

THE NOOSELETTER



CROAK & DAGGER
NEW MEXICO CHAPTER – SISTERS in CRIME

Volume XVII, Number 1 — January / February 2021

†The President's Corner†

Dear Pantsters, Plotters, and Readers,

Ten years. That's how long it took me to write my first book. I wrote it "pantster" style, letting the characters talk to me and leading me along different pathways. Flying "by the seat of my pants." I believed this would keep my story fresh and the creativity flowing.

Not wanting to spend another ten years wandering around in imagination land, I decided to add a touch of structure to my method. The three-act system mirrors our life and our deeds with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Time divided into three sequences surges through our DNA from womb, to middle-age, to tomb.

One of my agent friends described it this way: Our protagonist starts at "Once upon a time . . ." Then something changes when "We're not in Kansas anymore." And finally our protagonist jumps all the hurdles, learns the lessons, grabs the blue ribbon, and assures herself that all is well—or maybe not. These three divisions of sequence give my characters a roadmap for their journey, yet I haven't stifled their own voices and creativity.

Then I threw in an inciting moment, a few plot points and some plot twists, and, Voila! I had developed my own brief, but solid path to *The End*.

Here's another helpful organizational structure: Write the story with the beginning ending at 90 pages, the middle taking another 180 pages, and the ending finishing up with another 90 pages. Look at what happens:



*C& D writers are keeping busy despite
Hard Times (see page 5)*

You have a well-proportioned, 360-page book. Does this make me a plotter, or am I still a pantster?

Sorry, it's a trick question. 2020—and it's looking like 2021 as well—have changed all of us into pantsters. We scrapped all our plans in 2020, with other players telling us what to do. Currently none of us has a clear roadmap to what the ending of 2021 will be. As pantsters, we give the players the freedom to talk to us and show us the paths they want us to take. However, it's our task to keep our story fresh and the creativity flowing.

Cheers to you in 2021—whatever this year brings!

—Charlene Dietz, President

The Latest from GLA/G(L)LA

The Great Library Adventurers are keeping the new-covers posters up to date while we wait to hear from librarians that they are able to have patrons wandering around their premises. And of course able to have us rambling around creating mischief while installing displays of our members' books.

The Great (Little) Library Adventure is waiting for certain public-health numbers to go down, so we can have a work day. When some of the Senior Adventurers are feeling safe outside their bubbles, we'll be packing up 52 boxes of books to ship off to NM's smallest community libraries. Current estimates are for each box to contain at least six books.

Masks still on and fingers still crossed.

—Ann Zeigler, Chief Perp



Sisters in Crime **Guppies**

SinC Guppies is an online writer's support group. Guppies come from across the United States and Canada but share a passion for writing mysteries and a common goal of getting published.

Subgroups represent cozies, noir, psychological and romantic suspense, and thrillers.

The Mystery Analysis Group is a book discussion group aimed at discussing the craft, and the AgentQuest group can help with writing queries and synopses. For more information, check them out at www.sinc-guppies.org.



Sisters in Crime was founded in 1986.

The mission of Sisters in Crime shall be "to promote the ongoing advancement, recognition, and professional development of women crime writers."

And our motto is: "SinC up with great crime writing!"

Check out the Croak & Dagger Website (www.croak-and-dagger.com) for:

- Upcoming Programs & Events
- Meeting Schedule
- Our Authors & links to member authors' websites
- How to Join C&D / SinC
- Link to the C&D blog

REMEMBER: Our Croak& Dagger blog provides opportunities for free publicity for members. Contact our website maven, Susan Zates (address below) for more information or with an idea for a blog article. Get your name out there wherever you can!



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Noose News

NM/AZ Book Awards are On!

The New Mexico Book Co-op is pleased to announce the 15th annual New Mexico-Arizona Book Awards; the purpose of these awards is to uncover and honor the best in Arizona and New Mexico books and authors! Entries will be judged by booksellers, librarians, teachers, and book marketing experts.

The 2021 New Mexico-Arizona Book Awards will be accepting entries starting on January 29, 2021, continuing until April 30, 2021. The awards program honors the best books produced by authors or publishers from New Mexico or Arizona as well as books about or set in either state. Books will be accepted for judging in 58 categories.

The awards program is open to authors and publishers anywhere; books must have a direct connection to Arizona or New Mexico, either as subject, author, or publisher. Books with a publication date or copyright date since January 1, 2019 are eligible.

Authors and publishers are encouraged to submit books for judging. All entries must include the Entry Form, payment of entry fees and three copies of the book being considered (add one copy for each additional category entered for the same book). Entry information can be found at <http://nmbookcoop.com/BookAwards/entry-info/entry-info.html> or at <https://bit.ly/38wYjoj>. All entries must be received by April 30, 2021. For more info 505-344-9382 or [email info@nmbookcoop.com](mailto:info@nmbookcoop.com).

What's New at Our Favorite Bookstores

John Hoffsis of Treasure House Books & Gifts in Old Town reports that things have been hectic these last months, so John is taking a "mental and physical break" for the rest of January, when the store will be open only on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.)

