

Volume I, Number 1—January, 2005 ALBUQUERQUE CHAPTER SISTERS in CRIME

DAG & DAG

† Expert Testimony †

—A word from our President

In 2003, I'd just pulled onto the road to publication. Sure, the publishing contract sat in my office, but there'd be no book in hand for nearly a year. The few authors I knew, advised me to start attending mystery conventions. It seemed like a frivolous, expensive idea. You see, I'd spent so much time and money networking with editors and agents, I saw no reason to do the same with mystery readers and authors. Why bother?

Only semi-convinced, I went to Left Coast Crime in Pasadena, CA. From the moment I stepped into the host hotel's lobby, I understood. Within seconds, I struck up a conversation with two women in line behind me. They embodied the mystery enthusiast—both read more than two hundred books annually. They loved discovering new authors. They loved talking and learning and experiencing mysteries. Ahead of me, a tall redheaded woman joined our chat. "Did you say you're going to be published?" she said.

I nodded. "Congratulations!" She gave me a big hug. "Another author welcomed me into the fold and I've been waiting three years to do it for someone else," she said.

Her warm response—as well as the dozens of others I experienced that weekend—persuaded me that the mystery community is a marvelous one indeed.

I joined Sisters in Crime soon thereafter. At first, I didn't understand why an organization like SinC needed to exist. Didn't women authors have the same successes as men? I've learned that the answer to that question is a systematic NO. Perhaps in another letter, I'll discuss some of those inequities.

Today, I want to stress something just as important. Sisters in Crime is unique for its inclusiveness. It's a community of lovers, mystery lovers. Unlike a professional trade organization with requirements for levels of membership, SinC is egalitarian. No associate or junior members here.

Last October, we began the adventure of starting a SinC chapter in Albuquerque. For three months, a dedicated group of mystery admirers worked to make sure we could sustain this endeavor. Now, we've got a great, hardworking board and a diverse, fun membership. The proposed list for our programs truly has—pardon the cliché—something for everyone.

Next month, we'll meet in our new regular location—the best of all possible places—a police substation!

My gratitude goes to every person who has helped us launch the Sisters in Crime Croak & Dagger chapter. And, my sincere invitation and welcome go to every mystery reader, writer, fan and friend who will help us keep this wonderful genre a vital part of our community.

> Cheers to you all, Pari Noskin Taichert, President Sisters in Crime Croak & Dagger chapter

EDITORS' COMMENTS-

The Nooseletter provides a forum for the membership as well as being a device for official announcements of policies and operations of our Croak & Dagger chapter. That's not all, of course.

We hope that our members will submit essays and articles, via e-mail, for possible inclusion in future issues. We are looking for content with balanced emphasis on the different aspects of the mystery genre; e.g., the reading of mysteries as well as the process of writing them.

Of course, we will emphasize the role of women in the world of mystery publication, mindful that the main goal of SinC is to promote women authors. Even in 2005 they're still not getting fair treatment from the publishing powers-that-be.

We'll also try to include timely notification of upcoming events such as readings, signings, conferences and workshops. Let us know when you learn of any, and we'll get the word out to the membership.

We'll start by publishing electronically every-other month. *The Nooseletter* will arrive on your cyber-step as an attachment in Microsoft Word ".doc" format. If you have "special needs," please let us know. We'll try to accommodate. A few hard copies will be available at each general meeting.

The Nooseletter, in the beginning at least, will be a basic black-and-white product—without frills—no scratch-'n-sniff. If you want to know what your sister-brother members look like, attend meetings.

Submission Guidelines—Essays/articles should be 500 words or less. In the "subject" line of your e-mail put the words: "Nooseletter Submission." You may submit either in the text of the message or as an attachment. The editors reserve the right to reject, accept, amend, alter, revise, cut, etc. —Ed.

