



THE MARCH OF CRIME

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA - SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER
MAY & JUNE 2012

IS YOUR PSYCHO KILLER JUST... PSYCHO?

BY DENNIS PALUMBO

As some of you may know, I'm a licensed psychotherapist in private practice, specializing in creative issues. But I also write mystery fiction, both short stories and novels. Which means I also read a lot of mystery fiction, and have for many, many years.

And since I believe good crime fiction holds a mirror up to society – exposing both its flaws and triumphs, dangerous excesses and moral ambiguity – it doesn't surprise me that many contemporary mysteries and thrillers feature ever more violent criminals, ever more psychotic murderers, ever more deranged serial killers. As our world threatens to tilt into chaos – social, economic, and political – our crime fiction seems to traffic more and more in the realm of the psychologically-disturbed culprit, the villain whose heinous crimes appear totally random, totally senseless.

Which means, for today's mystery writer, I believe it's also a time to step back and reflect on how truthfully – both in terms of believable

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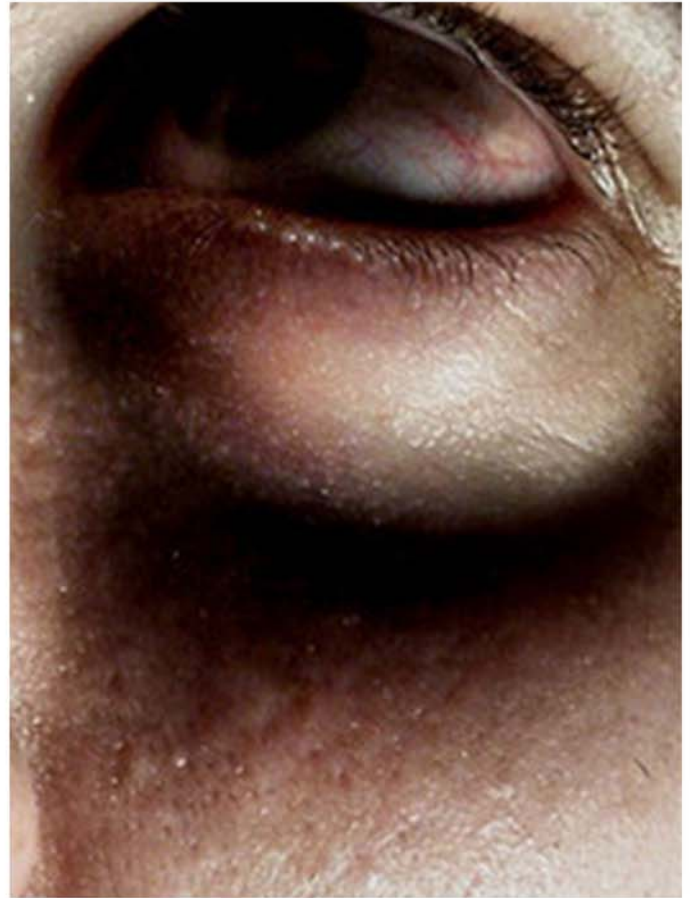


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THE PRESIDENT'S RAP SHEET GARY PHILLIPS

First off, again thanks to the members who put in time at our booth at the L.A. Times Festival of Books this past April. Many folks were met and greeted as we spread the word about who we are and what we do, and we sold some swag – did you see the new style of T-shirt and those cool baseball caps with our logo? – so that's a good thing.

Summer is almost here and as I write this, and the possibility of a L.A. playoff series between the Clippers and the Lakers is a tantalizing possibility. Ah, but your hardworking board offers more than just tantalizing possibilities...how's that for a segue? On the heels of the well-received panel of Edgar winners we did for the May luncheon talk at Billingsley's, coming up on Sunday June 10 is our Bar-B-Q Summer Bash. You've probably already received the e-blast announcing this and I hope you've RSVP'd. I look forward to enjoying the sun and the pleasure of your company at the party.

While it's more than a year away, put down the fourth California Crime Writers Conference is happening again, June 22-23, 2013 back at the Pasadena Hilton. Keynote speakers are Sue Grafton and Joseph Wambaugh and the committee, composed of So Cal MWA and Sisters in Crime/L.A. members (sometimes one and the same), are hard at work shaping panels and workshops. Building on what's gone before, we look to make this conference informative and necessary for a range of writers, for the pre-published to the veterans. None of us stop learning and growing in our craft. For more information check out the website at: www.ccwconference.org.

I leave you then with the words of Frank White, a gangster played by Christopher Walken in the film, *The King of New York*.

"I'm not your problem. I'm a business man."

Until next time,

Gary

HELP MAKE OUR CHAPTER EVEN BETTER

The March of Crime accepts submissions from members in good standing. If you would like to write for us, please email themarchofcrime@gmail.com. The only requirements are that your piece is well-written and is valuable to your fellow members.

