The novice needs to discover what works best for them.

W.B.: Many fiction writers prefer to read nonfiction for pleasure. What nonfiction do you prefer?

L.L.: *History*.

W.B.: What was the last movie you watched?

L.L.: Pitch Perfect. Don't tell anybody, I have a macho image to maintain.

W.B.: Let's talk for a minute about your memoir, "Women: One Man's Journey." What inspired you to write the book?

L.L.: As of the time I wrote it, a lifelong quest to understand my relationship with women, beginning with my mother, and theirs with me. Also, to reconcile my direct experiences of women with many of the pronouncements of the feminist movement as it evolved. For me, a lot of the signals were mixed. Writing the memoir helped me to deeper understandings in that it forced me to make an honest evaluation of how I resonated with women as a condition of better understanding them.

W.B.: Scotch, bourbon, or beer?

L.L.: Scotch to drink around the bar with others, but also a martini guy.

W.B.: Last question ... what do you do for fun?

L.L.: These days, social media. Ninety-eight percent of my 3,500 or so friends are writers who are interesting and clever. I also listen to a lot of music on YouTube and enjoy all genres from all periods.

W.B.: Thanks for a great interview, Lanny. And good luck with your further writing ventures.

You can read more about Lanny at his website, <a href="http://lannylarcinese">http://lannylarcinese</a>.

### I Have Something to Tell You

Don't miss the captivating new book from internationally bestselling author Susan Lewis!

High-flying lawyer Jessica Wells has it all. A successful career, a loving husband, and a family she adores. But one case—and one client—will put all that at risk.



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# FROM LAWYER TO BESTSELLING AUTHOR: **Debbi Mack**FINDS SUCCESS WITH SERIES



Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Debbi Mack's lawyer-sleuth Stephanie Ann "Sam" McRae has proven to be a popular character with readers. It's no wonder that Debbi is a *New York Times* bestselling author and has found great success with her mystery series. She's also a Derringernominated short story writer and former reviewer for *Mystery Scene Magazine*. Debbi also has a podcast called The Crime Cafe, available on her website, Apple iTunes, and Stitcher. Oh, she also writes screenplays and is an aspiring indie filmmaker. Can you say "busy"?

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Your *Sam McRae* mystery novels have been best-selling books. What would you say are the pros of writing series?

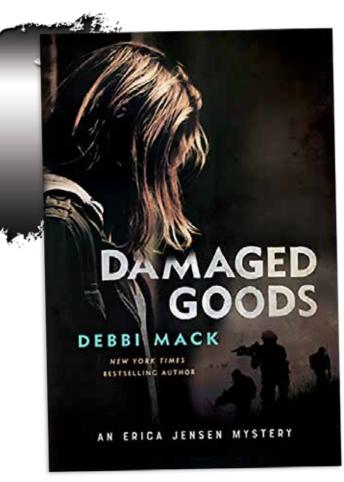
Debbi Mack (D.M.): Yeah, some of them have been best-selling books. Some, not so much. :) Right. The pros of writing a series include creating an established world in which to set each book. Think of any successful TV series. Why are they successful? The writers create a situation that has the potential to generate lots of great stories. You also really get to know the characters. From a creative standpoint, you've laid the groundwork. Having done that, you can mine it for all its story potential.

Each of the minor characters can have backstories that could

conceivably add to the various series plots or make them qualify as protagonists in "spin-off stories," so to speak. A series also has the advantage of familiarity to readers. If people like your stories and characters, they'll want to see them again. So a series makes sense from that standpoint. As a result, any novel in your series is itself a marketing tool for your series. More books equals more potential income.

W.B.: So, what about the cons of writing series?

D.M.: I can't really think of a genuine con. However, I do think some stories are more amenable to being told as standalones. Let's say you invent a character who isn't likable or someone you don't want to write about all the time. Or maybe you're writing about one great big event in a story that ends so that there's nothing more to say. Then, write a standalone. If you think of a sequel or find potential for more later, that's fine, too.



Actually, if there's a con, it's that a series confines you once you create the world. But there are always creative constraints in any story you write. So, I guess the worst scenario is that you could get bored with a character. I suppose that's a potential con, assuming you're unable to tweak the character or situation to make them more interesting.

W.B.: I find it interesting that Sam is a lawyer and that you once also had a profession in law. So, I wonder how much of Sam McRae is Debbi Mack?

D.M.: Surprisingly little, actually. Sam is a former public defender who has her own office. I had my own office for a while, but never worked in the criminal justice system. I can count the number of criminal cases I had in three years as a solo practitioner on two fingers. And they were miniscule in every sense of the word.

She does reflect some of the disillusionment I felt at the time I stopped practicing law. But she also reflects my optimism (maybe hope is a better word) that the system could be made to work better. Also, she displays my sarcastic side, to a certain extent. However, I had to borrow a few traits I'd seen in other female lawyers I've admired for their ability and outspokenness.

W.B.: You left your law career to become a full-time writer, the dream for many of us. How did you manage that transition?

D.M.: I'm tempted to say, "with difficulty" and leave it at that. However, what happened was, I got to know another lawyer who was

writing freelance for a living. I started off researching and updating legal publications and writing freelance for a community newspaper.

Then, I got a part-time job with one of the Dow Jones newswires covering the U.S. Supreme Court. Definitely the coolest job I've ever held. Certainly the most amazing one for me.

Through that job, I landed a regular monthly column with a magazine called Corporate Legal Times. They changed the name to Inside Counsel, I believe. This was years ago. I also found work writing encyclopedia entries about classic advertising campaigns. As part of my research, I spoke with numerous corporate librarians. I was fascinated that such jobs existed, so I earned a master's degree in library science. That involved learning shitloads about the Internet, some of which might be outdated. However, the bare bones of Internet technology are essentially unchanged. We covered a lot about the Internet and its history, and I even retained a few shreds of knowledge. I'm learning more as I go.

While in library school, I learned that there are people out there who get paid to research on a freelance basis. I decided to remain a freelancer but shift from writer only to writer and researcher.

I've reached the conclusion that everyone attempting ecommerce of any sort should know at least a minimal amount of HTML. You should also be able to read and understand that last sentence, too. :)

W.B.: What's your secret for pumping out book after book after book?

D.M.: Is that what I'm doing? Oh, yeah. Right.:)

I think the secret is to just keep writing. Keep working on something. It may seem like nothing, but just write and keep at it. Make it a daily practice, even if it's only a half hour. Or whatever schedule works for you. Just be diligent and do it.

W.B.: Any tricks for creating realistic and intriguing characters?

D.M.: I think it helps to have empathy for all your characters, even the bad guys (or gals). If you can understand the basis of their beliefs and why they act a certain way, then express it in descriptive terms, like speech mannerisms, what they wear, what they do, and so on, you'll end up with realistic and intriguing characters. Avoid stereotypes. I like when an author can turn a

stereotype on its head. Either that or subvert a standard plot device in an interesting way.

W.B.: Do you think about marketing when you're in the "creative mode"?

D.M.: Short answer: no.

W.B.: How important is blogging to your marketing scheme? What would you tell writers who aren't active bloggers?

D.M.: I find it very helpful. For me, it's a great way to express who I am and the types of writing I like, which hopefully helps connect me with readers with similar interests.

I don't think of blogging as a requirement for authors, but I think it's still very much a viable medium of expression. And depending on an author's tolerance for blogging, I'd say it's a good idea, but if you do so, don't expect overnight results from those efforts.

The thing is, each time you blog, it establishes a record of some sort. No matter what subject you pick. So be sure and pick a subject you enjoy tremendously, or it'll become a chore.

W.B.: After working with a small, traditional publisher for your first novel, "Identity Crisis," you turned to self-publishing. Where do you think the publishing industry is headed?

D.M.: Now, there's a loaded question. Um...straight to Hell?:)

Seriously, though, I'm not a person who takes great stock in predictions. However, if you're asking where traditional publishing is headed, I'd say Big Publishing is likely heading toward consolidation. It's like the 80s all over again. Except on steroids, what with Internet commerce and all that. I suspect the Big Five (is it five now?) will continue to be swallowed by ever-bigger media conglomerates or will merge.

Thing is, at this time, the FTC and government sentiment seem to lean toward scrutinizing mergers and acquisitions more. I'm anything but an expert on this, but the industry at the Big Five or Six Publishing level will doubtless be affected. Assuming the government actually follows through on all this. And assuming the winds of political change keep blowing that way.

Even with the incredible popularity of self-publishing, there will always be authors who either don't want to handle the business side of writing or seek the gravitas of having a major publisher. Or a small, well-regarded publisher. So, publishing will survive.

It is a mighty crowded market out there. And when you're self-published, it's up to you to figure out who you are and what you're trying to communicate. Because that's your brand.

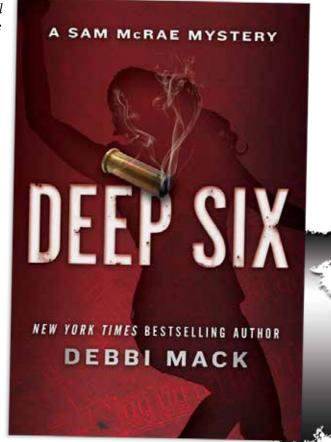
#### W.B.: What about independent publishers?

D.M.: Small indie presses will continue to do business, along with so-called "hybrid publishers," for authors who don't want to handle the small details that self-publishing involves. And then, of course, there are what I call "true indie authors." The ones who want as much control over their IP and how it's distributed as they can manage.

What's going to be interesting will be to see how the government (and Big Tech) address the way antitrust laws have changed since their creation. Not only do they put the emphasis on consumer benefit, which was not the original basis or rationale for creating them, but they fail to consider how differently digital business scales.

Somehow we've ended up in a situation in which everyone in publishing must trod with care around a company that owns a healthy percentage of the very distribution network we are all doing business on. And is, simultaneously, a direct competitor to those publishers.

Can anyone say, "conflict of interest"?:)



Regardless of all the changes in the industry, there will always be some form of gatekeeping. Whether it's by virtue of having a publisher or the opinions of Bookstagramers, I think publishing will carry on.

W.B.: Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, or Margaret Millar?

D.M.: That is so not fair! Oh, God. No matter what I say, I'll feel bad about it. Okay, Margaret Millar. Take that, you old white guys!:) But I love them all.

W.B.: Who was the author who most inspired you to write?

