

MARCH OF CRIME

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA—SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

SOCALMWA GUMBO PARTY

On a perfect, warm summer night, a gaggle of mystery and crime authors gathered in Woodland Hills for four kinds of gumbo, spicy shrimp, homebrewed beer, and friendship.

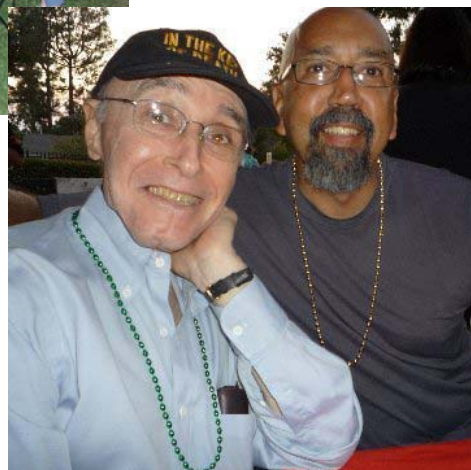
Much thanks to Gumbo Meister Bill Fitzhugh and his wife Kendall for hosting us under the stars. Here are just a few pictures of the event:



SoCalMWA Prez Les Klinger stirs up trouble with Bill Fitzhugh (left) in the Gumbo kitchen.



SinCLA Vice-Prez Susan Kosar Beery with husband Steve.



Bob Levinson and Gar Anthony Harwood, two former SoCalMWA Presidents.

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The President's Rap Sheet

Leslie S. Klinger



In a recent blog discussing the future of books as we know them, my friend Laura Caldwell, a prolific writer of thrillers, mysteries, and nonfiction and a (mostly) recovering lawyer, wrote, "Maybe there'll be fewer of the printed variety, but I tend to believe that this art form, even if it changes and appears drastically different in the future, will survive. The written word and the audiences' ability to imagine, in their own head, the way a story plays out, can never really be lost. And us authors, even with our bits of grumbling, are addicted to what we do. We can't stop even if you want us to."

Laura is not alone in worrying about Kindles and self-publishing and the demise of newspapers, and whether authors should blog or Twitter or maintain Facebook pages. But while

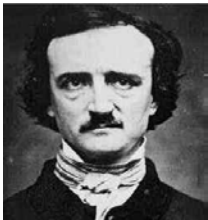
we struggle to figure out how to make writing profitable (remember, the motto of MWA is "Crime does not pay—enough!") or how to build our base of readers or increase sales, we need to be truthful on why we do what we do. It's not for the dreams of great fame, it's not for the elusive large advances or royalties, it's not for the mythical option fees for selling our books to Hollywood. It's not for the questionable joys of touring. It's not for the terror of reading reviews. Admittedly, it's not even for the genuine pleasures of meeting independent booksellers or passionate critics or devoted readers.

In the end, it's all about the words. Some of us tell stories; some are reporters or scholars in pursuit of knowledge or truth. Of course we hope that our work finds an audience,

that it entertains or enlightens, and that it brings pleasure to our readers. If we're honest, however, the writing itself is why we do what we do. As Laura said, we write because we have to. MWA is our support group, a haven where we can meet fellow addicts, and a place where we can learn to write *better*. We remain committed to serving our members' needs—whether those needs are for improvement of their craft or a comfortable place to have a drink with sympathetic friends. Whether the future of books is electronic or audio-based or holograms, the *words* will still be at their core, and MWA will be here to help spread those words.



Killer Quotes



"We should bear in mind that, in general, it is the object of our newspapers rather to create a sensation- to make a point-

than to further the cause of truth. The latter end is only pursued when it seems coincident with the former."

—Detective C. Auguste Dupin *The Mystery of Marie Roget* A Sequel to "The Murder in the Rue Morgue." by Edgar Allan Poe, 1851

"The Super Chief was on time, as it almost always is, and the subject was as easy to spot as a kangaroo in a dinner jacket."