John hopes to be back to normal hours by February 1. "Normal" hours are Thursday - Sunday 12-4 p.m.; Monday through Wednesday CLOSED to the public, but 30-minute browsing sessions are available by appointment only from 1-4 p.m. Call (505) 242-7204 24 hours in advance to book your time.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, Treasure House has begun to sell lots of used books (both New Mexico Subjects & Authors & general interest), including mass market general fiction, as well as paperback mysteries for \$1.95. TH will continue the occasional "virtual" book event when the opportunity arises.

"Hopefully we'll be back to doing real live events after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Also, the store has been certified as a COVID-safe environment by the state, so people can shop in-store with confidence that we obey the rules and keep things clean."

Online links for Treasure House are:

Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/treasurehousebooks>

Our website: <https://treasurehousebooks.net>

Our Bookshop.org site to order just about any book under the sun:

<https://bookshop.org/shop/treasurehousebooks>

Our Libro.fm website for audio books:

<https://libro.fm/treasurehousebooks>.

"Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read." – Grouch Marx

Steve Brewer at Organic Books (Carlisle just south of Central), reports, "Thanks to you, Organic Books is now a full-service bookstore. Our doors are open. Everyone who visits has been well-behaved, masked, and careful about distancing. Thank you for being smart and considerate!"

Steve reminds us that "On [Bookshop.org](https://bookshop.org) you can order any book, brand new and delivered to your door, and we get the proceeds! To search our in-store inventory, you can use [Biblio](https://biblio.org). Or for audio books, use [Libro.fm](https://libro.fm), and select Organic Books as your store.

"We sell books new and used, with a special focus on local authors. We also carry cards, journals, pens and more. Open 11 to 6 every day. We also offer sidewalk shopping and curbside pickup! Or [contact us](#) and we'll help you get what you need.

"Because of your support in 2020, Organic Books starts the New Year with energy and momentum. We were able to do four major projects in 2020:

- In April, during the spring shutdown, we computerized our inventory and uploaded every book to online sales, enabling us to serve customers around the world.

- In July, we reopened to public shopping seven days a week instead of six.

- In August, we began selling many more new bestsellers as well as used books.

In September, we launched a new line of grow-your-own-everything books for gardeners, farmers, home canners, rainwater harvesters, cannabis growers and mushroom hunters

We take books for trade or donation, and buy books directly from local authors. Bring used books any time we're open. Our trade policy is \$1 for paperbacks, \$2 for hardbacks, and \$3 for trade paperbacks. Educators et 20% off any book in the store. We appreciate you!

If you're a local author, we want to carry your books! If you're a local artisan, we want to carry your gift cards, calendars, stickers, and other crafts. Bring a sample by any day."

Here are some books the staff at Organic Books are reading and recommending:

Max: ***The Ministry for the Future***, by Kim Stanley Robinson. Science fiction. Eyewitnesses tell the story of how climate change will affect us all. Its setting is not a desolate, post-apocalyptic world, but a future that is almost upon us—and in which we might just overcome the extraordinary challenges we face.

Seth: The ***Expanse*** series, by James S.A. Corey (pen name of Albuquerque fantasy authors Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck). The blockbuster stories (also a Prime Original series) start with ***Leviathan Wakes***, introducing Captain James Holden, his crew, and Detective Miller as they unravel a horrifying solar-system-wide conspiracy that begins with a single missing girl. A kick-ass space opera of interplanetary action-adventure.

Steve: ***Left Turn at Albuquerque***, by Scott Phillips. Crime fiction. Zippy, fun noir tale centering on an art-forgery scheme.

Kelly: ***The Splendid and the Vile***, by Erik Larson. Military. An intimate chronicle of Winston Churchill, his family, and London during the Blitz. An inspiring portrait of courage and leadership in a time of unprecedented crisis. All about how Churchill taught the British people the art of being fearless.

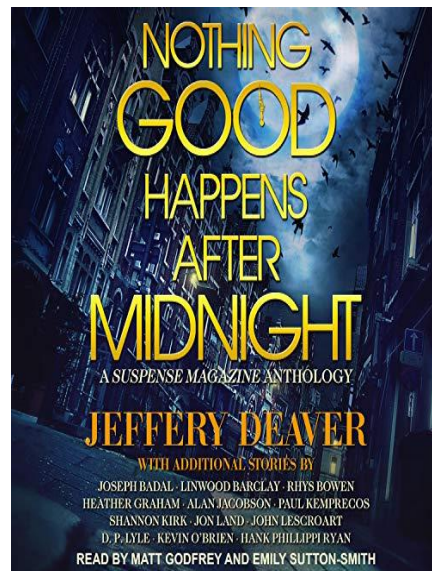
SinC Reaches Out

Acting Executive Director Julie Hennrikus reminds all you Sisters out there that SinC has a lot going on. Be sure to visit the website regularly, especially the [Calendar](#), for updates and for any chapter events that are open to the entire membership.