D.M.: That really is tough to answer, but most inspired me? I want to say Raymond Chandler or Robert Parker, but when you come down to it, I think Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Judith Van Gieson essentially got me thinking seriously about it. There have been so many others who've influenced and inspired me since I began this journey. It would be impractical to list them all.

W.B.: Do you read reviews of your books? If so, how does it (or does it not) affect your writing?

D.M.: If it's in a blog or traditional publication, then yes, it's good to know the buzz going around about the book. Amazon reviews, sometimes, but I don't make a habit of reading them. Maybe I should. Or not. But it doesn't affect my writing all that much.

W.B.: What's your favorite place to write?

D.M.: *In my home office*.

W.B.: Tacos, pizza, or salad?

D.M.: Pizza! With mushrooms.

W.B.: What's next on your agenda?

D.M.: Right now, I'm getting ready to release "Fatal Connections," my follow-up to "Damaged Goods," the Shamus-nominated first Erica Jensen novel, in November 2021. I'm also working on a Sam McRae mystery (a long short story or a novella), which I plan to serialize on Substack, where I'm serializing all my novels (https://debbimack.substack.com/welcome). I'm also mulling where to take Erica Jensen next.

I produce and host The Crime Cafe podcast on an ongoing basis from the end of June to early April. I have a Patreon page for that. I also write screenplays and blog movie reviews, as well as serialize public domain films in my weird version of Mystery Science Theatre 3000, which I may start mixing in with more serious movies (also posted on Patreon). I hope to write and produce scripted content in either audio or video format. I've read quite a few books that might make great movies or TV series.

So, I'm keeping busy.

W.B.: Thanks, Debbi. Good luck with your future ventures!

FATAL
CONNECTIONS

DEBBI MACK

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

For more about Debbi Mack, check out her website at <a href="www.debbimack.com">www.debbimack.com</a>. You can also find her on Facebook (<a href="www.facebook.com/debbimackwriter">www.facebook.com/debbimackwriter</a>), Twitter (<a href="https://twitter.com/debbimack">https://twitter.com/debbimack</a>), and YouTube (<a href="www.youtube.com/c/DebbiMack">www.youtube.com/c/DebbiMack</a>). •

### RONALD MALFI

## Switching Gears Between Rock & Horror



Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Ronald Malfi is more than a best-selling, award-winning horror writer. He's also a musician and a member of the alternative rock band, Veer, which performs largely in the Annapolis/Baltimore area. Both ambitions have proven to be incredibly creative outlets for him...and it shows in his work. He is the recipient of two Independent Publisher Book Awards, the Beverly Hills Book Award, the Vincent Preis Horror Award, and the Benjamin Franklin Award for Popular Fiction.

Ronald's novel, "Floating Staircase," was nominated for a Bram Stoker Award for best novel by the Horror Writers Association and won a gold IPPY award. Other popular books are "December Park," a coming-of-age thriller, and "Bone White," about a man searching a haunted Alaskan town for his missing twin brother. His monster novel, "Snow," is claustrophobic, terrifying, and incredibly entertaining.

His most recent novel, "Come with Me," about a man who learns a dark secret about his wife after she's killed, has also received amazing reviews.

Ronald was kind enough to chat with us about his writing and his music.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): My introduction to your fiction was your novel, "Snow." It had a late-night horror movie feel to it. Was that what you were striving for?

Ronald Malfi (R.M.): I was striving for a straight-up, old-school horror novel. Back then, I had been sending sample chapters to Leisure Books editor Don D'Auria for a long time, and he was always kind enough to reject my work with some helpful criticism. Mainly, he wanted to see me amp up the horror elements in my fiction, which were arguably ambiguous back then and still are today. But I wanted to prove to myself I could get a book published with Leisure.

So, I sent Don about three chapters of "Snow" and a rough synopsis to see if he'd be interested. I had written nothing more than those three chapters at the time and wasn't really holding my breath. But then he came back

and said, "Yeah, this is good, let me see the whole manuscript." I told him I was on vacation, and could he give me two weeks? Then I holed up in my basement, crushed pot after pot of coffee—and some whiskey, too—and pumped that complete novel out in about fourteen days.

W.B.: You're also the guitarist and singer for the rock band Veer. I assume you're the major lyric writer. How does music influence your writing? Or is it the other way around?

R.M.: If I'm having writer's block with a piece of fiction, I find switching gears over to music frees up that headspace and gets things moving again. It's funny, and other writers and musicians have asked me to collaborate on projects that involve both elements at once—a haunted rock band or whatever—but that's never had any appeal to me. I love the creative process of writing music and lyrics and performing them with my band, but it's something wholly separate from my fiction.

That said, I find great inspiration in other people's music when I write. I remember a very early



draft of my novel, The Narrows, was written entirely on a diet of Bruce Springsteen. I listen to a lot of horror movie scores and soundtracks and jazz music, too, when I write.

W.B.: Beatles, Alice Cooper, Judas Priest, or Metallica? (I'm guessing not Abba or the Bee Gees.)

R.M.: Beatles. But, hey, I also dig ABBA.

W.B.: "Come with Me," your latest novel, has garnered many great reviews. It seems to lean more toward suspense than horror. How does this book differ from your others?

R.M.: I don't think it really differs all that much from my other work. I find with each passing year, people—readers, reviewers, whoever—have become more restrictive in terms of genre, whatever that is. It seems that if there's not some literal supernatural boogieman, they say, "Oh, that's a thriller or a mystery or suspense. Can't be horror." Personally, I don't subscribe to that. Some of my favorite horror novels—"Jaws," "The Silence of the Lambs," Peter Straub's glorious Blue Rose

novel "The Throat"—wouldn't make the cut, by those standards. Nor, really, would something like "Cujo." I consider "Come with Me" a thriller, sure, but it's also certainly a horror novel.

All my books focus on character, story, and atmosphere over plot and gore. That's just what personally interests me and that's how I write.

W.B.: I'm betting you're a "pantser," writing by the seat of your pants. You seem like that kind of guy. How much outlining, research, and prep actually goes into starting one of your novels?

R.M.: I do very little outlining when I sit down to write a novel. That's worked out for the most part, but I do occasionally write myself into a corner. Outlining sucks the life out of a story, so I avoid it. I do, however, jot notes on legal pads as I'm writing—things I want to remember to include, phrases, perhaps a line of dialogue that might tie things up. I'm constantly writing stuff like that down when I'm in novel-writing mode.

As for research, it depends on the book's subject. My books aren't very research-heavy, which is probably a good thing, because I'm notoriously lazy. My research is usually limited to a specific question or set of questions I need answered because I'm unfamiliar with that particular arena. I knew nothing about police work in Alaska, so when I was writing "Bone White," I called the Alaska State Troopers a few times to ask them what they no doubt thought was a handful of peculiar questions.

W.B.: I've always thought horror and humor are kissing cousins. What do you think?

R.M.: Absolutely. They're the most basic human emotions. You're triggering the same wellspring when you're working in horror or comedy, and both, if done well, result in a physical response—a scream or a laugh.

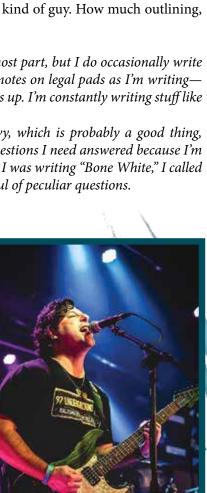
W.B.: Pearl Jam, Fuel, Green Day, or the Foo Fighters?

R.M.: All of them, and in that order.

W.B.: Do you write much short fiction or is your focus primarily on novels?

R.M.: I don't consider myself a particularly good short-fiction writer. I think I've written some pretty good short stories—my story "The Dinner Party" from my collection "We Should Have Left Well Enough Alone" comes to mind—but mostly, I find I wander and belabor too much to stick to the sort of economy of word that is regarded as the hallmark of short fiction.

I used to write a lot of short stories whenever I was approached by a publication to do so. I've sort of backed away from doing that in recent years, mostly because I've been too busy with longer works. If an idea jumps out at me and won't let go, I'll write it, but I rarely set out to write short fiction just for the hell of it.



RONALD MALFI



Novellas, on the other hand, are such a rich format for horror fiction, and I feel I've found a good stride when writing those. My most recent novella, "Mr. Cables," just felt completely right to me, and I've got a collection of brand-new novellas coming out at some point in the future that I've slowly been working on between novels.

W.B.: You often attend conferences like Scares That Care and Creature Feature Weekend. What do you find are the benefits of these cons?

R.M.: I find these are great places to catch up with old friends and meet people who share a love of the genre. Yeah, I sell books at these events because that's why I'm there, but they're really a lot of fun. And conventions like Scares That Care is a charity of which I'm a fervent supporter.

W.B.: Between the band bookings, writing, and family life, how do you find the time?

R.M.: Sometimes I don't. Family always comes first. My wife has been gracious enough to allow me pockets of time to slip into my world of book-writing, and I'm grateful for that. It's really a full-time job. As for the band, the guys and I agreed back when we started in 2016 or so that we wouldn't get nuts with it. We don't play every weekend and, for the most part, we don't travel and tour. We've found a niche locally where we've become a go-to band to open for national acts when they come through town, and that's served us wonderfully.

W.B.: Twilight Zone, Night Gallery, Tales From the Crypt, or Ash vs Evil Dead?

R.M.: Boy, I'd have to say Twilight Zone.

W.B.: Do you prefer podcast interviews or public appearances like book signings where you get to meet your fans?

R.M.: Both have their merits and can be fun. Since "Come with Me" came out in the middle of this pandemic, I've been cautious about what in-person events I'll attend, which means I've done a ton of podcasts to promote the book. Some were fun, some were...well, they get tedious and exhausting after a while. But I've been lucky enough to have done some great ones.

W.B.: If you could rewrite the script for a horror movie, which one would it be? And what would you do differently?

R.M.: Man, I know if I sat and thought about this, I could come up with something. I was recently telling a filmmaker buddy of mine that I'd love to see Jaws done more faithfully to the book. I mean, the movie is stellar, it's just untouchable, but it's so different from Benchley's novel. I think it would be cool to revamp it more closely to the drama it really is, with all the infidelity and deceit and Martin Brody stumbling around like a cuckolded drunk. I can even picture the preview on a theater screen, where the audience wouldn't even know it's a remake of Jaws until the last three seconds when the shark pops up and the title card is shown. I think that'd be cool.

W.B.: What's your next writing project?