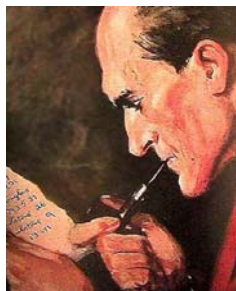
—Philip Marlowe
in *Playback* by Raymond Chandler

"Betty was a great shark of a woman. Men died in her wake."

—Walter Mosley, *Black Betty*

"Good heavens!" I cried. "Who would associate crime with these dear old homesteads?"

"They always fill me with a certain horror. It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside."



—Sherlock Holmes in "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches"

Miami Book Fair Looking For Mystery Authors

The Miami Book Fair International is looking for mystery writers interested in being on panels the weekend of November 14 - 15. If you have or had a book come out this year and it will be available by November 1 please e-mail Paola Fernandez-Rana at paola.fernandezrana@mdc.edu. MBFI is the largest book fair in the country with over 100,000 attending daily on Saturday and Sunday. The Florida chapter will also be co-sponsoring a signing booth with Murder on the Beach. Details to come on that later.

CHAPTER NEWS

SoCal MWA members **Gregg Hurwitz** ("Trust No One") and **Charlie Huston** ("Mystic Arts of Erasing All Signs of Death") were nominated for the 2009 Southern California Independent Booksellers Award.

A **Robert S. Levinson** short story, "Regarding Certain Occurrences in a Cottage at the Garden of Allah," set during the late thirties Golden Age of Hollywood, appears in the November-dated issue of *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, on newsstands.

Gay Tolti Kinman was the group leader for an Elderhostel--"Scene of the Crime." The Saturday a.m. panel was **Kathryn Lilley** and **Michael Mallory**, moderated by Kinman, talking about writing mysteries in different genres. The Friday evening keynote speaker was Denise Hamilton.

Kinman also gave a Mini Mystery workshop at The Women's Room sponsored by Friends In Deed in Pasadena on July 16 teaching aspiring writers how to murder someone--in print.

There's a new mystery and food lover's blog out there that **Jenn McKinlay** is writing for on Wednesdays. It's called the Mystery Lover's Kitchen www.mysteryloverskitchen.com. It's comprised of 6 Berkley Prime Crime authors who write culinary mysteries and they are always on the look out for guest bloggers on Sundays. Also, for the first six weeks, they'll be offering \$25 gift cards to Williams-Sonoma to their viewers in a random drawing.

SoCal MWA Board Member **Jeri Westerson** was nominated for a Shamus Award for Best First PI Novel for her debut medieval noir *VEIL OF LIES*, which also received the nomination for a Macavity for the Sue Feder Memorial Historical Mystery Award.

John Morgan Wilson has a short story, "City in Fog," in the September/October issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* that is said to be the first take on the vampire genre *EQMM* has ever run. John also has a non-genre story in Best Gay Stories of 2009, due out shortly from Lethe Press.



Renew!

This may be the last
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1140 Broadway, Suite 1507
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Fan Guest of Honor : Janet Rudolph
Toastmaster : Bill Fitzhugh

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Left Coast Crime **Los Angeles, CA. March 11-14, 2010**

So Cal MWA members who will be attending Left Coast Crime in Los Angeles in March 2010 are reminded to sign up as soon as possible for the Forensic Science Day offered by the convention. There are only a few places left, so please hurry!

The Forensic Science Day, Wednesday, March 10, will be a day of learning from experts currently working the field of forensic science and criminal justice, and will include a tour of the LA Regional Crime -- all for only \$100 -- far below the cost of most day-long forensic science courses. The proceeds from the class benefit the Crime Lab Project Foundation, which will donate them to California Forensic Science Institute at CSULA to help fund forensic science research. So you can have fun, learn more about forensic science, and help a good cause!

For more information and to register, please visit http://www.leftcoastcrime.org/2010/forensic_science_day.htm

Mystery Writers Talk Shop

By Jackie Houchin

In the popular “Coffee & Conversation” series at the Burbank/Buena Vista Public Library, mystery authors connected with interested readers and aspiring writers in two recent afternoon sessions.