Whether you're an Active, Associate, Affiliate, or Corresponding Member, we welcome your participation.

YOUR EDITORS SPEAK

NATASCHA JAFFA & DAVID J SHERMAN



As writers, we sink into an introverted position, focusing primarily on our work rather than the outside world. However, networking with other writers, editors and even publishers, will help you in the long run.

I had the privilege to attend my very first conference this year. It wasn't a big event, a mere 250-300 people in attendance, but I didn't go for the workshops. I went to meet other authors. Why? Because I learned I can spend all the time I want focusing on my work, but I can't succeed in this industry alone.

In our chapter, members are strewn across several states. Not all of us can connect with those members able to attend monthly meetings. Conferences such as ThrillerFest bring us together, but we can go beyond that. Whether you're published or just starting out in the industry, connect with other writers, share your advice and encourage others to do their best.

In return, you'll find joy in each other's success, you might learn something new, or find the motivation you've been lacking... maybe win some brownie points.

Natascha

The March of Crime is the newsletter of the Southern California Chapter of the Mystery Writers of America. TMOC Editors: Natascha Jaffa & David J Sherman; Chapter President: Gary Phillips; Board of Directors: Richard Brewer, Craig Faustus Buck, Tyler Dilts, Darrell James, Sue Ann Jaffarian, Gay Tolti Kinman, Paul Levine, Marilyn Meredith, Rochelle Staub, Jeri Westerson; Ex-officio: Naomi Hirahara. Opinions expressed herein are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Mystery Writers of America, or the Southern California Chapter. National Office: Mystery Writers of America, 1140 Broadway #1507, New York NY 10001, 212.888.8171, mwa@mysterywriters.org, www.mysterywriters.org.



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narrative and real life itself – a crime story villain is portrayed. In other words, is your psycho killer just... psycho? Does your villain display the verisimilitude that all good fictional characters require – or is he or she just crazy? Mindlessly, conveniently crazy?

Ray Bradbury once said, “There is only one type of story in the world – your story.” In other words, all writing is autobiographical. No matter how seemingly removed in time and space from the reality of your own life, you’re writing about yourself. Even your impulse to tell a particular story arises from an aspect of your interior world.

Case in point: My series of mystery thrillers (Mirror Image, the debut novel, and Fever Dream, its sequel) feature a psychologist who consults with the Pittsburgh police. This character, Daniel Rinaldi, is Italian-American, was born and raised in the Steel City, and graduated from the University of Pittsburgh. As did I.

Of course, my crime novels are works of fiction, so there are definitely points at which Rinaldi and I part company. For one thing, he was an amateur boxer in his youth. The other, even more obvious difference, is that Daniel Rinaldi is a lot braver and more resourceful than I am. Most of the dangerous situations he finds himself in would have me running for the hills!

So Daniel Rinaldi both is and isn’t me. As therapists, he and I are similar in our theoretical orientations and manner of doing therapy. His best friend, a paranoid schizophrenic, is even based on a patient at a private clinic with whom I was especially close. But, though we share these and other personal similarities, as a character Rinaldi clearly represents a fantasized version of me.

As do, I believe, all characters brought to life by their literary creators – even those that seem totally removed from who we think we are. I’m speaking here about the writing of villains.

Particularly those that are portrayed as crazy, psychopathic, criminally disturbed.

PIT-SMOKED BBQ
+
HOME-CRAFTED BEER
+
YOUR FELLOW MEMBERS
=
SOCAL MWA SUMMER BASH

SUNDAY, JUNE 10, 3P - 6P

rsvp: contact@socalmwa.com

CONTACT SUE IF YOU'D LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE AN APPETIZER, SIDE-DISH, OR DESSERT, SUE@SUEANNJAFFARIAN.COM

I can't tell you how often I've read thrillers in which the author's depiction of a psycho killer is pure boiler-plate: unconvincing, unmotivated, without psychological depth or realism. Why is this? Especially when the writer's other characters seem more rounded, realistic, subject to the usual panoply of feelings and motives?

In my view, it's because these writers are denying Bradbury's tenet about writing, which is that – however disguised – it is inevitably autobiographical. By that I mean, crime writers often see their monstrous,

unstoppable killer as being “out there” somewhere, beyond the realm of normal human behavior. A caricature of evil out of a child’s nightmare.

Or, even worse, they often conjure a conveniently crazy killer who commits the crime merely because he’s crazy. Merely to horrify the reader. Merely as an excuse for gratuitous and graphic depictions of unspeakable acts. Merely as a bad guy heinous enough to have us rooting for the hero to finally stop him. In other words, the boogie-man.

I’ve often had writing patients, working on a violent crime thriller, complain that they just can’t get inside the head of their villain “because I’m not like that.”