R.M.: I'm currently finishing a novel called "Black Mouth" for Titan Books, and then I've got a novella collection that is scheduled to come out after that.

W.B.: Last question: Phantasm, Nightmare on Elm Street, or Carpenter's The Thing?

R.M.: Probably The Thing, although I spent half my youth ingesting all those Elm Street movies, too.

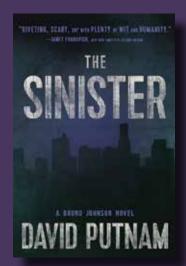
W.B.: Ronald, thanks for sharing a few minutes with us!

You can learn more about Ronald at his website, <a href="www.ronaldmalfi.com">www.ronaldmalfi.com</a>. Also check him out on his Amazon author page (<a href="www.amazon.com/Ronald-Malfi/e/B004VC3JMO">www.amazon.com/Ronald-Malfi/e/B004VC3JMO</a>), Facebook (<a href="www.facebook.com/Ronald-Malfi-401187830088060">www.facebook.com/Ronald-Malfi-401187830088060</a>), Instagram (<a href="www.instagram.com/ronaldmalfi/">www.instagram.com/ronaldmalfi/</a>), and Twitter (<a href="https://twitter.com/RonaldMalfi">https://twitter.com/RonaldMalfi</a>). •

"Riveting, scary, but with plenty of wit and humanity."

-JANET EVANOVICH

**NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR** 

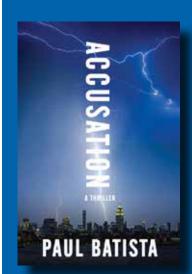


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to shootouts and
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but can he
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together?

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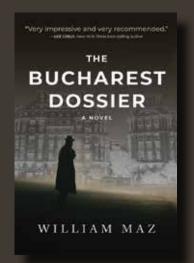


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Every day is paradise on Bonaire—until something unexpected washes ashore

OCEANVIEW



PUBLISHING

## Ushering in the New Year with Talented Author ALAN JACOBSON

Interview by Suspense Magazine Press Photo Credit: Corey Jacobson

ystery, suspense, thriller, action—with a dash of humor—all are skills that Alan Jacobson's mind possesses when he sits down and writes his novels. His works are many and among them is the ever-popular series focused on FBI profiler Karen Vail, as well as the OPSIG Team Black series that fans rave about on land, sea, as well as the Worldwide Web.

To add to the Happy Holiday season, Alan sat down with Suspense Magazine and gave us answers to five questions about his latest-andgreatest novel, "The Lost Girl," that fans simply have to know! So, as a holiday gift to you all...here's Alan!

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): "The Lost Girl" is your latest book; tell us about it, as it's a different kind of book than you normally write.

Alan Jacobson (A.J.): It's different in the sense that it's not part of the FBI

profiler Karen Vail series or the OPSIG Team Black covert ops books. However, it definitely has the trademark Alan Jacobson character depth, heart-thumping suspense, behind-the-scenes research, twists,

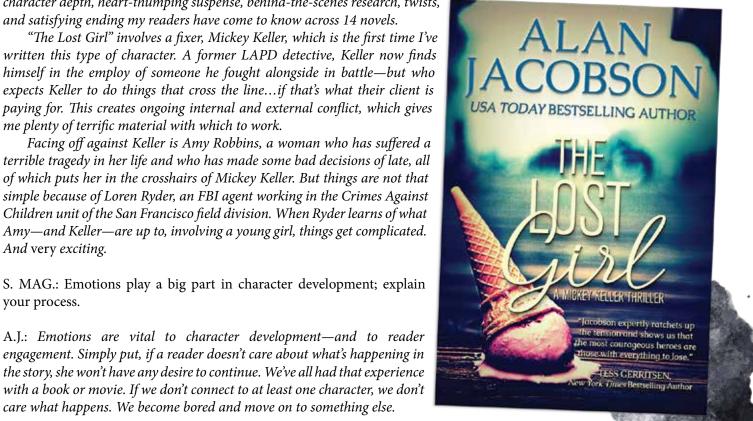
and satisfying ending my readers have come to know across 14 novels. "The Lost Girl" involves a fixer, Mickey Keller, which is the first time I've written this type of character. A former LAPD detective, Keller now finds himself in the employ of someone he fought alongside in battle—but who expects Keller to do things that cross the line...if that's what their client is

me plenty of terrific material with which to work.

Facing off against Keller is Amy Robbins, a woman who has suffered a terrible tragedy in her life and who has made some bad decisions of late, all of which puts her in the crosshairs of Mickey Keller. But things are not that simple because of Loren Ryder, an FBI agent working in the Crimes Against Children unit of the San Francisco field division. When Ryder learns of what Amy—and Keller—are up to, involving a young girl, things get complicated. And very exciting.

S. MAG.: Emotions play a big part in character development; explain your process.

A.J.: Emotions are vital to character development—and to reader engagement. Simply put, if a reader doesn't care about what's happening in the story, she won't have any desire to continue. We've all had that experience with a book or movie. If we don't connect to at least one character, we don't care what happens. We become bored and move on to something else.





THE WRITER'S T001 KIT:

Outside feedback? Finding time? Is self-publishing worthwhile?

in the last issue, we initiated a series for aspiring writers excerpted from the Writer's Toolkit portion of my AlanJacobson.com website. I coested the toolkit in the late nineties in response to readers who were emailing me seeking advice and assistance with getting published. Responding to those messages started taking substantial time away from my ability to write—and when the questions got repetitive, I began mailling solutions. I wanted to share my knowledge to help asptring writers and new authors avoid the mistakes I had made—but I couldn't do it at the expense of my young career.

I began compiling the questions I received most often, along with the answers I doled out. Sometime after launching my website, with the release of "False Accusations." I began posting these Q&As. Below are excerpts, updated to reflect almost a quarter century of publishing experience...part two of the Writer's Toolkit.

#### ON WRITING...

#### Q. IS IT WORTH BEING A MEMBER OF A WRITER'S GROUP? IS OUTSIDE FEEDBACK HELPFUL?

A. A few years into my writing career, I got to know what worked and what didn't, where I needed to make corrections, how to construct a story that remained compelling for 400 pages. Eventually, I got to the point where I edited in my head as I wrote; I discovered I had an inner voice that, once I learned to listen to it, told me to stop and fix what I was writing at that moment-resulting in much cleaner first drafts. But these are the skills that develop in any craftsman who spends years

that moment—resulting in much cleaner first drafts. But these are the skills that develop in any craftsman who spends years perfecting his work. It was not always that way for me.

To get there, early in my career, I assembled a core group of carefully chosen readers. Most were people who regularly read my genre, but some enjoyed a variety of literature. One was an unpublished writer whose focus was spec screenplays. In addition to my own readers, however, I had an agent who possessed a keen editing eye. She also employed her own group of readers who reviewed (or "covered") my manuscripts prior to submission. As a result, I got a solid cross section of opinions as to what weeked—and what didn't. This approach is obviously different from a group composed of supring writers, but did provide outside feedback from a cross section of the population, not unlike those who would beying my books.

Of course, despite these efforts—writer's groups or independent readers or both—there's no assurance that an editor at a publishing house is going to like your manuscript or agree with the opinions of your readers. I still believe, however, that the

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It's my job as an author to engage the reader so that he/ she cares—deeply—about the characters and what happens to them. That process is fairly straight-forward: try to make the person relatable to everyday Joe or Jane. If my characters experience things in their lives that we've gone through in our lives, we can relate and develop an empathic connection.

In "The Lost Girl," Amy Robbins experiences a tragedy that everyone can relate to—and it's such a deep emotional incident that you, as the reader, can't help but feel for her. During the course of the novel, Amy is faced with some very difficult decisions—and we find ourselves rooting for her, willing to go to the end of the earth with her to see if she succeeds.

Those are the kinds of characters and stories that make us want to read to the last page; the ones that stay with us long after we finish the book. That's always what I strive to achieve. Some readers have returned to my novels and read them again and again...eight times apiece is (to my knowledge) the "record"; no one is going to invest that kind of time unless they feel strongly about the characters and becomes emotionally engaged in what happens to them.

S. MAG.: Why did you feel it was the right time to write "The Lost Girl"?

A.J.: It's always the right time to write a great novel! The idea behind "The Lost Girl" came from my wife. When she pitched it to me and I started to run with the concept, I got very excited about the potential...about developing the scenes around the tragedy that envelops Amy Robbins and the aftermath of its psychological impact. At the same time, the story that coalesced around the people who want to stop her from recovering emotionally and prevent her from regaining that which she had lost was so compelling that I had to start writing it.

It was one of those things that came together beautifully: the story, the characters that would populate it, and the location where I wanted to set it. Serendipity played a role, too, when I reconnected with an FBI agent who had worked child crimes for many years at the Behavioral Analysis Unit in Quantico. (For the story behind how that happened, see "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to My Booksigning," Page 112). The stars were aligned. I was excited. And the vision came together. How could I not write this book now?

S. MAG.: Authors always have ideas running through their heads; how do you determine which ones to write about?

A.J.: The idea that I can't stop thinking about is always in danger of becoming my next year-long project. If I can't get it out of my head, and my brain keeps coming back to it, I don't resist or ignore it. Usually, ideas continue to come to me that build on the original concept. I write these down (or dictate them into an email or Word document—whichever is easiest at the moment) and get as much out as I can. If that keeps

# "Over nearly 30 years of writing novels, I've always said that if I got into a book and lost interest or it's not working, rather than struggling and forcing it, I would abandon the idea and write something else."

happening, day after day, a story coalesces with characters, setting, complications, etc. The more developed the story gets, the more it starts to resemble an outline. As I continue to devote more attention to it, if it still holds my attention, I'll stick with it to see where it leads me. If the excitement level remains high, that'll be my next project.

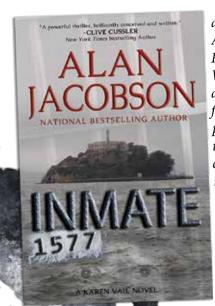
Over nearly 30 years of writing novels, I've always said that if I got into a book and lost interest or it's not working, rather than struggling and forcing it, I would abandon the idea and write something else. Only once did that happen. I abandoned the story, losing months of work, and wrote a different book. I was ultimately very happy I did that—not only because I loved the novel I'd switched to writing, but because I stood by my principle and "walked the walk."