In “Too Hot to Handle,” **Pamela Samuels-Young**, **Harley Jane Kozak**, and **Sue McGinty** discussed their books and the joys and woes of writing and publishing crime fiction. The panel was moderated by **C. Debra Thomas** (Pasadena Community Access Corp/Channel 56).

McGinty compared her “Murder in Los Lobos” to Earline Fowler’s Benni Harper books (only more sinister) in that it’s set in central California, has a sleuth with a cop-hubby, and religion plays a part (protag’s an ex-nun).

Young describes her legal-mystery series as fast paced, suspenseful, commercial fiction, and says she got the core idea for “Murder on the Down Low” from an interview on Oprah. (In “Buying Time” her new stand-alone mystery, an unusual insurance policy sparked the plot idea.)

Kozak says her “Dating” series is good beach reading. “A fast reader can read the whole book without getting sunburned!” Her sleuth writes unusual greeting card sentiments, such as, “Good luck with your liposuction!”

Q: Where do you start? **Young**: “Always with plot. Then I wrap my characters around the idea.” **Kozak**: “My books *have* to be about dating, so I look for a big sub-plot. Crimes are a dime-a-dozen, but figuring out *why* Wolley gets

involved is tricky.”

Q: What’s your writing schedule? **McGinty**: “Early in the morning before the phone starts ringing. Phone messages are the ‘kiss of death’ for creativity.” **Kozak**: “Away from home (and the kids), sometimes in a hotel.” **Young**: “In Starbucks. I can be in ‘a zone’ and write for hours.”

Q: Are critique groups helpful? **McGinty**: “They’re vital, but don’t let your book be *written by committee*.” **Young**: “Yes, just ignore nit-picking.” (Young also pays someone to read her manuscript onto audio tape so she can listen and catch details she’s missed on the word processor. Great idea, Pamela!)

In “Lazy Summer Mysteries” moderated by the witty and humorous **Mike Mallory** (“Exploits of the Second Mrs. Watson”), authors **Sheila Lowe** (“Dead Write”), **Joan Del Monte** (“Mud Blood”) and **Alice Zogg** (“Final Stop in Albuquerque”) answered queries about their sleuths, POVs, series/stand alones, settings, and publishing routes.

Q: What motivating element gets you started? **Del Monte**: “Discovering a terrific new way to kill someone.” **Zogg**: “I love to travel. To me, locations suggest motives for murder.” **Lowe**: “My mysteries are all based on some aspect of a true story.” **Mallory**: “I discover some obscure, historical “factoid” and ask myself how it can be used in a mystery.”

Q: Do you outline? **Lowe**: I did, but decided not to with book #3. Part way in, I bogged down and stopped writing for months. For me, it’s important and helpful.” **Del Monte**: “I don’t outline, but I spend a lot of time re-writing.” **Zogg**: “It’s more fun to let it go its own way... but I do know the storyline and the murder weapon before I begin.”

Q: Pet peeves? **Mallory**: “Flaunting excessive expertise. Stupid character names.” **Zogg**: “Names you can’t pronounce.” **Lowe**: “Other authors getting to use adverbs when my editor won’t let me.”

Q: Advice for beginning writers? “Take out all your adverbs.” “Read your favorite books critically to see why you like them.” “Keep writing.” “Keep your day job.” “Try to be objective about your own work.”

Fresh Blood

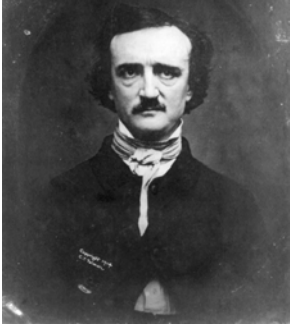
Active

Neil Russell (Beverly Hills, CA)
Burt Barer (North Hollywood, CA)
Roy Johansen (Stevenson Ranch, CA)
Ron Cutler (Marina del Rey, CA)
Randy Sutton (Las Vegas, NV)
Simon Tolkien (Santa Barbara, CA)