Have you found a way to “level up” your writing craft or business recently? Tried something new? Dumped an old tactic? Changed some aspect of how you run your writing life? Started over? We’d like to hear about it for a future issue of *inSinC*!

Joe Badal Checks In

“Imprisoned at home during the last year has been positive in at least one respect: I’ve spent even more time on writing than I usually did. I finished two manuscripts which have passed the editing process and are now in the hands of my publisher. *The Carnevale Conspiracy*, the 7th in my Danforth Saga series, will be released this spring. The 4th book in my Lassiter/Martinez Case Files series, *Everything to Lose*, will be released in late 2021. I am currently working on the 4th book in my Curtis Chronicles series (as yet untitled).” For more, go to www.josephbadalbooks.com. (Ed note: And don’t forget Joe’s contribution to the anthology, *Nothing Good Happens After Midnight*: <https://amzn.to/38KQWX6>)



What Some C&D Members are Reading – And Writing

I entered my latest book (*Murder at the Petroglyphs*) in the NM Press Women Communication contest last year. It won First Place in the Adult Novel division. With that win, I was eligible to enter the National Federation of Press Women Communication contest. They notified me by email that I was a “winner” in that contest, and would find out my “placing” at their national convention—except with the COVID restrictions, they couldn’t actually have a national convention. So, in June, they held a Zoom meeting for all the Winners to find out where they ranked in the contest.

After sitting in front of my computer, on Zoom, trying really hard not to show impatience or lack of a smile for two hours, they FINALLY got to the “W’s”. But by that time, I could already account for First, Second, and Third place in my category, so, as I knew it would be, they announced me as “Honorable Mention.” I don’t know if that sounds better than Fourth Place or not, but there it all is! Still, being a finalist in a national contest was exciting while it lasted!!!

—Pat Wood

I read mostly cozy mysteries with humor, but some of my favorites are actually police procedurals by Steven F. Havill. Last one of his that I read was *Out of Season*. I have lots more to go, and I can’t wait to read more. He tells a good story and knows how to reveal the mystery as it evolves and still keep the reader’s attention.

Some books I’ve read in the last year include Connie Shelton’s Samantha Sweet series (I just finished book 6), *The Unhoneymooners* by Christina Lauren (a really funny romance reminiscent of Sophie Kinsella), and *No Escape Claws* (the sixth book in Sofie Ryan’s Second Chance Cat Mystery series).

I haven’t worked on writing anything in the last year, so I have nothing but excuses on that front.

—Stefanie Pepin

I’ve been staring at my “find a spot on the shelves for these” pile, which is where books land when they (finally) graduate from the life-threatening gravity challenge—my TBR pile(s). The “find a spot” pile seems pitifully small this January. Hmmm. This calls for investigation.

Okay, investigation complete and face-palm administered.

The pile is tiny because most of my reading in 2020 (all 97 months of it) came from the NM-AZ Book Awards and/or our neighborhood branch library. Book Awards books—about 175 of them—went back to Book Awards Central, to be sent on to other judges. So, lots of great, interesting, or tolerable books and only a few of the “for this you killed a tree??!” entries. And my quick skim of my library reading history list shows I binged on historical and science NF.

Since I’m also a Book Bub member, I grabbed lots of near-giveaway e-books, which I will eventually get around to reading.

Which leaves my much-neglected TBR pile, which I otherwise would have devoured in 2020. On New Year’s Day I was officially four years behind with Louise Penny (Inspector Gamache/Three Pines contemporary police procedurals, set in Quebec, Canada), Donna Leon (Inspector Brunetti contemporary police procedurals, set in Venice), and Craig Johnson (Sheriff Longmire contemporary police procedurals set in Wyoming—not to ever be confused with the TV series using the same names and absolutely nothing else). I’m three years behind on my other favorites: Colin Cotterill (Dr. Siri humorous historical, set in 1970s Laos, with a very large dose of magical realism/paranormal elements), Christopher Fowler (Bryant & May humorous police anti-procedurals about the Peculiar Crimes Unit that investigates weird stuff that other units won’t touch), and Andrea Camilleri (Inspector Montalbano contemporary/humorous police procedurals set in Mafia-infested southern Italy).

If you are more inclined to stream than read at the moment, I highly recommend both the Montalbano and Brunetti series—excellent acting and production values, and faithful to the character and narrative arcs of the books.

What I have NOT been reading—all your books that are part of the Great Library Adventure. Before you get too huffy, please note that I want those 120+ books to look as wonderful a few thousand more miles down the road as they did when you handed them to me. I do own a few of your books, but, you know...budget. And I know that many of you do not get free or cheap copies from your publishers, so I don’t want the expense to land on you instead of me.

Peace and chocolates (as in, take deep breaths and enjoy life’s little treats), Sisters and Misters. Keep looking forward (because we don’t want to know whether they’re gaining on us).

—Ann Zeigler

Level Best Books just re-released my first mystery: *Dying to Be Beautiful: Without A Head*. Book two, *Fashion Queen*, will be published in the spring. I had originally self-published them along with two more books in the series. LBB is also the publisher of my mystery series, "The Senior Sleuths." Book 3, *Dead in THAT Beach House*, was released in December.