S. MAG.: When you tell people that you are an author, what book do you want them to start with?

A.J.: This is an interesting question. I'll usually ask them what they enjoy reading, and then, based on their response, I'll make a recommendation. If they like mysteries, thrillers, or crime novels like those written by Michael Connelly, James Patterson, Ridley Pearson, and the like, I'll tell them about the FBI profiler Karen Vail series. I'll suggest either starting with the first book, "The 7th Victim," or the sixth—Vail's origin story, "Spectrum." "Spectrum" turns back the clock to the early 90s when Vail is a newly graduated NYPD beat cop, then moves forward in time to the present. We get a strong sense of how Vail became the profiler she is today by seeing how and what she learns on the job, the things that shaped and influenced her as a cop, then detective, and then FBI agent. Readers can't go wrong starting with either "The 7th Victim" or "Spectrum." My own readers have commented that "Spectrum" makes a great entry into the series.

If the person is more into Nelson DeMille, Lee Child, James Rollins, or Vince Flynn, then I'll tell them about the OPSIG Team Black series. Although "No Way Out" is not one of the OPSIG books, it's essentially a cross-over between Karen Vail and

OPSIG—and planted the seed for Vail to begin working with the team (as she does in some of the OPSIG books). "No Way Out" is set in Spain and England and is a hell of a fun ride. The OPSIG series has a range of stories, from "The Lost Codex" (ancient biblical texts launch the team into a present-day conflict with major implications) to the emotional political thriller, "Hard Target" (praised by Lee Child, Vince Flynn, and David Morrell); and "Dark Side of the Moon," where our favorite spec ops team has to travel to the Moon to head off a war. Each of the OPSIG novels can be read independent of the other.



If the reader wants something unencumbered by a series, they have two choices: my debut novel, "False Accusations," which is a psychological thriller, or "The Lost Girl"—the first book in the Mickey Keller series. While I wrote "False Accusations" 25 years ago, its jawdropping ending has always garnered a visceral reaction from readers. And anyone who likes to get in on the early phase of a new series, "The Lost Girl" is an emotional thriller that does not disappoint. It was just named one of the top ten best novels of the year by The Strand magazine.



Lastly, if she wants to read John Raab's favorite, I suggest "Inmate 1577", the fourth in the Karen Vail series, which is set in San Francisco and on Alcatraz. (John has good taste, as it's my wife's favorite, too!)

To keep up with all the happenings in what looks to be a very busy 2022 for Alan Jacobson, find all the news, events, signings and more at <a href="mailto:alanjacobson.com">alanjacobson.com</a>.

# A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to My Booksigning



By Alan Jacobson Photo Credit: Jill Jacobson

Sometimes life throws a curve that you are unprepared for. It's a tired cliché, but true. A variation that my grandmother preferred was, "Man plans and God laughs."

Such unplanned events can have a profound effect on your career—if you recognize the signs and take appropriate action. And yet, that's easier said than done. Let's flip the calendar back to September 2009. My second *FBI profiler Karen Vail* novel, "Crush," was about to hit bookshelves. It was the first of a two-part story ("Velocity" being the second) set in the Napa Valley. How that "Crush"/"Velocity" "idea" came about is another one of those unplanned

occurrences—but that incident occurred in 2007 (and we're currently in 2009—too much time travel in a single article can be disorienting).

It was a clear, sunny afternoon in St. Helena, a small town in the heart of wine country. Since "Crush" deals with a serial killer operating in Napa, Peju winery—one of the vineyards I worked with on my research for the novel—offered to host the book launch party. They set me up in their sculpture garden to sign hardcovers while people milled about, enjoying a glass of "Crush"-branded Zinfandel or Sauvignon Blanc. Afterwards, we were to convene in the tasting room, where I would speak and then sign more books.

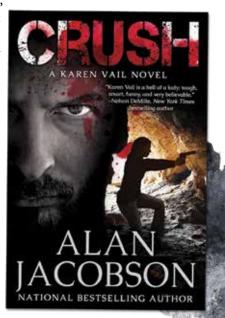
One of the individuals in line to get an autograph was an FBI agent out of Quantico, the Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) specializing in crimes against children. He had just been transferred to the Oakland resident agency and offered his

assistance should I need it for one of my novels. He gave me his card, I signed his book, we chatted about common acquaintances at the BAU, and I went on to sign the next patron's hardcover.

When I arrived home that evening, I entered his business card information into my PC's contact list—and left on a book tour the next morning. That was where the data sat, unused, relegated to ones and zeroes on a pancake-shaped hard drive.

Fast forward ten years, to 2018. My friend Robert Friedberg (who, incidentally, appeared in "Crush" as a San Francisco police inspector) told me that a new neighbor had moved onto his block and they had had some very interesting chats. Robert wanted me to meet him. Why? Because he was an FBI agent. As many of you know, I've worked with the FBI for about 28 years, so I did not suffer from a shortage of FBI resources. Plus, since I was on deadline for turning in the manuscript for "Dark Side of the Moon" to my publisher, meeting Robert's friend would have to wait.

A couple of months later, I was talking with Robert, and he again mentioned his neighbor and said, "Alan, I'm telling you. You've really got to meet this guy." I assured him I would, but as the weeks passed and deadlines hit one after another, the good intentions vanished into the ether of worthwhile-but-forgotten-thoughts, tucked away somewhere in the neurons of overcommitted gray matter.



Months passed. Robert was again at our house, this time for Thanksgiving. We somehow ventured onto the topic again and he said, "When are you going to meet my friend? He's the director of the FBI." The FBI director does not live in, or work out of, California, so I chuckled. "You don't mean the director. You mean, like, the special agent in charge?" Robert shrugged. "Yeah, probably. Whatever. You gotta meet him. John's a really good guy."

John. Something reached into those dormant neurons, which were now hyperstimulated, jumping up and screaming: Pick me! Pick me! One of them was subconsciously telling me to pull out my phone. I opened my contacts and searched for "FBI." Among the many entries was John Bennett. In my notes, it read: met at "Crush" book signing at Peju. BAU. Child crimes. Now with Oakland RA.

Lots of Johns in this country, but somehow, I knew. I looked at Robert. "Do you mean John Bennett?" Robert pointed at me. "Yeah. That's him."

I dashed off a quick email to John, using his nickname, which was also in my notes, reminding him of our meeting at Peju ten years earlier, referencing his neighbor Robert, and asking him if he wanted to get together in the city at his office. He was now, indeed, the special agent in charge (SAC) of the San Francisco field division, a very prestigious post.

SAC Bennett remembered me well and we set a date. Our meeting lasted hours. He took me on a tour of the Oakland resident agency ("RA" in Bureau parlance), a satellite of the San Francisco field division, even though—as a suboffice—it employed two-hundred agents and occupied four floors of a large office building in downtown Oakland. Some RAs were located in smaller jurisdictions and staffed with only a single agent. In a high crime city like Oakland, those two-hundred agents had full caseloads.

As it happened, I was outlining a novel set in Oakland involving an agent who worked out of the Oakland RA; my character headed the Crimes Against Children unit. I knew a lot about how the FBI operates but I had a hole in my knowledge base regarding crimes against children. As I told SAC Bennett this, he smiled. He had devoted a chunk of his career to working such cases.

In addition to introducing me to dozens of agents in the RA, he brought me to the office of the foremost expert on crimes against children, who was due to be promoted to Quantico to teach the new agent course on that very topic.

She would later prove instrumental in helping me bring the story behind "The Lost Girl" to life and infuse it with realism. Those of you who have read my novels know that research is key to my stories and characters; like Ridley Pearson, Richard North Patterson, and Jeffery Deaver, I make sure to get my facts right. I often joke that the only thing fictional in my novels are the characters I create and the stories that I tell. (If Agent Vail pulls her Glock, she is *not* going to release the safety! I promise.)

We talked about the case that is the centerpiece of "The Lost Girl," the nuances I needed to know about how such a case would be run, and what would happen in the event certain incidents occurred in the novel. We stayed in touch after she moved across the country to Quantico, and when I finished the first draft of "The Lost Girl," she read the manuscript to make sure I had not screwed up the material she had taught me, and to ensure that I didn't make any incorrect assertions or run afoul of FBI procedures, etc. (I did both—and she fixed all such flubs.)

The story behind "The Lost Girl" brings together FBI agent Loren Ryder and a fixer, Mickey Keller—the namesake of the new series this novel launches. Ryder is bound to FBI procedure while Keller is bound to...well, only his conscience. It created an interesting dynamic to work from... conflicts galore...and as we authors know, conflict done well drives action and suspense.

"The Lost Girl" came together beautifully as a result of these, and other, agents I worked with at the Oakland RA. Although I had planned and outlined my novel, God laughed...and then used my friend Robert to repeatedly needle me to remember the person who would prove key to the story...someone I had met a decade earlier and *almost* never saw again.

This experience brought to mind the old joke involving a religious man whose town was flooded. He climbed his roof to safety—but had no food or water. He prayed day and night for help. The next morning a canoe came by and the rescue worker shouted up to him: "Come down! I'll take you to safety!" The homeowner waved him off. "God will provide. Go on." The worker shrugged and paddled away. The man prayed for another hour, until another canoe floated by. "Hurry down," the rescue worker shouted. "I'll take you to a shelter where you can get food and water." The religious man shook his head. "Thanks anyway. God will provide." The same thing occurred an hour after that. Finally, the man got down on a knee and brought his gaze skyward. "Please, God, why haven't you helped me? I beg of you. Guide me to safety." A lightning bolt struck a few feet to his left. "You idiot!" God roared. "I've sent three canoes for you!"

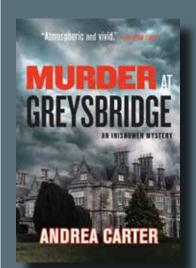
Plan. Do your best. But when something falls in your lap, don't discount it because it wasn't expected. Go with it and see where it takes you.

Alan Jacobson is the USA Today bestselling author of the FBI profiler Karen Vail series and OPSIG Team Black covert ops books. Several of his novels have been optioned by Hollywood and his debut mystery, "False Accusations," was adapted to film by acclaimed Czech screenwriter Jiri Hubac. Michael Connelly and James Patterson have called Karen Vail one of the most compelling heroes in suspense fiction. Jacobson's latest book, the first in the fixer Mickey Keller series, is "The Lost Girl."

Photo: Alan Jacobson signing John Bennett's copy of "Crush."