OP-ED —THE GALLOWS TRAP DOOR— When I Am Old, I Shall Read Mysteries

—by Page Erwin

Who is reading mysteries anyway? People of all ages, you might think. Well, according to a recent study put out by AGS, (Applied Geographic Solutions) approximately 10% of the US population reads mysteries. Those of you who write mysteries may judge that statistic misleading since mystery fans are fiercely loyal and they buy books avariciously, but that's beside the point.

The Tactician Corp. studies various American cities in terms of consumer behavior and did a detailed study of Dallas, TX. (See www.tactician.com). In Dallas, 7.3 % of the population had read a mystery in 2002. The national figure for the same period was 9.3%. The percentage of Dallas folk who read one or more novels was 10.6%, while the national rate was 13.1%. Children's books, mysteries and cook books trailed close behind.

Nationwide, the primary site for purchase of books was the book store at 24.3%, followed by department stores (6.3%), book club (5.7%). Surprisingly, despite all the whineging and hand-wringing by bookstore owners over Amazon.com, Alibris, and others, books purchased via mail order came in at 4.1%, less than we expected. Other purchase points included super markets and drug stores. Libraries weren't included, since the survey focused on sales. Locally, we've observed libraries in ABQ doing a brisk business at all hours.

Comparable readership statistics are not available here in the Duke City (too small a number to measure, no doubt). So, for purposes of this article, we've used anecdotal methods based on observation.

We attended several readings by mystery authors. Featured writers included James Lee Burke, Michael McGarrity, Judith Van Gieson, J.A. Jance, P.J. Tracy (mother and daughter), Aimee and David Thurlo, Pari Noskin Taichert and others. Audiences were dominated by persons over fifty, and most of *them* were over sixty.

Let's be fair. We actually sighted one teenager at Judith Van Gieson's signing. Dressed as a "Goth," she spent most of the time snuggling up to her main squeeze on the upholstered back bench at Page One. Maybe she was a relative of Judith and wanted to be in the will. The only youthful person at P.N. Taichert's reading was "Herself."

So, what is the future of the mystery genre? Let's try to put it into perspective. For one thing, we think the ageing of the audience is part of a much larger movement away from artistic and literary forms which make demands upon the imagination. For a number of reasons, too numerous to discuss here, the generations below age fifty are held in thrall by The Visual and The Instant—double-click on the icon, push the button, wiggle the joystick—group-think. Too many of them lack the desire to create and compete. These ways of learning and doing require little to no imagination and are largely passive.

Is it any surprise that, when we attended a chamber music concert at a local private school last year, we found ourselves, in our mid-sixties, among the youngest attendees? The Erwin (male) half of Page Erwin vowed never to go back.

"Too many old people—too depressing—humbug," said he. Could the audience for classical music be marching down the long tunnel toward the dazzling white light? And how does this relate to the market for fiction and mysteries?

Turn on Public Television during the fund-raiser, which, lately, is most of the time. You can inhale giant whiffs of Lawrence Welk, Yanni, Michael McDonald, Irish stepdancing, and "Broadway's Lost Treasures." All are geared to elicit funds from seniors. What ever happened to Maigret, Cadfael and Adam Dalgleish? Well, about a dozen years ago, PBS management made a conscious decision to abandon its traditional audience. In order to survive, it yielded to pressure from Congress to appeal to the common denominator of prevailing public taste rather than futilely attempt to elevate it. At present, PBS can't even find support for a Hillerman mystery.

We could play this game of "Ain't It Awful" indefinitely—the demise of the Classical Age of Arts, Letters and Music. Well, maybe it *is* dead, or maybe it isn't. There's no way of knowing for certain whether or not we're living in the midst of a major shift in our cultural foundations.

Another thirty years and perhaps no one will be left to care about it. Who says human nature constantly strives upward? Example: once the Romans withdrew their occupation forces from Britain in the fifth century, the indigenous natives set about dismantling the infrastructure. They got rid of the conveniences of indoor plumbing, baths and running water in favor of trudging to the well and emptying the honey bucket out the second storey window. Couldn't wait, it seems, to get themselves buried in the Dark Ages for the next thousand years or so.