Also, I will be a co-presenter for a six session series on "About Being An Author," for The National Steinbeck Center beginning mid-February or early March as well as being a mentor/coach for their "Day of Writing."

—Marcia Rosen

www.theseniorsleuths.com

www.levelbestbooks.com

www.creativebookconcepts.com

The American Bar Association honors women attorneys annually with The Margaret Brent Award, though little is known about her. Born in England in 1601, Lady Margaret Brent left no diaries, letters, or journals. Except for the one-hundred plus court cases she presented that have been recorded in the Maryland State Archives, all other research about her is tangential.

My work in progress is a historical biography novel of this Catholic woman's fight for life and voice in a male dominated Protestant world, and how her judicial knowledge saved the early settlers of Maryland from ruin. Working Title: *The Spinster, the Rebel, and the Governor: Lady Margaret Brent, America's First Woman of Law 1638-1648*.

What I've been reading:

Croak & Dagger Members' Books (13 to date).

The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek by Kim Richardson (I highly recommend this one. Based on the project to get library books to the Kentucky Hill People.)

The Dutch House by Ann Patchett (Very different--strange obsessive family behaviors over a house. If you're up for something unusual, give it a try.)

This Tender Land by William Kent Krueger (Here's a well-written romp through an unfortunate childhood in the late 1940s or maybe it was early 1950s)

My Dear Hamilton by Stephanie dray and Laura Kamole (Well written historical novel)

A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles (I didn't like other books by this author, but this one has become my all time favorite. A gentleman is

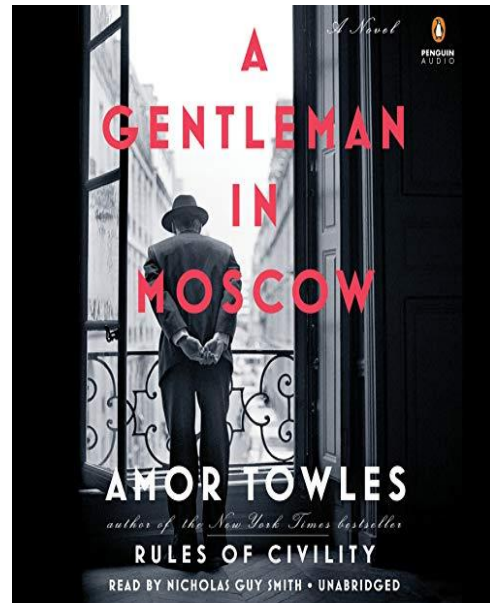
restricted to spend the rest of his life inside a first-class hotel in Moscow, or die.)

From the 20-some others I've read in the last 12 months, these five are exceptionally well written.

Oh, I did get a small recognition from RMMWA. I was one of five finalists in their six-word mystery-crime contest for: *Genealogist discovered dead in cemetery*.

I didn't win, but I should have because I used only five words! ☺

—Charlene Dietz



Some books I read this past year:

Once Upon Stilettoes by Shanna Swendsen

Witch is When Everything Went Crazy by Adele Abbott

Inspector Hobbes and the Curse by Wilkie Martin

Shattered Alliance by Benjamin Wallace

Most of the books above are paranormal mysteries, but the one I liked best was *Witch is When Everything Went Crazy*. It's the second in a series and a fast read. I was unable to put it down. The protagonist is a P.I. who finds out she's a witch and as she learns the trade, she investigates and uses some of her new spells to help her out.

As for writing: My latest work in progress is a fantasy novel about a girl and her dragon. Mara and her dragon Thor are trying to stop the war that has started between her and her beau's countries. Both living on opposite sides of the border, they grew up and shared many adventures as kids. Now she has to save her true love and her brother and his dragon.

—Valerie Abeyta



I changed the title of the 3rd book in my Cookie Baker Mystery series.

The original title was *A Halloween Cookie*, but in the end, the manuscript simply did not work as a stand-alone holiday mystery. I have been writing and editing the manuscript through lockdown 2020 and it is now titled *A Broken Cookie*.

Significant changes had to be made, shifting sections of the book and creating a better flow. I hope to have it up on Amazon within a few weeks.

All my mysteries are under my pen name, Joanna Blalock, and I have received at least one 5-star review on Amazon for each previous novel.

—Kay Shaw

Authors depend on reviews, so if you enjoyed anything you read by any of our local authors—post a positive review on Amazon!

I've been reading a lot of mysteries, of course (see page 11) and finding some new authors (believe it or not, I hadn't read anything by Tami Hoag before her excellent *The Bitter Season*.)

But I've also read some good nonfiction, particularly by Erik Larson, whose *Dead Wake*, about the sinking of the Lusitania, was wonderful. I'm currently in the middle of his *The Splendid and the Vile*, about Churchill during the Blitz. Larson has a knack for putting the reader right into the time and place. Wish I could do that.