Affiliate

Daryl Wood Gerber (Los Angeles, CA)
Jane Hunt (Los Angeles, CA)

YOUR EDITOR SPEAKS JERI WESTERSON



Fall has always been my favorite time of year. Call me sentimental, but for some reason, when the air is nipped with a bit of crispness and the leaves change to bright gold, I imagine myself one of those New Englanders, a veritable Martha Stewart, puttering in my garden, hefting a bright orange pumpkin into my

wheelbarrow and looking out across my acres of farmland, musing about the spiced cookies I'd be baking for all the neighbors' children—wait, wait. Stop. I can't go on. That just isn't me. Oh, yes, I like baking cookies well enough, but not for those little bastards down the street. And I don't live on a farm. Nor do I live in New England. I live and bake (figuratively and physically) in Southern California. I wouldn't know what to do with snow. Or fall, for that matter. We have what Southern Californians take for fall. Yes, a few leaves change on some of the trees. But palm trees don't tend to drop their leaves. Anyway, it's my way of being nostalgic for a place and

time I've never been to. I like to dream. And I like to travel. And I'm lucky enough to travel to those places that *do* have autumn. Indianapolis, for one. That's where Bouchercon is sitting this year. I've got a lot to look forward to there. I've got a noir panel *and* I've managed to snag two nominations for my debut medieval noir, *VEIL OF LIES: A Macavity* and a Shamus! Very cool. As they say, it's really great just to be nominated. I'm in extraordinarily good company.

I'll enjoy my fall colors there along with the sights and sounds of the Midwest. As always, got anything to say? Email me at themarchofcrime@gmail.com.

Save the Date

Put these SoCal MWA dates and times on your calendar.

Sunday, September 13, 2pm, Salon at Gary Phillips' Pad
Contact: Gary Phillips, gdogg855@aol.com

Sunday, Oct 4, 10am – 6pm—West Hollywood Book Fair

Sunday, October 25, 1:30pm
Crime of Our Times: Financial Fraud with Brian E. Klein,
Assistant U.S. Attorney
Beverly Hills Library 444 N. Rexford Dr. Beverly Hills
It's free! Contact: Les Klinger, mail@leslieklinger.com

Saturday, November 7, 11am—2pm
Charlie Huston interviewed by the Mystery Bookstore's
Bobby McCue
Location to be announced. Contact: Naomi Hirahara,
bachi@naomihirahara.com

Sunday, Dec 13, 3pm—Holiday Party at the Jonathan Club
in Santa Monica

The Crime Calendar

October 8–11—Wordstock , Portland, OR http://www.wordstockfestival.com/#/page_id=110/

October 15-18—Bouchercon 2009 Indianapolis; www.bouchercon2009.com

Oct 30, 2009—The Great Manhattan Mystery Conclave, Manhattan, KS—celebrating small town mysteries <http://www.manhattanmysteries.com>

Nov 7, 2009—Bodies and Buckeyes, Columbus, OH <http://www.siccowriters.org/5.html>

November 13-15—New England Crimebake, Dedham, MA, GOH: Sue Grafton, www.crimebake.org

Nov 21, 2009—Men of Mystery, Irvine, CA <http://www.menofmystery.org/>

Dec 5, 2009—Black Orchid Banquet, New York, NY <http://www.nerowolfe.org/> Annual banquet held by the members of the Wolfe Pack, devotees of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe series.



Old photos, Found Documents and Well-connected Friends

By Steven M. Thomas

When I started writing crime fiction a few years back, I never considered using anything but a first-person narrator. That's what Chandler and both the MacDonalds did and I loved their books. Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone and Robert Crais's Elvis Cole came alive on the page and pulled me into their fictional worlds by speaking directly to me. I had just read "Miami Purity," Vicki Hendricks's gem of a first novel, and Dick Lockte's wonderful "Sleeping Dog," both told in compelling first-person voices.

It seemed like a great way to tell a crime fiction tale -- which turned out to be true. It also seemed like an easy way -- which turned out to be false. A strong first-person voice lends a sense of realism and immediacy to a story, but that narrative choice also imposes tricky limitations on the writer.