Let's forget the big picture. We can't stop the outgoing tide of civilization, if, indeed, that's what's going on. Our best guess is that the popularity of the mystery genre may actually increase by a few percentage points over the next decade. A growing percentage of the population is migrating into the oversixty category. They'll have more leisure time in which to read as they seek balance and justice in their lives, a need fulfilled by reading and enjoying mysteries.

"Detective stories keep alive a view of the world that ought to be true. They contain a dream of justice. They protect a vision of the world in which wrongs are righted, and villains are betrayed by clues that they did not know they were leaving... A world in which murderers are caught and hanged and innocent victims are avenged... Of course people read them for fun, for diversion... But underneath they feed a hunger for justice." —*Thrones, Dominations.* Dorothy L. Sayers & Jill Paton Walsh. For only twenty dollars a year, you can become one of us. Enjoy the benefits of book discounts, free book exchange, guest speakers, and, best of all, good company! Croak & Dagger

The Cairn of Albertus WRITE IT RIGHT

Just the facts, Ma'm, but get 'em right!

In writing historical novels and re-creating a past era, an author generally is dependent on two literary sources: Secondary and Primary. I list secondary sources first because these are the most common historical references available, written by authors who have read original sources and are transmitting a more or less useful version to the general reader. For novels set in Greek or Roman times, primary sources might not be available in English translation, but this should be the subject of another column.

When I decided to set my first novel, The Saint's Day Deaths, at Mainz, Germany, A.D. 406, the definitive event was that the Rhine River froze solid on New Year's Eve of that year and allowed three barbarian tribes to flood across from Germania and invade Gaul. That fact alone seemed like a good basis for a plot. I read several books on the late Roman Empire, the barbarian invasions, and a primary source, The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354-378) by the Roman historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, readily available in the Penguin Classics series. Historically, Burgundians sacked Mainz in 412, so there wasn't much else to write about there. I hated to waste all that research, so I jumped ahead to A.D. 439 and set my second novel at Ravenna, Italy, then the capital of the Western Roman Empire. That, of course, entailed a whole new set of researches. For example, the port of Ravenna back then was directly on the Adriatic Sea; today it's a port located three miles from the sea and reached by a ship canal. Since very little was written about ancient Ravenna, I convinced my wife, Jennifer, that we should visit Italy (which took very little persuading) and found sources unavailable elsewhere.

What's my point in all this? I had written a rabbi into the plot, David ben Zadok. In one scene the Empress Mother, Galla Placidia, calls him in to evaluate an ancient papyrus. It's November, cold and damp, and she offers him a cup of hot, mulled wine, which ben Zadok accepts. After all, she's the power behind the throne, her son Valentinian III pretty much being a selfabsorbed ninny. Turns out my editor at Toby Press was an Israeli woman, who said, "Whoa, there, don't you know about *kashrut*, the Jewish kosher laws? The rabbi would have refused the wine." I protested, "Yeah, but she's the Empress of the Western Roman Empire. Wouldn't he have felt obligated not to insult her?" "No," she insisted, "he would politely turn her down and explain why." OK. That gave Placidia a chance to be a bit sarcastic about "the peculiarities if your religion," and me to set up potential friction between them.

In the novels I avoid the term "Jew," which I've never liked. "Judeans" is the word I use. That derives from Judaea, a biblical and Roman designation for the area, that was used until A.D. 135, when Hadrian changed the name to Palestina as punishment for the Second Revolt.

One invaluable secondary source is Michael Grant's *The Jews in the Roman World*. Grant recently passed away, after leaving a legacy of several dozen books on the Classical world. —Albert Nover

Croak and Dagger

COMING EVENTS—

On January 27th, multipublished local author and former UNM President **Richard E. Peck** will speak to us on crime novels and thrillers. He is the author of the recently published *Strategy of Terror*, a sure-handed spy story that follows the efforts of a lone American in Italy to thwart a heinous crime planned for Christmas Eve at the Vatican. His crime novel, *Dead Pawn*, is set in Albuquerque and is reminiscent of the best work of Elmore Leonard. Richard is also the author of a young adult novel, a book of photos of New Mexico, and a book of photos and text on the famous golf courses of Scotland. He is, as he says, on many shelves in bookstores and libraries. This talk will be at 7 p.m. in the teacher's lounge of Grant Middle School, corner of Sellers and Easterday NE. Don't confuse our mystery writer with the *other* Richard Peck, the "juvie writer," who's reading at Bound To Be Read that same week. No, no! *Our* Peck is for grown-ups!