In non-mystery novels, I loved *A Gentleman in Moscow* when I read it a few years ago, but also liked (pace, Charlene) his *The Rules of Civility* and its short follow-up, *Eve in Hollywood*.

As for writing... what can I say. My second cozy mystery (w/a Elly Kirsten) is three-quarters done, but I don't seem to be able to manage that last stretch. Sigh. Remind me occasionally to get at it. It's called *She Died Young*.

I did, however, win two thirds and a first prize in two contests last year, with Western mystery short stories and am currently submitting them to whatever markets I can find (not a lot for historical mysteries).

—Linda Triegel

Sharing the Web (from Pat Wood):

1. Lee Lofland puts out an interesting blog.
2. You might want to sign up to receive it.
3. It has some good writing tips in it.
4. If you've ever been interested in attending the Writers Police Academy (but didn't have the bucks to do it), check it out.

The current issue of Lee's blog contains good advice for writers on avoiding too many 'ly' words (adverbs). "Words ending in 'ly' are often redundant and quite frankly, unnecessary. They can slow the reader and are often so jarring they could stop the flow of the story. Is it possible to draw on personal experiences and then to write those powerful scenes without the use of 'ly' words?"

Lee also throws in information about an up-and-coming online event. **January 23, 2021**, is the date for this event with the Writers Police Academy. If you are interested in taking part, click on the link available in Lee's blog post. I hope a bunch of you will do it! It should be interesting.

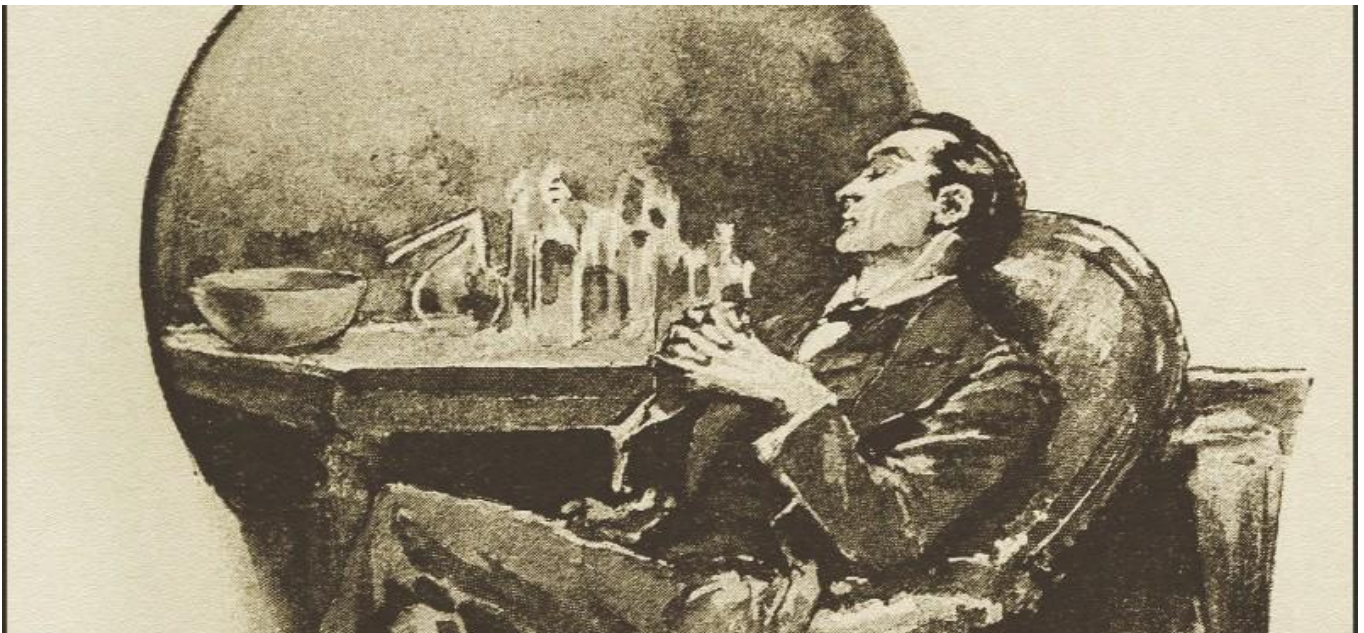
For more, go to:

<https://leelofland.com/he-angrily-and-loudly-and-a-bit-threateningly-said-stop-using-so-many-ly-words/>

‘Funny how?’ Why Comedy is Crucial in Crime Writing

by Christopher Fowler

Excerpted from the Crime Reads website. For more, go to: <https://crimereads.com/funny-how-why-comedy-is-crucial-in-crime-writing/>



From the earliest days of crime fiction, humor has always been one of the author's most important weapons.

The first stage play I ever saw was Joe Orton's *Loot*, which probably warped my view of the British police forever. The farce involves a much-stolen corpse and naked bank robbers, and features Inspector Truscott of the Yard, an appallingly cheerful copper who specialises in outright lies, burglary and violence. I found him hilarious.