One big challenge, especially with a typically complex crime fiction plot, is getting all of the critical story information to the narrator and so to the reader in a timely and realistic fashion. With an omniscient narrative voice, the writer can simply tell the reader about something important that happened yesterday in Pasadena or describe an event occurring in Malibu in the present that bears on the solution to the mystery. But a first-person narrator can only know and tell the reader what he or she personally experiences in some sense. How can such a person plausibly gather all of the facts needed to crack a fast-breaking case when events are unfolding in many locations at the same time and key occurrences are buried in the past?

Narrators who are police detectives have it a little easier than others because they can forcefully interrogate suspects to find out what happened when they weren't there, do background checks, search premises, access bank and phone records, run license plates and dispatch other cops to cover multiple locations, essentially extending their senses and consciousness around the city and through time. Part-time and accidental detectives, avenging relatives, and criminals protagonists -- who have to solve the mystery of how to successfully pull off complicated crimes -- have a much more difficult time finding out what has gone on and is going on beyond the reach of their senses.

Private investigators fall somewhere in between police narrators and amateur sleuths when it comes to gathering information needed to solve the crime and allow the reader to follow and enjoy the story. They have some legal authority to investigate, are skilled at questioning people, good at deduction, and familiar with police techniques. But they lack the full force and resources of the department and are often at odds with the cops.

Mean It

“ I was on a panel, and someone asked what I thought was the best way to develop as a writer: Take creative writing classes? And I have to say that I think this is a really good way to get writer's block. If you want to develop as a writer, do your research, experience what it is you are writing about, and tell the truest, purest most meaningful story you can. Mean it. Start with short stories. Get feedback from editors. Short stories are the best training a writer can have. ”

—Eva Batonne

P.I.s end up getting most of their facts from other people. Detective stories usually start with a client interview, a wonderfully realistic and flexible device that allows the writer to insert just as much information -- or disinformation -- into the record as he or she wants. The basic mystery or problem is presented to the detective and the reader, main characters are introduced, and essential background circumstances described.

After the setup, the PI typically puts on his fedora and sports coat and heads down Wilshire or Sunset to talk with someone the client has mentioned who seems likely to have key information about the case. That person coughs up a few facts, intentionally or unintentionally, directing the detective to another likely source. Thus begins a round-robin that continues throughout the book as the writer tells the reader the story in large part through the information provided to the detective by participants in the plot.

But that information, along with what the detective deduces from it, is never enough. Other means of discovery are always necessary to supplement what the detective witnesses personally and finds out from others in conversation. Found or stolen notes or letters; diaries, ledgers and other documents; old photographs or films; tape recordings or computer contents; library or Internet research; well-connected friends; and all kinds of other techniques and devices are needed to inform the first-person narrator and move the story forward.

Ross MacDonald's first novel, "The Moving Target," illustrates the point. A 1949 mystery revolving around the disappearance of war-profiteer millionaire Ralph Sampson, the book starts with a typical client interview. The missing man's wife and lawyer set the stage for detective/narrator Lew Archer and the reader, providing a big informational head start. Throughout the book, Archer gets most of the rest of his facts by questioning suspects and their unsuspecting acquaintances. But Macdonald also uses numerous extra-conversational devices to help Archer and reader solve the case.

1. In Chapter Four, Macdonald has the detective find a picture of a woman in Sampson's hotel room with the inscription "To Ralph from Fay with blessings." This picture occurs in some form in countless crime fiction novels, including both of mine so far, a great device for starting a flow of information while deepening the mystery at the same time. It puts Archer on the track of the missing man's companions, who he has never met or seen.