At 7 p.m. on February 22nd, we hope to present a doubleheader of out-of-state mystery authors to speak. Easterners **Donna Andrews** and **Clyde Linsley** will address us on the pleasures of creating intriguing plots and the pressures of dealing with publishers' deadlines. Donna writes two series, the Meg Lanslow blacksmith mysteries, and the Turing Hopper detective novels, in which her protagonist is the artificial intelligence inside a computer. Clyde writes the Josiah Beede historical mystery series set in 1830s New England, New Orleans, and Washington, and the Leo McFarlin private eye series set in Washington, DC. They both reside in Virginia and are board members of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of Mystery Writers of America. This will be our first chapter meeting at the police substation east of the intersection of Montgomery and Tramway NE.

In our first quarterly Saturday meeting, former Federal agent **Lucinda Schroeder** will speak to us on 26 March about undercover operations. Lucinda runs "The Crime Connection," a consulting resource for authors and law enforcement professionals, and is the author of a nonfiction book and several articles on everything from profiling murderers to investigative techniques. Her talk will be at 1 p.m. at the police substation. —**Rob Kresge, Program Director**

Send your devious ideas about future guest speakers to Rob: rkresge777@comcast.net

Croak & Dagger Schedule

Executive Board Mtg. Page Erwin (Roy & Cal's) residence on Thursday, January 13th at 7:00 PM. Call 821-9638 or email royandcal@netzero.com for directions to any of these meetings. **General Mtg.** Teachers' Lounge, Grant Middle School, Tuesday, January 25th, 7:00 PM.

General Mtg. Briefing Room, James Joseph Dwyer Mem. Substation, 12700 Montgomery Blvd, ABQ 87111-4215; 7:00 PM, Tuesday, February 22nd, 7:00 PM. **General Mtg.** Briefing Room, James Joseph Dwyer Mem. Substation, Saturday, March 26th, 1:00 PM.

Read From Among the Winners—

At the October Bouchercon in Toronto

Anthony Award:

Best First Novel-*Monkeewrench*, by P.J. Tracy Best Paperback Original-*Deadly Legacy*, by Robin Burcell* Best Historical Mystery-*For the Love of Mike*, Rhys Bowen*

Barry Award:

Best Novel-*Every Secret Thing*, by Laura Lippman* Best First Novel- *Monkeewrench*, by P.J. Tracy Best British Crime Novel- *The Distant Echo*, by Val McDermid Bets Paperback Original-*Tough Luck*, Jason Starr

Macavity Award:

Best Mystery Novel- *The House Sitter* by Peter Lovesy Best First Mystery Novel- *Maisie Dobbs* by Jacqueline Winspear*

*denotes Sisters in Crime members

Local Award Winners:

The South West Sage announces, among the winners of their 2004 SWWCONTESTS: In the Mystery/Suspense/Thriller category, Judged by John Scognamiglio: First Place: Pools of Purple by Judy Castleberry Second Place: Wolves by Rebecca L. Williams Third Place: Desert Winds by Bruce & Pamela Nyman

CONGRATULATIONS!

SCENE OF THE CRIME

Houston, TX, is starting a book festival.

Press kits and books must be in by mid-January. For info go to: <u>http://www.houstonfestivalofbooks.org</u>

LEFT COAST CRIME 2005

El Paso, Texas Feb. 24-27 Contact: Registration, Left Coast Crime 15 2626 N. Mesa, PO Box 261 El Paso, TX 79902 Preconference: L.C.Hayden, <u>Ich@leftcoastcrime2005.com</u>

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY

Salt Lake City, UT

This organization, based in the United Kingdom, is planning its first US conference. **April 15-17**, University Park Marriott. **Conference co-chairs**—historical novelist Ann Chamberlain and Sarah Johnson, coordinating editor of the *Historical Novels Review*. Included will be authors and fans of historical mysteries. <u>www.historicalnovelsociety.org</u>.