Comedy is tricky ground for crime writers. Slapstick travels but wit does not. If American humor was always benign, a belly-laugh and a pie in the face, on my side of the Atlantic it was harder to pin down; semiotically dense, anarchic and best when bleak, or at least rather cruel. The perfect English insult is one where you walk away thinking you've been complimented. The English love to laugh at human weakness, sex, death, embarrassment, sarcasm, class, money and selfishness. No wonder humor can be used to such good effect in crime novels.

Creating a funny character is one thing, but consciously setting out to write a witty crime novel is another matter altogether. Humour must emerge organically; you can't simply parachute characters into a funny situation. It also requires a moral viewpoint, if only so that morality can then be flung aside. The tragedy of sudden death and its investigation needs to be treated with gravity, the humour confined to those who have no idea that they're amusing. People are at their most ridiculous when they're desperately serious.

How do you get humor to evolve naturally in a story?

It helps to have the right mindset. I'd recommend a sense of amused resignation. And you need the right location. It's impossible to hang out in London and not have stories to tell. Exaggerated versions of my own experiences usually find their way into stories. So much of my childhood was spent in central London that I grew up thinking Hyde Park was the countryside. We were surrounded by people who seemed normal but became eccentric when they got into scrapes.

London's 2,000-year history is packed with improbable incidents, which are useful for adding colour. A vast amount of historical and geographical research goes into each volume. When I stumble across a press headline that says, 'Fish and chip shop sells cocaine,' it emerges in the book as:

'We're raiding a funeral parlour? That's nice, isn't it? Perhaps we should follow it with a spot of go-karting round the local crematorium.'

I genuinely had no clue as to whether the first book—never intended to be a series—would find an audience. I suspected it was too esoteric to succeed. Bryant & May (named after a British matchbox) are now approaching their 20th book together. Virtually every case they've investigated has factual roots, and the most unbelievable ones are often the truest. *The Bleeding Heart* has its basis in a grisly local legend that sprang up in Bleeding Heart Yard, just a short walk from my apartment.

It's an unwritten law that comic crime should avoid topicality, but I've thrown in all kinds of time-specific incidents, from London's terrorist attacks and anti-capitalist riots to the release of undocumented immigrants. A realistic background can help you get away with murder. There are no supernatural elements, no unfair tricks, just diversionary tactics and sleight of hand in bizarre situations. After all, the cases unfold in a city where chapels are sold off as

nightclubs, where councils plot to steal parks from children, where residents still tie coloured ribbons on the gates of the Cross Bones, an 18th century prostitutes' graveyard in a Catholic enclave. Sometimes the only response is dark laughter.

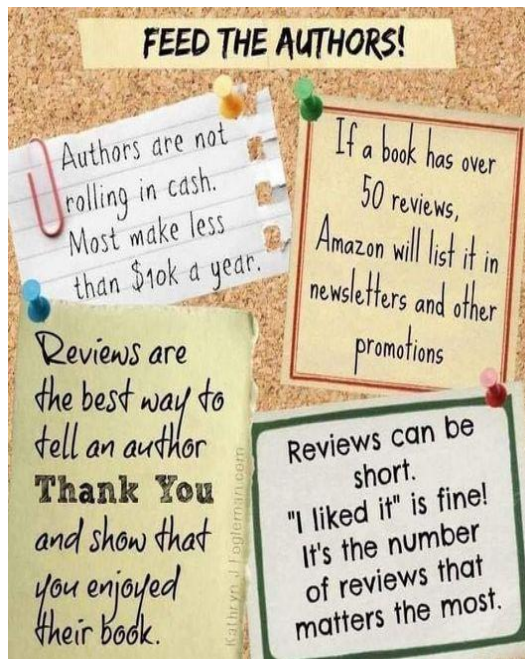
Of course you can get away with anything if you say it with a straight face, which partly explains the power of Agatha Christie—and especially Sherlock Holmes. The Holmes adventures had little veracity. Men went raving mad in locked rooms, or died of fright for no discernible reason. Women were simply unknowable. And even when you found out how it was done or who did it, what kind of lunatic would choose to kill someone by sending a rare Indian snake down a bell-pull? Who in their right mind would come up with the idea of hiring a ginger-haired man to copy out books in order to provide cover for a robbery? What was once deadly serious is now highly amusing.



We still enjoy Hercule Poirot because, like Holmes, he ushers us into a lost world. Christie loved her colonels, housemaids, vicars, flighty debutantes and dowager duchesses. But at the time when they were written surely nobody found them realistic. At least Conan Doyle's solutions possessed a kind of strange Victorian plausibility, whereas Christie's murder victims apparently received dozens of visitors in the moments before they died, queuing up outside their bedrooms like cheap flights, and her victims were killed by doctored pots of jam, guns attached to bits of string, poisoned trifles and knives on springs.

You can't get away with this old nonsense in the present day, of course, but personalities don't change. Dickens' characters are still all around us, their traits infinitely reincarnated. IAs my detectives revel in their own mortality they're licensed to use plenty of dry graveyard humor. However, I'm careful to respect victims and honor them over villains. There needs to be serious intent underpinning droll events.