2. In Chapter Five, the detective calls on Morris Cramm, "night legman for a columnist," who looks at the picture and conveniently fills Archer in on Fay's

Continued Page 7 "Old Photos"

Continued from Page 6 "Old Photos"

last name, history, and current companions. The well-connected pal with specialized knowledge who stands outside the story and provides critical information is almost universal in detective stories. Think of "Kenny Haste, a crime reporter on the Chronicle," who Marlowe calls for biographies of the criminals he is investigating in "A High Window," or Patricia Kyle, a casting agent and former client Elvis Cole visits to get inside information about an entertainment industry individual he is looking for in "The Monkey's Raincoat," or Sol Silverman, the fat successful operator with an omniscient overview of Los Angeles power players and their goings on who assists the part-time sleuth in Jeff Sherratt's latest novel, "Guilty or Else." These almost mystically knowledgeable secondary characters are a relatively effortless and yet plausible way to help first-person narrators and readers understand what goes on outside the range of the narrator's vision. Because they don't enter into the story very much the writer doesn't have to fully explain or justify their knowledge. It is just a given. In Chapter Twelve, MacDonald uses the technique again, bringing in Archer's old buddy Peter Colton, "a senior investigator in the D.A.'s office" to provide car rental records and other information that Archer wouldn't have access to himself.

3. Documents play a part, too, as they usually do. A letter bearing Sampson's signature, a ransom note, and an FBI teletype providing the history of a man Archer finds dead all feed important information to the detective and reader that Archer would otherwise lack.

4. When Archer searches the dead man's body in Chapter Nineteen, he finds a matchbook with the name of a bar on it, a clue that extends his awareness, telling him where the dead man was at some earlier time. When he goes to the bar, in person and in the moment, he discovers more information and moves the story forward, but he needs the matchbook to direct him when he is in a narrative blind spot.

5. At Sampson's mountain hideaway, Archer sees a truck tire track like one he saw earlier at Fay's house. That lets him know about something that happened when he wasn't present in the mountains and establishes a key connection as he sorts out the mystery.

These kinds of clues and devices are used in third-person crime fiction, too, of course, but it is more by choice than necessity. The first-person narrator needs them -- to fill inevitable gaps in awareness and help put the complicated puzzle of the case together for the reader. For writers working in the first person, figuring out how to use recovered e-mails and old photos to help construct a story can be tricky -- if they seem planted, the story loses credibility -- but it is also a big part of the fun for both writer and reader. Used skillfully, these devices add intelligence, suspense and entertainment value to the story and enable the author get around one of the main difficulties of writing in the first person.

Steven M. Thomas is the author of two first-person novels, Criminal Paradise (2008) and Criminal Karma (2009), both published by Ballantine. His narrator is Robert Rivers, a professional thief who plans carefully executed burglaries and armed robberies along the Southern California Coast.



Transom Notes

Lucy Lawrence has a signing for *STUCK ON MURDER* at the Poisoned Pen in Scottsdale on Sept 15 at 7:00 PM. First in a new series featuring Brenna Miller, decoupage artist.

Jeri Westerson's *VEIL OF LIES* will be released in paperback on October 13. Her second novel in the series, *SERPENT IN THE THORNS*, will be released September 29. All are invited to the book launch on Saturday, October 3 at 5pm at Vroman's Bookstore in Pasadena. Medieval food, champagne, and sword-fighting knights will be on hand.

The debut thriller *STACCATO*, by **Deborah J Ledford**, will be released by Second Wind Publishing, September 15, 2009.

A.S.A.P. Publishing will be releasing *UISCE*, by **Ken Bruen**, in late September, early October. The book has 2 short stories, one featuring Jack Taylor, and the other, Inspector Brant. The introduction is by **Michael Connelly**, the afterword, by **Jan Burke**, and the front and rear covers as well as 8 interior illustrations are by Phil Parks.

SILENT MYSTERY AND DETECTIVE MOVIES; A COMPREHENSIVE FILMOGRAPHY by **Ken Wlaschin** has just been published by McFarland.

PURSES AND POISON, **Dorothy Howell's** follow up to her debut mystery *HANDBAGS AND HOMICIDE*, has been released in hardcover from Kensington. Foreign rights to the series have sold in the U.K., France, and Thailand, and are available in Large Print and on Kindle.