Do you feel that way? Do you believe that because you’re a nice, kind, truthful person, you can’t really create a lying, vicious killer? A ruthless blackmailer? A greedy kidnapper?

Well, if so, I beg to differ.

For one thing, as a psychotherapist for more than 25 years, I’ve come to realize that people – common, everyday people – have operatic passions. That stoic guy bagging groceries at your local supermarket, that helpful lady at the pharmacy, the janitor at your kid’s school – all of them, if given the opportunity to relate their life stories, would stun you with the personal dramas each has endured. The heartbreaks and triumphs, the yearnings and dashed hopes. The hurts and shame and missed opportunities they’ve obsessed about since high school. The deaths and financial losses and mental illnesses with which their families have struggled.

As I say, operatic passions. Great loves and hates. Maybe buried now beneath years of quiet, conventional living. Beneath years of daily toil, paying the bills, driving the kids to school. But those passions are there, trust me. Otherwise soap operas wouldn’t be a staple of broadcasting in every corner of the world, in every culture. Otherwise viewers wouldn’t be transfixed (often as a guilty secret) with reality TV, with true crime series on cable networks, with gossip in all its forms.

Which brings me back to the crime writer, and what he or she is willing to acknowledge and explore. And, make no mistake, there’s a bottomless well, a fathomless sea, a boundless horizon available, if you just have the courage to accept all that it contains.

Deep within each mystery writer lies the seeds of every kind of human. From a nun to a serial killer, a corporate tycoon to a migrant worker, a life-giver to a life-taker. If you can feel, you can imagine. And if you can imagine, then the possibilities – for good or evil – inherent in that which you’ve imagined are available to you.

Here’s an example, crude but illustrative. Let’s say you’ve always had a secret yearning to be respected. Perhaps this yearning began in childhood, when your siblings got all the glory in school or on the athletic field, and you felt ignored. Discounted. Invisible.

Imagine, then, that your villain – a terrifying serial killer, a sociopath who murders without remorse – has felt similarly discounted and invisible all his life. Rejected. Ignored.

Well, if you’re this guy, one thing that definitely gets you some attention is leaving a swath of mutilated bodies in your wake. And if you’re clever enough to continually elude the police,

you probably feel a sense of pride. Of gratification. Of vindication. Now the world's respecting you, even if it's a respect based on fear. You're certainly not invisible anymore. At long last, you're getting the attention you deserve.

Luckily, regardless of how we were treated in childhood, most of us still grow up to be sane, rational citizens. Maybe our feelings are easily hurt, or we succumb too easily to envy or jealousy, but we're probably not going to do much about it. Certainly nothing criminal.

But in our fiction, we get to act out these feelings. As writers, we get to create villainous characters who do all sorts of bad things – and, I submit, the more relatable their motives, the more terrifying they are to the reader.

The cold fact is, even a psychopath has his or her reasons. David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam, believed his neighbor was a demon, ordering him to kill through communicating via his pet dog. Mary Martin Speck, a nurse who killed 23 patients, claimed to be doing the Lord's work. Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer, felt a need to prove his superiority over those lesser beings trying to catch him.

As I say, the reasons may be irrational, based on delusional beliefs or unfounded grandiosity, but they're reasons nonetheless. At least in the killer's mind.

Which means the brave writer has to visit that mind occasionally. Has to figure out some way to relate to that mind's desires, fears, beliefs, pain, ego.

I recall a group therapy session years ago, when I was an intern in clinical training, in which one of the members got furious at another. Over some real or imagined slight. Regardless, she got to her feet and verbally attacked this second person.

After 10 minutes of vituperative rage and name-calling, the woman finally calmed herself. Then, turning to the therapist who was running the group, she said, sheepishly, "Wow, all that anger and rage... all that ugly hate... I'm so sorry. That wasn't me."

To which the therapist responded, "Yes it was. It isn't the sole truth of who you are, of course, but those dark feelings are in there. They're in everybody. They're as real in you as are your other feelings – your compassion, your generosity, your joy."

As John Fowles once wrote, in his novel *Daniel Martin*, "Whole sight... or all the rest is desolation." By which he meant that the totality of the human condition, the entire truth of our experience as people, has to be acknowledged if we're to live authentically. Just as, I believe, the totality of the human condition has to be explored and utilized by the writer seeking to create vivid, compelling, seriously terrifying villains.

So the next time you begin conceptualizing your crime story's villain, don't be afraid to mine your own feelings. Down deep, below the surface. It's where the motherlode of characterization, and all the narrative gold that results, lies hidden.

Just waiting for you, the writer, to bring it into the light.

CHAPTER NEWS

Marilyn Meredith, writing as F. M. Meredith, is happy to announce that *No Bells*, the latest in the Rocky Bluff P.D. mystery series, is now out from Oak Tree Press.