Comic crime gets overlooked by critics who mistakenly assume it must trivialise the unfolding drama. With correct handling the reverse is true; it can highlight everything that's surreal and absurd about criminals and their investigators. In *Oranges & Lemons* I started by studying London's nursery rhymes and ended up exploring the history of religious insurrection. If the story is a good one, there's room for both topics.



Crime novels can use comedy to expose flaws instead of confirming beliefs, leaving readers with plenty of food for thought. A sense of humor is integral to life's balancing act, but it also needs to be kept in check. I vary the level according to the plot, constructing ridiculous situations around serious crimes. If you don't like the jokes you can stay for the drama.

My favorite funny fiction comes from wayward characters in impossible situations. I remember reading a PG Wodehouse story in which two inept twits kidnap a child in order to rescue him and impress a girl, but manage to kidnap the wrong child, and an obscure Spanish story in which thieves choose to steal a painting they've picked from an art book, not realizing how enormous 'Guernica' is. Both involve crimes exacerbated by the misguided intentions of the lawbreakers and accelerated by panic. The Coen brothers have always understood how crucial it is for their audience to know more than the players, so when an incriminating cigarette lighter is left at a crime scene in 'Blood Simple' we scream, 'Pick it up, you idiot!' They're not afraid of tackling existential epiphanies either, as private dick M Emmett Walsh is left to die on a bathroom floor, knowing that the last sight in his grubby life will be the underside of a sink.

I never regard my own crime novels as outright comedies because they tend to have tragic elements that arise from the way I work. The first draft is always serious, and the comedy arrives several drafts later. My most overtly comic crime novel, *Plastic*, was based on a true story told to me by a friend who looked after a high rise apartment for the weekend and found herself facing a possible stalker in an eerie blacked-out building. My heroine had an absurdly optimistic mindset that kept the story light. It would have been too easy (and lazy) to write a standard woman-in-peril thriller. An interesting, contradictory character can always provide comic possibilities.

There's an image that always springs to mind when I'm starting a new Bryant & May novel; London office workers on their summer lunch breaks, eating sandwiches while sitting on top of tombstones. Strange histories are all around them, but they fail to notice that their lunch park is a graveyard. The comedy is already there in the people and places surrounding us—it just needs to be brought out and stirred into a suitably dark brew.

Reviews

Playing with Fire by Tess Gerritsen. Ballantine Books, 2015, 284 pp (PB).

Violinist Julia Ansdell finds an old book of gypsy tunes in an antique store in Rome and takes it home to Boston. There's a loose sheet of music in it too, with a handwritten waltz that Julia tries to play, only to come up short when the mysterious tune seems to cause an appalling reaction in her 3-year-old daughter. Still, she can't stop wondering about the music and starts to investigate its origins. Who composed it? How did it get to the antique store? Was it ever played?

The plot, which apparently began life as a novella from Julia's POV, now jumps back and forth between her modern-day life and the years just before and during WWII in Italy, when composer Lorenzo Todesco, a Jew, finds his life turned upside down by the Fascist regime.

It's an exciting story, with unexpected twists and turns, that make it hard to put down. There are elements of the supernatural, historical romance, and thriller, including War-time horrors, proving (again) that Gerritsen is a really good writer, even if you never read a Rizzoli & Isles novel. Not only that, she's a musician, so that the passages describing the "Incendio" waltz that Julia struggles to master, seem exactly right. ♦

An Unmarked Grave by Charles Todd. William Morrow, 2012, 262 pp (TP)

This is the fourth of the Bess Crawford historical mysteries by the mother-and-son team writing as Charles Todd, but you don't need to have read the previous novels to enjoy this one.

Bess is a nursing sister serving in France during World War 1. She's very good at her job, but it takes its toll. In fact, she comes down with the Spanish flu at the start of this story and is invalidated home.

However, she is stricken just after learning that the body of an officer she knew had been hidden in plain sight among the other corpses scheduled for burial at her aid station. Bess can see immediately that Major Carson did not die

of wounds or disease, but was murdered. Ill herself, she cannot investigate until she recovers—when she learns that the orderly who showed her Carson's body is also dead.

There's rather too much back-and-forth between France and England as Bess goes home, goes back, investigates in one locale, then another, etc. The plot gets a bit convoluted as well (fewer twists and turns might have reined it in a bit), and if the villain was mentioned early on, I missed it. Nonetheless, the action is compelling and the writing excellent, and I got very engrossed in Bess's adventures. ♦

The Norfolk Mystery by Ian Sansom. Harper Collins, 2017 (PB)

After a promising start, introducing an intriguing protagonist who you think could propel a mystery story along, nothing much moves in this novel.

Stephen Sefton, a disillusioned veteran of the Spanish Civil War, gets a job he needs, as assistant to a well-known (except to him) writer, Swanton Morley. "The People's Professor," as Morley bills himself, has set out to write guide-books to all the counties of England, starting with Norfolk. (No surprise that Swanton Morley is an actual village in that county.)