Cherokee McGhee Mystery has just brought the first two books in **Kris Neri's** Agatha, Anthony, and Macavity Award nominated Tracy Eaton mysteries back into print, *REVENGE OF THE GYPSY QUEEN* and *DEM BONES' REVENGE*. Cherokee McGhee will also publish the third book in this series, *REVENGE FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE*, in Spring '10. In Fall '09, Red Coyote Press will publish the first book in Kris's new supernatural-mystery series, *High Crimes on the Magical Plane*.

The Mystery Bookstore in Westwood will be hosting the national launch of *DEAD AIR*, the new thriller from **Deborah Shlian, MD**, and **Linda Reid, MD** on Saturday December 5 at 5 PM.

Taking the Mystery Out of Writing Mysteries

By Dennis Palumbo

If you saw the season-ending episode of *Monk*, do you remember the clue that helped catch the killer?

Me, neither.

In the recent thriller *Fractured*, what was the mistake Anthony Hopkins made that proved he killed his wife?

You got me.

My point, and I do have one, is that often writers think the most important aspect of a good mystery is the ingenuity of the crime, the unraveling of the clues. Which is why many writers are scared to death of even trying to write a mystery or thriller.

Fear no more.

Yes, viewers of mysteries and thrillers like tightly-plotted narratives, clever red herrings, and a certain element of surprise. And you should always strive to weave as many of these aspects into your whodunit or crime story as possible.

But these factors are not what makes a mystery - any mystery - memorable. Think of TV's *The Rockford Files*, or *The Closer*. Think of films like *Chinatown* and *Silence of the Lambs*. As best-selling crime author Michael Connelly wrote, "The best mysteries are about the mystery of character."

But what does that mean?

Let's start with the basics: what is a mystery? In simplest terms, it's a story about the disruption of the social order. A crime against society is committed: a man is murdered, a bank is robbed, whatever. We, the viewer, want to know two things: who did it, and why.

At least that's what we *think* we want.

What do we really want? We want order restored. We want the violator of the social compact - the killer, the thief, the blackmailer - caught, so that things in our world are set right once more. And who do we want to do this? Our surrogate, the smarter, wittier, and more doggedly determined version of ourselves: the detective hero. Whether a street wise cop like Popeye Doyle in the *French Connection*, a sloppy homicide detective like TV's *Columbo*, or a tea-drinking, sweater-knitting old lady like Miss Marple, we want this one thing from our mystery protagonist above all others: we want order restored.

But not just social order; the best mysteries, whether on *Without A Trace* or in *Murder On the Orient Express*, are also about the exploration and resolution of psychological tension. In other words, how do the characters interact? What do they want?

For example, in most mysteries, whether a suspect is guilty of the crime or not, he or she invariably has a secret. A clandestine relationship, a trauma from the past that haunts them still, perhaps even a connection with the killer (or the victim) that helps complete an entire mosaic of possible

motives, entanglements and intrigue.

Henry James famously said: "Plot is characters under stress." Well, nothing ramps up the stress level of a group of characters like the murder of one among them. A further "turn of the screw" results when the murder comes under investigation by an outside agent - the hero or heroine, the cop or private eye - determined to ferret out the truth.

How does that apply to the mystery you're trying to write? A reasonable question.

Remember what it felt like when some kid broke a window at school and the principal gathered you and all your classmates together? Remember the mounting tension as the principal went down the line, interrogating each of you, sometimes even feigning humor or sympathy, but always with the relentless, eagle-eyed determination of a predator searching for his prey?

Well, do the characters in your mystery or crime story feel that way? How do they show it, to the camera, to each other, and to the detective? Or, perhaps more importantly, how do they attempt to conceal it?

In most memorable mysteries, or in the best straight-ahead thrillers, this context of mutual suspicion and misdirection of motives is pivotal. It's what keeps the suspense mounting for the viewer. Moreover, it's the crucial element that keeps the laying-in of necessary clues from seeming like a mere litany of exposition. By the time we're halfway through the film *Who's Killing the Great Chefs of Europe?*, the lies told and attitudes expressed by the suspects has us convinced that pretty much anyone could be the culprit. Which is exactly what you, the mystery writer, wants most of all.