"Haunting, atmospheric, and gripping." -JOHN CONNOLLY

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

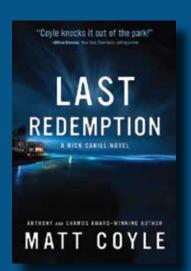


Two missing teenagers-a brutal North Atlantic storm—a deadly conspiracy unfolding

"Matt Coyle is on top of his game."

-MICHAEL CONNELLY

**NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR** 

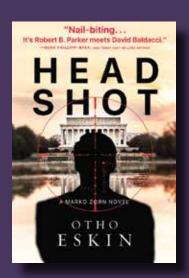


Will Rick Cahill survive an insidious disease long enough to see his first-born child-or will sadistic killers murder him first?

"Crackles with twists and turns."

-STEVE BERRY

**NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR** 

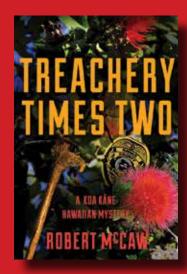


The Most Elusive Assassin in the **World Versus** D.C. Homicide **Detective Marko** Zorn

"A relentlessly riveting tale."

-JON LAND

**USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR** 



Secret military weapons, saboteurs, a volcanic eruption—and a probe of Chief **Detective Koa** Kane's criminal past

OCEANVIEW



## Town as Character

When settings in suspense novels and films take on a life of their own (And why these stories couldn't take place anywhere else)

By Debbie Babitt

A desolate motel off a California highway...a hotel out of season in the Colorado Rockies...a remote English country house...the woods bordering an Irish housing estate outside Dublin...a suffocating Midwestern town...

**Who could forget** the eerie vacancy sign for the Bates Motel lighting up the skies that Janet Leigh as Marion Crane sees through her rain-swept windshield and makes the fateful decision to stop there for the night?

That first glimpse of the secluded Overlook Hotel where Jack Torrance, as portrayed by that other Jack, hopes to reconnect with his family and get a second shot at redemption?

The magnificent Essex estate, Bly House, where Deborah Kerr's Miss Giddens arrives to be governess to a pair of innocent, orphaned children?

The centuries-old Cornwall manor house, Manderley, that Joan Fontaine's unnamed heroine can't see from the road?

**Suppose the setting** isn't a transient motel or a sprawling country manor. Or an isolated mansion on a remote island off the Devon coast where ten people are brought together by an unseen host in Agatha Christie's, "And Then There Were None." It's the place that's supposed to provide shelter and protect us from the monsters...until it becomes the scene of our worst nightmares....

In "Rosemary's Baby," Ira Levin's 1967 classic tale of devil worship, the eponymous heroine moves with her husband Guy to an apartment in New York City's haunted Bramford—only to discover that her new home is also home to a coven of witches who want her unborn child for their satanic rituals.

The Manhattan townhouse in A.J. Finn's 2018 thriller, "The Woman in the Window," that emotionally imprisons agoraphobic Anna Fox and becomes a true place of no escape when a killer traps her there.

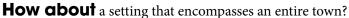
The 2019 award-winning *Parasite* turns the traditional country house setting on its head with two wildly contrasting locales. In the film, the poor family is trapped by their poverty. Remember the scene in their flooded subterranean apartment where they find themselves up to their necks in sewer water? The wealthy family's glass-encased modern house is also a trap. All their money can't shield them from the dangerous, toxic world outside that is slowly seeping into their multi-million-dollar prison.

Inspired by the 1972 film version of Anthony Shaffer's play, *Sleuth*, the 2019 movie, *Knives Out*, takes us into the home of eccentric crime novelist Harlan Thrombey—a Gothic Revival mansion described by a character as "akin to living inside a real-life 'Clue' board." With the elaborate set of knives in the library behind the hot seat where each suspect is questioned, it's as if the house were seeking revenge for the murder of its owner.

**What about** the creeping, alive darkness that beckons outside our window? A sinister, frightening place where no natural light ever finds its way in and that can swallow us whole if we're not vigilant.

"In the Woods," Tana French's 2007 novel that was made into the Netflix miniseries, *Dublin Murders*, a pair of detectives (one with ties to the past) investigate a murder that brings back the two-decades-old disappearances of three friends who vanished in the woods and only one came out. On the page, what we can't see, hear, smell, feel, or touch is filled in by our imaginations: the towering silhouettes of trees that can both harbor and conceal; the unearthly wail of the wind through the treetops; the scent of damp leaves scattered across earth that shrouds the graves of the dead; the low-hanging branches that stab us as we run; rocks that trip us up as we race to escape the evil stalking us. Here, the forest becomes the story's true antagonist, pitting its ancient will against our own. A villain with the power to ensnare us that, in these terrifying moments,

becomes more alive than any flesh-and-blood adversary.



The place we once called home.

A place we couldn't wait to escape.

Yet return we do, the siren call of the past too irresistible to ignore. But can you ever truly go home again? Perhaps the better question is: Can you ever really leave? Or do we carry our past on our backs for the rest of our lives, believing we have changed—not always for the better—while the town remains as it was in our memories: frozen in time? An eternal reminder of where we came from. A place fraught with family skeletons and unresolved secret histories from which no one emerges unscathed.

In Gillian Flynn's 2006 debut novel, "Sharp Objects," set in the fictional town of Wind Gap in "the boot heel of Missouri," reporter Camille Preaker thought she'd left her claustrophobic town in her rearview. Until her boss sends her back to cover the murder of a pre-teen girl and the disappearance of another. Installed in her old bedroom in her dysfunctional family's Victorian mansion, surrounded by her controlling, neurotic mother and the thirteen-year-old half-sister who seems to exert an eerie power over the town, Camille finds herself regressing to the girl she was while growing up in the shadow of death: the tragic demise of another sister. As she uncovers the truth, it becomes clear how deeply the town holds the inhabitants in its thrall. The hog farm owned by Camille's family becomes the repository of its darkest, most shameful secrets, and a legacy of cruelty and violence that spreads far beyond Wind Gap.

My debut novel, "Saving Grace," a 2021 southern gothic, is also set in a fictional place. The church is the religious, social, and spiritual center of Repentance—a rural Baptist town in northwest Arkansas ruled by faith and superstition, where the pastor calls evil the root cause of human suffering and you have to repent if you want to be saved. As my heroine Mary Grace Dobbs explains: "It felt like he was trying to scare religion into us." No less frightening is the woods that encroaches on the town, where a longtime recluse lives and where search parties are dispatched to hunt for three sixth-grade girls who disappear twenty-four years apart.

Residents of *The Village* of Covington, PA, in M. Night Shyamalan's 2004 film, live in fear of "Those We Don't Speak Of," the non-human creatures who live in the woods...a place all are forbidden to enter. The villagers have erected elaborate constructs, including watch towers, to protect the inhabitants. Everything changes when one of the residents defies the laws and passes through the woods in search of medical supplies from the towns that the village Elders deem wicked. But the Elders are harboring secrets—mementoes in black boxes that are purportedly physical reminders of tragedies in the outside world they left behind. The truth is even more shocking, exposing the rot and deceit at the village's heart that can spread like a rampant virus, leaving death and destruction in its wake.

Whether it's the house in Robert Bloch's "Psycho" that conceals an unspeakable crime...the hotel in Stephen King's "The Shining" that traffics in human weakness to carry out its evil agenda...the haunted estate in Henry James's 1898 novella "The Turn of the Screw" (hailed by Stephen King as one of the two great novels of the supernatural; the other being Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House")...or the atmosphere of doom that pervades the manor in Daphne Du Maurier's "Rebecca," these settings bring out the best and worst in us as they reflect our deepest, darkest yearnings. What they have in common is their inescapable hold on us, whether real or imagined. Lying in wait to claim (or reclaim) the part of us that will always belong to them.

As we turn back for one last look, we share Mary Grace Dobbs's conflicting feelings about the town she loves. Repentance is "a place that's part of me for better or worse. A connection that runs deeper than blood."

#### Fade to black... •

Debbie Babitt was Copy Director for two major Manhattan publishing companies. She is the author of "Adventures in Copywriting" that appeared in "Making the Perfect Pitch: How to Catch a Literary Agent's Eye." Previous creative incarnations include actress, playwright, and drama critic for the New York Law Journal. Her feature articles have appeared in CrimeReads and mysteryandsuspense.com. Debbie is a member of International Thriller Writers and Sisters in Crime. The daughter of a former federal judge, she and her husband, a criminal defense attorney, live in New York and Florida.

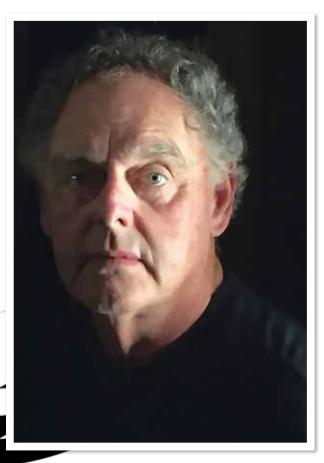
"Saving Grace" is Debbie's debut novel, and has been named "One of the Most Anticipated Thrillers of 2021" by She Reads, a "Best Mystery & Thriller book of 2021" by A Book and a Dream, and a "First Mystery Crime Club Pick" by the Mysterious Bookshop. "Saving Grace" is also a Number One Best and Most Popular Mystery and Psychological Suspense Thriller Book of 2021 on the Web.

Debbie can be found on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Or walking on the beach with her recorder plotting her next novel of psychological suspense.



# INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS

D.P. LYLE, MD.



Interview by Joseph Badal for *Suspense Magazine*Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

A visit to D.P. Lyle's website is an adventure. This award-winning, bestselling author of a variety of series, as well as standalones and non-fiction works, is also a story consultant, lecturer, hosts a popular podcast series, and so much more.

Being born and raised in the southern "hospitality" of Alabama, and working as a doctor for over 50 years, Lyle has utilized his background to create incredible characters, locations, and colorful dialogue that make his books stand out to fans across the globe. Sitting down with another award-winning suspense author, Joseph Badal, D.P. Lyle talks about his childhood, how Elmore Leonard and others influenced his career, and what's new for 2022.

Joseph Badal (J.B.): You have a large body of work that includes non-fiction books and fiction books spanning over five series. Your novels are placed in a wide array of locales. Are the physical locations in your books based on personal experiences?