Morley sets a frenetic pace, only to come to a halt when the vicar of Blakeney is found hanging from a bell rope in his own church, and both men are drawn into the mystery. Did the reverend really take his own life, or is there something darker afoot?

This should have been an enjoyable Christie-style 1930s murder mystery, but Dame A was better at plotting and even characters (not something I ever admired her for). Morley, inclined to Latin quotations at every opportunity, gets tiresome fast. He occasionally stumbles on an insight, and once in a while is actually funny, but he never changes. Nor does poor plodding Stephen, who might have been the real detective on the case, but he's kind of a one-note character too. The solution to the crime comes and goes with little fanfare.

Too bad. This is a likely premise for a series, if Stephen would just develop a backbone and a little more curiosity. ♦

Purrfect Murder by Nic Saint. Kindle edition, 2017, 232 pp in PB.

The hero of this series, Max, is a pudgy ginger cat with one outstanding talent—he can communicate with his human, Odelia Poole. Odelia is a reporter for the newspaper in their small town, a calling that Max, your typical curious cat, identifies with to the point of helping Odelia get her exclusive scoops.

When the body of a famous writer is discovered in an outhouse (of all places), Max and Odelia are on the scent (well, Max is; Odelia just asks questions). However, a new policeman has joined the local force, and (of course) he and Odelia are quickly at odds, Chase being the bossy type (with a bossy black cat named Brutus), and Odelia being, let's face it, incorrigible.

This is the first in this cozy mystery series by a husband-and-wife writing team. I like cat and dog characters well enough, but Max's communication abilities push things a bit far. The writing is serviceable at best, but looking at the "also by Nic Saint" list in the front of the book, it seems clear that the pair are racing through one book just to get started on the next of their scores of titles. (*Purrfect* is #1 of 29!) ♦



'We've moved a few things around. Travel books are in the Fantasy section, Politics is in Sci-Fi, and Epidemiology is in Self-Help. Good luck.'

The Coconut Killings by Patricia Moyes. An Owl Book (Henry Holt & Co), 1977, 211 pp (PB)

This is one of the author's Inspector Henry Tibbett classic mystery series. In *The Coconut Killings*, Tibbett and his wife Emmy travel to the British Seaward Islands as a favor to a friend who owns a hotel there. Fortunately, Henry has an excuse to meddle, as he's also under orders from Scotland Yard to investigate the murder there of a U.S. Senator, which seems to be tied up with a scandal involving the international cotton-growing business.

That incipient scandal serves to make this situation more urgent on the fictional St. Matthew's Island, but you can ignore it otherwise. The important plot is that a friend of the Tibbetts' friends is accused of the murder. The Colvilles are convinced he's innocent and ask Henry to prove it.

The Yard had arranged for Henry and Emmy to stay at the exclusive golf club on the island, where the senator was killed, but they prefer the warmer atmosphere of the Colvilles' Anchorage Inn (much to the disgust of the doyenne of the golf club). Instead Henry sends his sergeant, Derek Reynolds, to stay at the club, undercover, posing as a wealthy English philatelist (snootier than "stamp collector") to find out what he can.

The plot thickens nicely before the exciting ending. I was sorry that Emmy didn't get to take more part in the proceedings, as she has done before in the series, but Henry makes up for that by consulting Lucy, an elderly friend who knows everyone on the islands and can ferret out plenty of useful gossip. ♦

—Linda Triegel (ljt23@earthlink.net)

C&D Members!

Your *Nooseletter* wants to hear all about that terrific mystery you just read. Email reviews to Ye Editor at the address on page 2.

2021 MEETING DATES

NOTE: Due to the current pandemic, all meetings are cancelled until further notice.

Member Coordinator Pat Wood will continue to update you by email, And your Nooseletter will be sent every two months as usual.

Future meetings are tentatively scheduled for fourth Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m., at Sandia Presbyterian Church, 10704 Paseo del Norte. Park in back of the building and enter by the back door.

Check our Web site, www.croak-and-dagger.com, for any new schedule changes and upcoming programs.

Summary of Findings

The *Nooseletter* is the internal organ of the Croak & Dagger (New Mexico) chapter of Sisters in Crime (SinC). Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and editors.

Nooseletter Submissions†

Croak & Dagger friends are encouraged to contribute articles, reviews, and essays on aspects of mystery writing *and* reading for publication consideration. Especially let us know if you have published a new book or story, or have an upcoming local author event. (Unbridled enthusiasm for your own mystery book is encouraged here.)

Length: Articles should average 500 words, but short items and ideas for sources are also welcome.

Deadlines: Publication is every other month, starting in January. Submission deadlines are the last day of the month *prior* to publication: Feb 28, April 30, June 30, Aug 31, Oct 31, and Dec 31.

The Living and the Dead: As a general policy, articles and information should focus on living authors rather than dead ones, but that's not set in concrete shoes. Articles about specific historical development of the crime-mystery writing genre, for example, would be welcome.

Submissions: Please submit via e-mail to newsette@earthlink.net, with "Nooseletter" in the subject line. The *Nooseletter* is distributed to all members electronically.

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