MURDER IN THE GROVE 2005

Boise, Idaho June 10-11, with Guest of Honor Carolyn Hart, plus agents, editors, forensic experts, for both readers and writers of mystery fiction. <u>www.murderinthegrove.com</u>

CON MISTERIO

Austin, TX, July21-24, 2005. For program info as it develops, <u>http://www.conmisterio.org</u>

WHO DONE IT?

Results of the *Croak & Dagger* poll of favorite mystery writers of all time. Here are the **TOP TWENTY:**

Agatha Christie Diane Mott Davidson Colin Dexter Sir Arthur C. Doyle **Dick Francis Sue Grafton Elizabeth George** Martha Grimes **Tony Hillerman** P.D. James Ngaio Marsh Marsha Muller Sarah Paretsky **Ann Perrv Elizabeth Peters Ruth Rendell Candace Robb Dorothy Sayers** Susan Slater **Donald Westlake**

LOCAL APPARITIONS

Tuesday, January 18, at 7:00 PM, at the New Life Lutheran Church on Eubank, Albert Noyer will be talking to SWW about writing historical novels. He's one of us, Sisters, so try to be there. His most recent book, a fifth century mystery, *The Secundus Papyrus*, is a great read.
Thursday, January 20, at 7:00 PM—Virginia Swift will read/sign her latest book, *Bye Bye Love*. Bound To Be Read, SanMateo and Academy Blvd.

•Wednesday, **February 2**, at 7:00 PM—**Nancy Atherton** of Aunt Dimity Series fame will be at **Bound To Be Read**. •Thursday, **February 10**, at 7:00 PM—**Carlos Ruiz Zafon**, author of *Shadow of the Wind*, will read/sign at **BookWorks** on Rio Grande Blvd.

•Nothing in our genres is scheduled for **Page One**.

ROB'S RANDOM SHOTS

Bye, Bye, Love by Virginia Swift. HarperCollins. \$24.95. 289 pages

University of Wyoming History Professor (and sometime rocker/lead singer) Sally Alder returns in fine form to catch a killer amid a host of suspects from both sides of political issues in today's West. Rock legend Thomas "Stone" Jackson asks Sally to investigate his ex-wife's affairs at her Wyoming ranch-cumwildlife refuge. Heart set aflutter by her all-time musical idol, Sally agrees. But when she arrives at the ranch on the first day of Wyoming deer hunting season, she is horrified when Jackson's ex, Nina Cruz, a legendary diva in her own right, is gunned down by an unknown assailant.

The cast of suspects includes a doctor who resembles Willy Nelson, vegan staffers of the wildlife foundation Nina was setting up, hunters, even a member of Sally's own bar band. One of the joys of Virginia Swift's novels is the eccentric cast of townspeople that populates Laramie. More than just a small college town where everybody knows everybody else (and everybody's else's business), many Laramie residents are related to each other. From the sheriff who used to be a drug-dealing bartender, his wife the restaurant manager, a nouveau American chef, and a ditsy caterer, to Sally's straight-arrow, ever-reliable boyfriend, Geology Professor Hawk Green, we return to Laramie in each novel to catch up with old friends.

Swift's first mystery, *Brown-Eyed Girl*, introduced us to Sally as she fled West Coast life for small college calm and investigated the career of an early Wyoming feminist. Then, in the aptly named *Bad Company*, Swift used multiple points of view to portray bad guys from paramilitary militia to the self-reliant children of the sheriff.

Bye, Bye, Love continues this tradition, balancing suspects from animal rights movements, avid hunters, old friends and new enemies. Sally is squarely in the middle of not only murder, but a benefit rock concert for Nina's fledgling organization. She is in jeopardy from a prank to real gunfire. Fortunately, Sally puts the clues together just in time before the killer can strike again.