D.P. Lyle (D.P.L.): Some of my books are set in real locations, others in fictional ones. My Dub Walker series mostly takes place in my hometown of Huntsville, Alabama where I used a combination of real and created places. A couple of my Jake Longly books are set in real locations—"A-LIST" in New Orleans and "Rigged" in Fairhope, Alabama. But often I make up settings, which is the case in my two

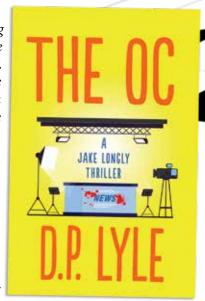
Cain/Harper books. I like creating and telling stories set in small towns because the impact of the crime is much greater in those locations. A murder in New York City or Los Angeles goes unnoticed for the most part as compared to one in a town of 2,000 people. It's more personal and I think that makes for better storytelling. Obviously, those that are set in real locations have more constraints than do those placed in fictional settings. I grew up in Huntsville, so I know it well, and I've been to Fairhope and New Orleans many times, so I understand the areas quite well. This certainly helps with creating the setting.

J.B.: You have created a well-developed, diverse cast of characters in your books. Are any of your characters based upon real-life persons? If so, would you give us an example of how you developed a character from someone you know?

D.P.L.: Thanks for that. It's interesting that one of the things I really enjoy creating and writing about are minor characters. Even those that are in one brief scene. I always try to add a little something to each that makes them memorable even though they will not reappear in a book. That's kind of fun. I don't base any of my characters on a real person but rather on a collective of characters I've known. Practicing medicine for nearly 50 years means that I interfaced with literally tens of thousands of patients and their family members both in my office and in the hospital. It is often under the most stressful circumstances where you learn a lot about how people act and react. This experience has contributed to character development in my novels.

J.B.: Your books are well-written and include plenty of dialogue. How do you go about creating your characters' conversations? Are they in any way inspired by conversations you have heard or been part of?

D.P.L.: The answer to this is like the answer to the above question in that I have talked with many people during my career. Perhaps even more importantly, people in the south are storytellers. Southerners love to talk, which, by definition, means dialogue fills a lot of people's days. I love dialogue. I find it easy to write. To me, it moves the story forward better

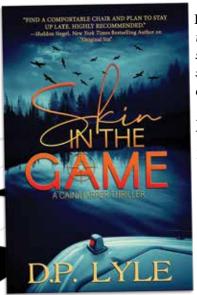


than anything else. It is always better than simply telling or giving an account of what is happening. Plus, the events are filtered through a character, which adds depth to the story and gives the reader a better understanding of the characters themselves. The part of writing that I dislike the most is what I call stage directions—what are the people doing while they're talking? I find this tedious and monotonous, but dialogue comes naturally.

J.B.: You create quirky characters a la Elmore Leonard, John Lescroart, and Steve Brewer. Have these or other writers influenced you in your writing style and choice of plot?

D.P.L.: I read all three of these authors but, for me, Elmore Leonard is **the** guy. I have learned so much from reading his work and from the two times that I had the opportunity to sit down and chat with him. His ability to tell a story in a clean and concise manner without a lot of fluff has had a great influence on me. I often think of Elmore when sitting before my computer, trying to create scenes. I frequently ask myself, "How would Elmore handle this situation?" I asked him once about his wonderful and quirky characters, how he created them, and if he did things like character sketches. His response was incredibly enlightening. He told me that he did not do any of that but that he would think about a character for a few weeks or months, and once he came up with a name, he knew the character. This underlines not only the importance of how it takes time to get to know a character but also how important names are. I've taken that lesson to heart.

J.B.: Have geopolitical events inspired any of your stories?



D.P.L.: I avoid politics in my stories, and I avoid preaching. I hate reading that stuff and the purpose of fiction is to entertain. I avoid the whole geopolitical world and try to tell a small story that hopefully is impactful to the characters involved, and thus the reader. That said, at least the Middle Eastern conflicts of late offered good background material for the development of Bobby Cain and Harper McCoy in my Cain/Harper series.

J.B.: Your books often include a love interest, which you skillfully weave into your suspense plots. Are you a romantic at heart, and do you find it easy to include romantic elements in your stories?

"But writing a good story is like making good chili. It takes time, and if you rush it, it won't be as good." D.P.L.: I think everyone is a romantic on some level and, certainly, fiction writers are. Having a love interest always deepens a character and creates some fun situations. Dub and Claire in my Dub Walker series, and Jake and Nicole in my Jake Longly series, have unusual relationships. They love each other but they also are not afraid to metaphorically jab one another with sharp sticks. I think much of my love for these types of relationships, where the man and the woman are on equal footing and each is capable of jousting verbally with the other, comes from growing up in the early sitcom era. Ralph and Alice Kramden, Lucy and Ricky, and, of course, the wonderful movies with Tracy and Hepburn were all inspirations for this character dynamic.

J.B.: I recently read your short story, "Tonic" in the "Nothing Good Happens After Midnight" anthology. Your use of dialect was quite effective. I couldn't help but think that you must have grown up in a small southern town. Is that accurate? Where did you grow up and how did your early years inspire your writing voice?

D.P.L.: I grew up in Huntsville, Alabama when it had a population of around 30,000. It was on one hand a sleepy southern town with farms, pick-ups, and lots of churches.

On the other hand, it was quite sophisticated for a small town because of the Marshall Space Flight Center and the large number of scientists there. The town had a diverse population and southern vernacular was ever-present.

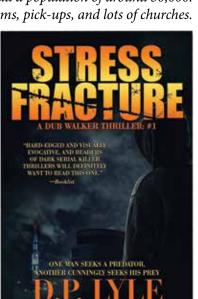
J.B.: What are you working on now?

D.P.L.: I'm working on the next Cain/Harper and Jake Longly books. I try to write one in each series every year, which means I attempt to complete a book in six months. Doesn't always work out that way but that's the goal.

J.B.: What advice do you have for aspiring authors?

D.P.L.: I think aspiring writers should learn to be patient. Today when you can whip out a story in a few weeks or a few months and then publish it online or in e-book format, the temptation is to get it out there so you can be a published author. But writing a good story is like making good chili. It takes time, and if you rush it, it won't be as good. Take the time to learn the craft and spend the countless hours writing and developing your skills and, most importantly, your voice. Remember, every story has been told but it hasn't been told by you. Get out of your own way and write the story the way you want to write it. You can then go back and clean it up, but you must get your voice on the page first. That is the most critical part of writing and the biggest lesson to learn. Be confident. It's your story.

And, frankly, fans galore can not wait to read Doug's next story the second it arrives on the scene. Make sure to keep up with this MD whose list of events, podcasts, conferences and more grows longer with each visit to his website at <a href="https://www.dplylemd.com/criminal-mischief.html">www.dplylemd.com/criminal-mischief.html</a> and to follow Doug on Twitter, head to <a href="twitter.com/DPLyleMD">twitter.com/DPLyleMD</a>.



### THE OC

By D.P. Lyle

In this fifth book revolving around former baseball player Jake Longly, author D.P. Lyle has given readers yet another exciting, thrilling story in this already entertaining series. As a sincere fan of Lyle, all the books in this series have been among my favorite reads of all time. Lyle has that gift of being able to introduce a character that people end up liking so much, they have to read more. When it comes to this series, the stories are always fresh!

This time around, we meet up with the former baseball star and restaurant owner Jake and see that he's excited about having a few weeks of fun with his beloved girl, Nicole Jamison, in the warm California weather. Yup, that's right, Orange County: The infamous OC. Unfortunately, that "vision" of paradise they're hoping for turns out to be a completely different situation.

When they first arrive, they find that a friend of Nicole's, named Megan, who happens to be a TV reporter, has gained an unwanted stalker. Although Megan tries to shrug off the danger, the stalker intensifies his unwanted attention to the point where Jake makes a call to Alabama and brings in the rest of his unlikely detective squad. Pancake and Ray appear on the scene and the trio works together to protect Megan. Unfortunately, her stalker leaves no clue about his identity behind.

But as the men find themselves immersed in the realm of celebrity stalking; they're pushed to their limits as they go up against a possibly unbeatable foe that leads to an incredible climax.

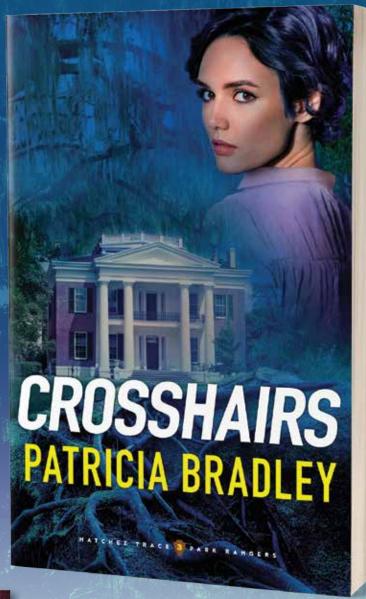
Now, although all the books in the *Jake Longly Thriller* series stand alone and can be read in any order, there is no reason to miss even one. The dialogue, as always, is witty, fun and the characters wrap you up in a mystery that remains suspenseful through the very last word. I can't wait for the next D.P. Lyle ride!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* •

## WHEN EVIL JUST WON'T QUIT, GOOD MUST PREVAIL

When ISB Ranger Ainsley Beaumont returns to her hometown of Natchez, Mississippi, to investigate the murder of a teenage girl, she doesn't suspect she'll become the murderer's next target. Can a former FBI sniper—and Ainsley's former flame—overcome his past mistakes on the job to protect her?

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# Saying Goodbye to ANNE RICE: An Author's "Last Sunrise"

By Amy Lignor Press Photo Credit: Nicholas Latimer

WE ALL HAVE MENTORS. WE ALL HAVE IDOLS. For some, it is a family member we tout; we admire them because of their courage, strength shown in the hard times, or simply because of the amount of support they give to us throughout our lifetime. Others look up to people who are not on their family tree, however. This category is comprised of those who stand up for others, give famous speeches and then stand by the words they orate, or have the power to create something that changes peoples' lives and has the beauty and passion to live long after we humans are gone. For me...I was lucky enough to have both.

My mother was the strength. She was the epitome of intelligence, class, and creative thinking. She and my incredible father made an indelible mark upon myself, my sister, and anyone they came in contact with over the years. Mainly, because they personified the "perfect couple." They could live life to the fullest, laugh throughout the hard times, and teach the world around them that as long as you lived the life of good people, who worked hard and stayed strong during the darkest of days, then you succeeded in living the perfect life.