Jennifer Moss is pleased to announce that her metaphysical mystery novel, *Town Red*, will be published late fall by Black Opal Books.

Dorothy Howell's next book in the Haley Randolph mystery series, *Tote Bags and Toe Tags*, will be published in June by Kensington. *Clutches and Curses*, will be available in paperback in May.

Dennis Palumbo's *Fever Dream*, the acclaimed second novel in the Daniel Rinaldi series of mystery thrillers, is now available for Kindle.

Melodie Johnson Howe's latest book, *Shooting Hollywood: The Diana Poole Stories*, is now available from Crippen & Landru.

Berkley has recently purchased books 4 and 5 in **Sue Ann Jaffarian's** Ghost of Granny Apples mystery series, along with two novellas in the same series.

Lisa Brackmann's second novel, *Getaway*, a literary thriller set in Puerto Vallarta, will be published by Soho Press on May 1, 2012. Launch party May 1 at Mysterious Galaxy Redondo Beach. Her UK release, *Year of the Tiger* (U.S. *Rock Paper Tiger*), was published by Harper, April 26, 2012 and is available in original trade paperback. www.lisabrackmann.com

Stefanie Stolynsky's first published novel, *Counterfeit Lottery*, will be published by 5 Princes Press and Books, LLC and will be available in paperback and on e-books in August.

On May 2nd in New York and this July in London, Simon and Schuster/Pocket Books will celebrate **Andrew Neiderman's** accomplishment of being the ghostwriter for the V.C. Andrews franchise for twenty-five years.

Neiderman is now the most successful ghostwriter in publishing history, taking the V.C. Andrews franchise worldwide from 30 million books to over 106 million. V.C. Andrews is the longest running franchise as well. Andrew Neiderman now, with his 44 thrillers as Neiderman, and the 70 book titles he's written for the franchise, has 114 published novels. Neiderman also wrote and co-produced the film *Rain*, based on the V.C. Andrews novel of the same title, a film that featured Faye Dunaway, Robert Loggia and Brooklyn Sudano, daughter of Donna Summer, as Rain. Neiderman has had 6 other titles of his thrillers produced as films, the biggest and most successful being *The Devil's Advocate*. Mr. Neiderman has written the stage musical libretto for the stage musical production of *The Devil's Advocate*, now being developed in London. He is also working with Permut Productions in an attempt to develop the novel as a television series. Currently, Mr. Neiderman has a new V.C. Andrews paranormal novel out, *Into the Darkness*. This August, the first direct to e-book V.C. Andrews novel will be offered by Pocket Books, *Capturing Angels*, and this fall, the sequel to *Daughter of*

Darkness will be published, *Daughter of Light*. Neiderman taught English and was department chairman for twenty-three years at Fallsburgh High School in upstate New York. He is a graduate of SUNY Albany with an M.A. in English. He and his wife Diane have two children and three grandchildren.

D.P. Lyle's short story "Even Steven" will appear in the next ITW anthology *Thriller 3: Love is Murder*, to be released May 29th.

Robert L. Hecker's musical "Honestly Abe", about the teenage railsplitter, is running in NYC at the Off-Broadway Actors Temple theatre on 47th St.

The second book in **Laura Levine's** Jaine Austen mystery series, *Last Writes*, will be re-issued in paperback (with new cover art) from Kensington Books on May 1, 2012.

Jan Burke was the Guest of Honor at Malice Domestic XIV, which was held April 27-29. Fellow chapter member **Lee Goldberg** was also honored at the convention, with the Poirot Award.

Susan Cummins Miller's fifth Frankie MacFarlane mystery, *Fracture*, is a finalist for the ForeWord Magazine 2011 Book-of-the-Year Award. Her second novel, *Detachment Fault*, has been released in trade paperback by Texas Tech University Press. And in April she won the 2012 Will Inman Award at the Tucson Poetry Festival.

Robert S. Levinson's current novel, *A Rhumba in Waltz Time*, was recently published in a Large Print edition by Thorndike Press. Bob is among authors in *Now Write! Mysteries* from Tarcher/Penguin; the *Crime Square* anthology edited by Robert J. Randisi (Vantage Point), with an original short, "The Night of the Murder"; and soon-due *Best Crime & Mystery Stories of 2010*, edited by Ed Gorman and the late Martin H. Greenberg (Cemetery Dance), with a story that first appeared in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, "The Girl in the Golden Gown".

Gay Toltl Kinman's new book, *Death in Rancho Las Amigas*, has just been released from Mysterious Women and is available in trade paperback on Amazon and on Kindle. The story is set in the Taos, New Mexico, area where a recently-widowed woman, a poet, goes to heal emotionally. She's not a sleuth, or even curious, but she is the catalyst that brings criminal activity, including murder, to light.

GOT SOMETHING TO SHARE?

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