Although these are not "food mysteries," at a recent Albuquerque signing, Swift said she tries to make every sentence "tasty." From phrases like "the Ranchman's Big Breakfast was equivalent to ingesting a pig and a cow, with a side of poultry protein and extra animal fat" to "how the hell could a vegetarian catch mad cow disease?" and "hope can be a brutal instrument of torture," Swift's prose sings like Sally's songs.

Strategy of Terror, Seven Locks Press, \$23.95, 339 pp

Richard Peck's new novel is his first foray into the world of spy thrillers and it's an all-round success. Previously known for his nonfiction work and the crime novel *Dead Pawn*, published earlier this year by University of New Mexico Press, Peck draws upon years he lived in Italy to paint a wholly credible story. Italian rightist and leftist terrorist groups struggle in a system in which each is still at the other's throat long after the best-known group, the Red Brigades, has ceased to function.

His protagonist, former intelligence agent and NCAA gymnastics champion Robert Mason, is drawn into danger when the woman he cares for, special assistant to a noted Italian film director, leaves him in Switzerland to return to Rome after her father is killed, seemingly in a work-related accident. Her father was a *sanpietrini*, one of the skilled artisans who have spent generations caring for Saint Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican. And, without giving too much away, therein hangs the tale, a sinister plot to commit mass murder on Christmas Eve in front of worldwide television cameras.

It takes Mason and the reader nearly half the book to tumble to the planned attack, but we are treated to sinister events that chill us to the core, such as a terrorist trainee's final exam in which he not only blows up the industrialist he's targeting, but causes considerable collateral casualties as well. And even when we get to the climax, events do not unfold as we expect, with double crosses, counterplots, and new information spurred desperate last-minute heroics.

Set in the post-9/11 world in which the security services of most nations are focused on the Al-Qaeda threat, this is nonetheless a plausible story of factions in Italy vying for power at each other's expense, in which no action is too outrageous if the other can be blamed. In previous years, the world has seen the Basques in Spain and the Continuity IRA in Belfast overstep themselves and lose the support of their constituencies through outrageous attacks that caused mass casualties.

The pace is superb, the knowledge of Italian and Swiss locations is masterful, and the characters--even minor ones--crisply drawn, complex, and clearly motivated. Peck has obviously learned from reading the masters and his dialog sparkles. He hasn't forgotten to include comic relief, but the action is intense and his protagonist and his heroine demonstrate coolness under fire, resourcefulness, and the physical endurance necessary to counter a plot that they stumble on only a week before it is to come to fruition.

If plausible spy thrillers are your cup of tea, or you think you'd like to try one, *Strategy of Terror* is well worth your time. I think Peck--and Robert Mason--will be heard from again. —**Rob Kresge**

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Nooseletter is official internal organ of The Croak & Dagger Chapter of Sisters in Crime (SinC), Albuquerque, in association with The SinC national organization. Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and editors. <u>Members</u> of Croak & Dagger are encouraged to contribute articles, reviews, essays, etc., for consideration for publication, average length 500 words or less. Publication is the first of every other month, beginning with January with submission deadlines being the 15th day of the month prior to publication: 15 Feb, Apr, Jun, Aug, Oct, Dec. Send to: royandcal@netzero.com, subject line "Article Submission." *The Nooseletter* will be electronically to members and friends during the first week of each publication month. —*Page Erwin*

Please consider becoming a member of SinC Albuquerque, Croak & Dagger, for only \$20.00 per year, and, while you're at it, join the national SinC as well, for only \$40.00. You'll get all the benefits of both organizations and help to promote women writers of mystery around the world. To join Croak & Dagger, Albuquerque, just print out the next page, fill it out, and mail it in. Be sure to enclose your check or money order for \$20.00.

Sisters in Crime, Inc. Croak and Dagger Chapter, Al buquerque P.O. Box 16597 Al buquerque, NM 87191-6597

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