On the other side of the coin, I am a writer. I would not have followed down this path originally, however, if it wasn't for the support of family, and the mentorship I found in certain creators who transformed realms, characters and lines into pure magic within the many corners of my mind. I still have a couple, but one lady—one pure class act—was recently taken from this earth. And I, for one—among millions out there, I am sure—wish to take a time out in order to say "goodbye" and "thank you so much" to the incredible female with indelible words: Anne Rice.

With more than thirty novels written, her standalone works and series led from one end of the spectrum to the other. From the life of Jesus to the gothic darkness that surrounds the mightiest of tortured monsters, Anne Rice's unstoppable brain spun stories of them all. Perhaps a majority of her readers will shout from the rooftops that the bestseller, "Interview with the Vampire," was her most profound hit, as do I. But her other works were just as passionate and noteworthy as the one where Louis, a vampire, sat down at a table with an interviewer and told his life story, including the pain, regret, and startling journeys he took standing by the side of the infamous Vampire Lestat.

Back in 2016, Anne Rice stated: "What matters to me is that people know that my books are serious and that they are meant to make a difference and that they are meant to be literature."

I wish to let her know she succeeded at all of the above with this young girl—now, a much older woman—who dove into her work headfirst and never craved to come up for air no matter what cover of which Anne Rice book I'd cracked open.

Born in New Orleans, Rice spent her early life in that incredible city that thrives on the spectacular and celebrates the "dead" with parades; the city that has served as the backdrop for hundreds of books simply because of the mysteries it seems to hold within its core. Moving on to the great state of Texas, before later heading to San Francisco, Anne's writing career was affected by her personal journey through religion. Not only did she taste a gothic reality when she was young, she was also raised in a Catholic family. It was publicized, as well, that she became an agnostic as a young adult. As Anne grew older, she had "issues" with the Catholic Church and their rigid stance against certain things, and although her Catholicism waned, her belief and faith did not. She personified that faith in works published in the mid-2000s; novels that were basically fictionalized accounts of certain events that occurred in the life of Jesus. ("Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt" and "Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana.")

But it was decades earlier, in 1976, that this unknown writer turned a short story she'd written in the 1960s into what would become one of the biggest hits in the history of literature: "Interview with the Vampire," her first published novel.

## ANNE RICE

### Lestat Returns With More Vampire Chronicles



Interview by Suspense Magazine Press Photo Credit: Michael Lionstar

Vampires have been characters in books for years. 
It began with Bram Stoker and "Dracula" and 
then along came an author who changed the way 
we look at vampires with her groundbreaking 
book, "Interview with the Vampire." That author, 
of coame, is Anner Rice. She set the stage for the 
modern-day resurgence and, just like Dracula, 
Anne created a character who now has become 
a standard for the modern fan with Lestat. Now, 
Anne's back with her latest book in the series 
alled "Prince Lestat and the Realms of Atlantis."

Anne Rice was boen and raised in New

Anne Rice was born and raised in New Orleans, Loaisiana. At this point, Anne has spent more of her life in California than in New Orleans, but New Orleans is her true bome and provides

the backdrop for many of her famous novels. The French Quarter provided the setting for her first novel, "Interview with the Vampire." And her antebellum house in the Garden District was the fictional home of her imaginary Marjair Wikshas, She is the author of over thirty novels. Her first novel was published in 1976 and has gone on to become one of the best-selling novels of all time. She continued her saga of the Vampire Lestat in a series of books, collectively known as The Vampire Chronicales, which have had both great mainstream and cult followings.

Her latest novel, "Prince Lestat," is the continuation of the Vampire Chronicles. With the old queen of the vampires, Akasha, long dead, the Undead are in chaos all over the world. Ricc's fabled Brat Prince, Lestat, is the order to the prince of the prince of the lates of the contraction of the Vampire Chronicles.

Her latest novel, "Peince Lestat," is the continuation of the Vampire Clevonicles. With the old queen of the vampires, Akasha, long dead, the Undead are in chaos all over the world. Rice's fabled Brat Prince, Lestat, is the only immortal known by name to vampires young and old and many appeal to him to come out of his long exile and bring order as wanton destruction plagues revenants in city after city around the globe. With a return of some of Rice's most messorable characters, such as the melancholic Louis, the childlike Armand, the beins Maharet and Mekare, the former Talamaca scholar David Talbot, the ancient Romans' Pandors and the noble Marius, and even Lestat's distant mother Gabrielle, the reader will meet many new vampires, all of whom must cooperate in guiding the vampire kinship with technology and ritual toward the path of unity, building a new vampire kingdom in the modern world.

Let's take a look inside her latest book "Prince Lestat and the Realms of Atlantis," before we jump into ou exactive interview.
"In my dream, I saw a city full into the sea. I heard the cries of thousands. I saw flames that outshome the lamps of

heaven. And all the world was shaken . . ."

-Anne Rice, "Prince Lestat and the Realms of Atlantis"

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SuspenseMagazineNovember/December2016/Vol.073

Quoted in the *NY Times* in 1988, Anne explained how this incredible book was her story to tell. "For the first time, I was able to describe my reality, the dark, gothic influence on my childhood. It's not fantasy for me. My childhood came to life for me."

Although critics were not praising the book to the high heavens when it arrived on the scene, readers like me who found the book, clung to it. We also jumped into the evergrowing, never-ending pool of Anne Rice fans. As that base continued to thrive, Anne added even more by consistently offering great, entertaining, can't-put-down books that as a collection are referred to as *The Vampire Chronicles*. However, she also wrote free-standing novels, including "Cry to Heaven" in 1982. Then, in 1985, using the pseudonym of Anne Rampling, she penned "Exit to Eden," featuring sex slaves. Moving on, donning the cap of one A.N. Roquelaure, "Sleeping Beauty" became an erotic series that caused readers and critics alike to shower her with praise and applaud her creativity.

Yes, there are many statistics to state; the biggest, perhaps, being that Anne's books have sold over 150 million copies, which will forever put her on the "most popular" list when it comes to authors. Personally, she's been at the top of my list since 1980 and has never slipped, skidded, or been knocked off the top shelf ever since.

When her son and author, Christopher Rice, announced that my mentor and idol had died at the age of 80 in a hospital located in Rancho Mirage, California, from complications that came about from a stroke, I was beyond sad. I know she has joined my mother in heaven. I am quite sure that people like them are carted there on the wings of many angels until they get their own set and begin to fly back down to us lowly creatures on Earth. They soar toward us in order to whisper calming words in our ears, pat us on the back when we need support, or walk beside us and offer their shoulder for us to lean on during the rough days. What both of these women did was teach me to keep going and shoot for the stars, and I give my utmost respect, gratitude and love to them for doing that job so well.

I call this incredible author by her first name in this article at times; not out of disrespect, but because of the fact that I feel like she's always been a great friend. Her words spoke to me. Her words kept me on this path, even when it would have much easier to scrap the long hours and creative mind blocks to sit at a desk somewhere and answer phones. There were times I wanted to be Anne. I never will be, of course, but when I wrote a series about angels a long time ago I received an email from a young mom with a little girl who fell in love with one of the winged creatures I had created. I read that letter over and over; I will read it over and over again. I am still, to this day, beyond emotional that this woman was passionate enough to tell me how her daughter felt, and her compliment has gotten me through some of the worst days possible. I proceeded to make posters of that character for her child and mailed them out immediately.

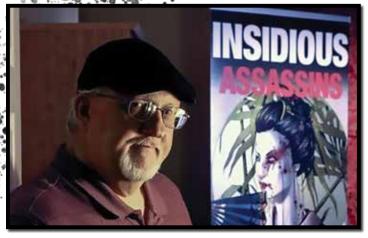
Because of Anne Rice, I get to enjoy the fact that my character adorns a now, grown woman's wall in her home, and she reads my books to her own child. Because of Anne Rice and her love of words, I continue to go at it, looking, perhaps, for my own Lestat...although fangs are optional. The day of her death will remain a sad day for the literary community, but also one that marks a life that should be celebrated for the rest of time. The sun has set on Anne Rice, but her influence on others remains.

As I close, I'm reminded of Louis' statement in "Interview with the Vampire" when he recounted the final time he saw that brilliant, familiar orb rise in the sky at daybreak: "I remember it completely, and yet I can't recall any sunrise before it."

I will remember you, Anne Rice, completely. You emitted sunshine with your life, actions, beliefs and endless gifts that you gave generously to readers everywhere. Yet, I must say, you were such a bright fixture in my life for so long that I doubt I will ever recall any that came before you.

Rest in Peace.
Your friend, Amy

## A Cess- Than-Gratifying Vacation in Paris



By Weldon Burge Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

uy Savoy was such an excellent suggestion," Jennifer Allgood said. "The aged beef paleron is exquisite."

"Isn't it, though? And the seared veal sweetbread," Liza Wellison said. "Oh my God, it is soooo good. And I rarely eat veal."

"And the confit leeks with truffle!"

"It's all a bit pricy though, don't you think?"

"Our husbands can afford it."

"So true."

The friends laughed.

A trip to Paris was perfect this time of year, and much needed. They'd planned such excursions each spring. Money was now never an issue. Their husbands were filthy rich. Fidelity, on the other hand, was always an issue.

They had no illusions. At one time, a decade before, they'd been trophy wives of their much older husbands. And they'd been skilled at being merely ornaments hanging on their husbands' arms at swanky social events, trained to smile appropriately and fawn over their men when the situation dictated it. They readily accepted this, as long as the money flowed. Their husbands wouldn't dare divorce them at the risk of losing half their estates.

Jennifer came from Boston stock and was attuned to high societal mores. Her husband, Stephen, also came from a wealthy Boston family. He was born into money. Not Kennedy money, but enough to launch his own successful biotech corporation in Silicon Valley. Jennifer was an attractive brunette with an air of elegance and sophistication about her. Her eyes were different shades, blue and brown, like David Bowie's, and her lips were thin, almost brittle. But she was a head-turner and played the "wife" role well.

In contrast, Liza (Elizabeth at soirées) came from an upper-middle-class family from Pittsburgh. She met her husband, Burt, at a marketing conference in Philadelphia. More specifically, at a bar near the conference center, followed by an extraordinary one-night stand. Liza, a redhead with a face painted with freckles, was somewhat plain in appearance, but had skills that far more than compensated for her lack of beauty. That one night of passion had conquered Burt. After their marriage, he became the Marketing Director of Tolson Industries. Soon after that, he partnered with Stephen in the business, which proved to be ridiculously lucrative as the biotech industry garnered more significance in the American corporate landscape.

"Magnificent view from here," Liza said, looking out the window. "The Seine and the Louvre. Almost as good as the food."

"You know, we've only just begun to explore Paris. There is so much we haven't seen yet, and our vacation is almost over,"

Jennifer said. "We must plan another excursion here someday. Maybe in a few years."

"That sounds wonderful. We can talk about it on our flight home."

A waiter approached their table. In English, he asked, "Would you ladies like more wine?"

"Yes," Jennifer said. "I'd like to try the Liber Pater Bordeaux, please."

"Any particular year?" the waiter said.

"Oh, you may choose, garçon," Liza said.

"Merci. I will select the best for you fine ladies."

Liza nodded toward the waiter as he walked away.

"What do you think? He's quite cute."

"Far too young," Jennifer said. "He wouldn't do at all."

"I suppose you're right."

"So, what project has stolen Burt from you this time? Another business trip to Hong Kong?"

"Tokyo, actually," Liza said.

"Wasn't that where—what was her name, Kiki or Tiki or something? Wasn't that where he hooked up with her?"

"Kiki, yes. But that wasn't Tokyo. That was Maui."

"Oh, that's right. Hawaii. It's a shame Kiki fell into that volcano. Incredibly sad." Jennifer smiled. She sipped her wine, looking over the glass rim at her friend, who smiled as well.

"And Stephen?" Liza said. "What has he been up to? I heard the market crash forced him to cut back on company expenditures."

"No, his company had enough cash reserves to weather the storm, thank God. I couldn't do with a cut in my allowance. And, of course, he had to have *some* money to keep his mistress happy. Her apartment doesn't come cheap."

"Do you know who she is yet?"

"No. But in time," Jennifer said.

"That last one was somewhat elusive, too," Liza said.

"Tiffany. She was a slippery one."

"Tiffany. What was she, like twenty? Burt is so predictable."

"Isn't he? I think he enjoys being a sugar-daddy."

"Well, Jen, you're fifteen years younger than Stephen. He likes them young."

"I suppose. But it's almost tiresome at this point," Jennifer said. "Poor Tiffany. So sad, that hit-and-run accident."

"Did they ever apprehend the driver?" Liza smiled again.

"Good Lord, no. And she lingered so long in the hospital, too. I'm sure her death was a wonderfully unpleasant one." Jennifer smiled.

"What do you think? Should we live dangerously and order dessert?"

\*

They left Guy Savoy (after more-than-generously tipping their waiter) and strolled along the Seine, joining the throng of other tourists, many of them Americans. Although the air was crisp, the evening sun played warmly on their faces. They found a bench on the riverfront and seated themselves to take in the magnificent view.

"I'm thinking of remodeling the kitchen," Jennifer said.

"Really?" Liza said. "Didn't you just do that a year or so ago?"

"Three years, actually. But you get so tired of walking into the same room, day after day. So boring. I'm thinking mahogany cabinetry. What do you think? And Cippolino Ondulato marble countertops with matching floor tiles."

"Sounds exquisite," Liza said. "But don't you think the dark marble and the mahogany will make the room too gloomy? I think I'd go with walnut cabinets."

"Ah, but you're not thinking of the lighting! I would redo all the lighting to accent the colors in the room."

"Oh, yes. Can't wait to see it."

"Well, Stephen can certainly afford it," Jennifer said. "Of course, we'll need to replace all the appliances as well. Especially that refrigerator. It needs to be cleaned, but it's just easier to buy a new one, you know?"

"I know exactly what you mean. Who wants to clean a refrigerator?"

"For sure, not me! And I'd prefer not to ask Amanda to do it again. You really can't hire good help these days. They always want health insurance and all those other benefits. All the other folderol. Who wants to bother with all that headache?"

"Tell me about it," Liza said. "By the way, speaking of new things, I'm contemplating buying a new Porsche."

"I thought you loved your car. Why trade it in?"

"Who said anything about trading it in? Can't a girl have two Porsches?"

"True, true." Jennifer laughed. "We really are spoiled brats, aren't we?"

"Spoiled? We've earned every bit of this. Every bit. We're entitled to everything we have, and more."

The crowd around the two Fontaines de la Concorde was thinner than they'd expected—not that they would have complained. As the sun set, the fountain lights bloomed into illumination. Jennifer and Liza circled the fountains several times, admiring the statuary sculpted nearly two centuries before and the orchestrated colored lighting of the dancing water. No visit to Paris was complete without seeing the city's various fountains scattered throughout, but these were the ones that most attracted the tourists.

"Ah, the Luxor Obelisk," Liza said, pointing to the structure at the other end of the square, its spire jutting toward the clouds far above.

"It's like a miniature Washington Monument, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't tell a local citizen that."

"You're right. They'd probably be offended."

"Can you imagine?" Liza said. "The obelisk marks the spot where the great guillotine stood during the French Revolution."

"How many hundreds of heads rolled here?" Jennifer said. "It must have been a bloody spectacle."

"People would come by the droves to watch the beheadings. The only entertainment of that day. I mean, there was no television back then, of course. No movies. It was a dull life until the chopping began."

"I wish I could have been there," Jennifer said.

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"Well, knowing us, we'd have been the ones with the severed heads. I don't think we'd enjoy that much."

"We'd certainly have an audience, though."

"Yes, but no encore, and we wouldn't hear the applause. Well, not for long anyway," Liza said. "I think I'd rather perform in community theater."

"I've done that. I think a ride on the guillotine would be far more satisfying."

"True."

"You know, I really hate leaving here tomorrow. Our vacation has been far too short. There is so much more to see, so much more to experience," Liza said.

"You know what we haven't done?"

"What's that?"

"Perfume," Jennifer said.

"Ooooh...you're right."

"We bought some fabulous jewelry at Castiglione Bijoux. That antique sapphire necklace you found, that's a one-of-a-kind piece. And gorgeous on you."

"And that diamond brooch you found," Liza said. "Marie Antionette could have worn it."

"But the perfume. We forgot the perfume!"

"I even had Maison Hayari on my list. You know, that's one of Nicole Kidman's favorite perfume shops here in Paris."

"And Beyonce's," Jennifer said. "Anything good enough for Beyonce is more than good enough for me."

"Well, maybe next visit. We're not going to have time now."

"Shame, really. But you're right. Next time."

The two women sat at the Maritime Fountain to start people-watching, one of their favorite pastimes when visiting cities around the world. That was really the only way to absorb the culture of a city, far more valuable than sightseeing. You can learn so much more from watching a street vendor than visiting a museum, the two friends thought.

"I think there are more tourists than Parisians," Liza said.

Jennifer nodded. "I think you're right. Too many gawkers."

"We need to find a local guy."

"Agreed."

"Check him out. There, to the right of the obelisk, standing alone and taking pictures," Liza said.

Jennifer hesitated, tapping her bottom lip with a manicured nail. "I don't know. Looks like a tourist, too. Kind of a pretty boy, don't you think? Kind of prissy?"

"You're right. Probably doesn't even prefer women. What about the other guy, sitting on the bench alone?"

"The dark-haired man with the goatee?"

"That one, yes."

"He looks like your stereotypical Parisian artist. Something Matisse about him."

"So, yes or no?"

"Well, he does remind me of Burt," Jennifer said. "But you would know better than I do."

"Slightly younger version, yes," Liza said. "I can see it, especially around the eyes."

"Well, we fly out tomorrow." Jennifer sighed. "We really need to decide."

"You're right, of course. We have limited time."

"Do you have the English-French dictionary?" Jennifer said. "How do you say, 'Want to party with us'?"

\*

The next morning, Jennifer and Liza seated themselves on the eleven-fifteen flight to Heathrow, a short layover before flying to the New York Kennedy airport and then another layover before the flight to LAX. The sun shone brightly in a near-cloudless sky. They expected a pleasurable flight.

"Well, he didn't scream like the man last year in Rio," Jennifer said. "What was his name?"

"Enrique, I think," Liza said. "Maybe Enrico."

"Whatever."

"The ball gag definitely reduced the noise this time around. Excellent suggestion."

"But Francois wasn't much fun at all," Jennifer said. "I think the bastard may have even enjoyed it."

"True. And he lapsed into unconsciousness far too soon. I think we could have made a better choice."

"Ah well. I must say, I really enjoyed Paris. Did you know the death penalty doesn't exist in France? You can murder someone and totally get away with it."

They laughed in unison as the jet lifted from the tarmac.

"Of course, you could get life," Liza said. "And the French prisons aren't exactly a stay at the Hilton."

Jennifer nodded. "It's a shame we have to leave Paris so soon. It's such a lovely city."

"So, where should we go next year?"

"Well, we already have the English-French dictionary," Jennifer said. "And I hear Montreal is gorgeous in the spring." •

Weldon Burge, long a native of Delaware, is a writer, publisher, and full-time editor. His crime and horror fiction has appeared in many publications, including Suspense Magazine, The Best of the Horror Society, Pellucid Lunacy: An Anthology of Psychology, Crimeutopia: We're All Animals Under the Skin, Beach Pulp, Scary Stuff, and many others. His stories "Permanent Detention," "Sizzle," and "Performance Anxiety" have been adapted for podcast presentation by Drabblecast.

Weldon frequently writes author interviews, as well as penning the how-to manual, "Getting the Story Straight: The Whys and Hows of Submitting Stories to Anthologies."

His debut thriller, "Harvester of Sorrow" (Suspense Publishing), is the first in Weldon's Ezekiel Marrs series, and he looks forward to writing Book 2. He is also writing a paranormal suspense novel.

Weldon and his wife, Cindy, founded Smart Rhino Publications—an independent publishing company focusing primarily on horror and suspense anthologies. He enjoys working with other writers in his field. Learn more at <a href="https://www.weldonburge.com">www.weldonburge.com</a>.

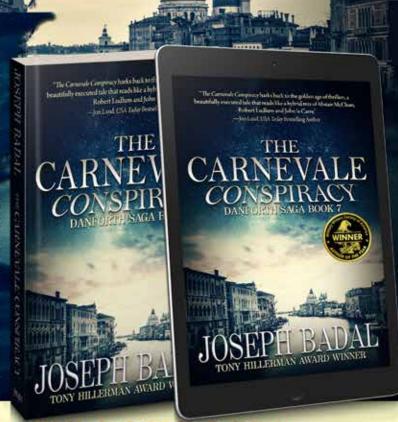
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