Another important aspect of these types of films, as vital as that of the deceptive nature of the suspects, is the world the story inhabits. All renowned mysteries from *Laura* to *Twin Peaks* to *Witness for the Prosecution* take place in a specific arena of life. The design industry, the rainy Pacific Northwest, the be-wigged world of British courtrooms. Whatever. If you consider a film like *All the President's Men* a mystery, and I do, since it meets all the criteria, then the fascinating world of Washington politics is the backdrop.

Recall, too, how the key to success for *Columbo* was the interaction of our rumpled hero with the nuances of the various worlds into which he ventured, from that of classical music to computer science, from Hollywood studios to military schools. His comfortable, familiar character was our vehicle of entry into the specifics of each of these very particular ways of life.

But what does all the above have to do with you, and the mystery you're writing? Let's see if we can break it down.

First, let's look at your protagonist. And here's where many new mystery writers get discouraged, and for a very understandable reason. When it comes to the hero - whether hard-boiled private eye or spinster librarian, cop-turned-lawyer or criminal-turned-cop - they've all been done. How do you make your sleuth unique?

For me, there's only one answer: ask yourself, what makes you unique? What scares you, interests you, makes you angry? What do you yearn for, or wish to avoid? What are your hobbies, passions? What's the aspect of your own character about which you're most conflicted, unhappy, even embarrassed? Believe it or not, this is where the seeds of an interesting, unusual protagonist are first sewn.

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For example, my friend Earlene Fowler likes to make quilts. As does her amateur sleuth, Benni Harper, now on her 12th or 13th novel in a hugely successful series. I cite this mostly to prove that you don't have to be a forensics pathologist in your day job to create a popular or believable hero. In my own case, the narrator of most of the stories in my new book is a psychotherapist in Los Angeles. Not exactly a stretch.

This concept operates as well for TV and film as for prose. Many writers of popular crime shows and recent thriller movies are patients in my private practice, and I've witnessed first-hand how their own issues, prejudices and concerns are woven into their on-screen characters.

So why don't you start by making a list of your own traits and interests, as suggested above? The closer the hero or heroine of your mystery story is to you, the more vivid and engaging he or she will be to the viewer. After all, as Emerson said, "To know that what is true for you in your private heart is true for everyone - that is genius."

Next, let's look at the world of your mystery story. What is the world you inhabit? Suburban soccer mom or single father? Former football coach, magazine editor, or Rhodes scholar? Travel agent, computer specialist, or kindergarten teacher?

After all, you know the details of your particular world so clearly. You know the ins and outs. It's those details that create the backdrop for the crime, that make possible the intrigue, the collision of misleading, back-stabbing, or too-good-to-be-true characters. Think of the gambling background in the movie *Ocean's 11*. Or that of the legal profession in *The Firm*.

Why is the background so important? Aside from being crucial to our sense of the reality of the story, and presenting us with a view of a world with which we may be unfamiliar (or that we think we know, but in fact really don't), a particular arena provides valuable help to the writer when it comes to building narrative and planting clues.

How? To put it simply, the best clues in a classic mystery involve misdirection. A clue usually seems to point in one direction, when actually, looked at from a different angle, it reveals something else. A typical example is the clue that appears to confirm a certain character's guilt, when in fact it's been planted to frame that person.

For the writer, trying to develop the narrative and plant significant clues along the way, it's much easier (and, I think, more organic) if the clues emerge from the world of the story. For example, if the bad guy uses some antique pistol to commit the crime, I'm much more likely to believe it in a story set behind the scenes at Colonial Williamsburg.

In fact, one of the smartest things a crime writer can do is develop the clues and red herrings out of the world in which the story is set. Most used car salesmen don't know where to get their hands on lethal yet undetectable poisons. They do know how to cut the brake lines of a car. (Or blackmail a mechanic to do it for them.)

I'm stressing the use of a vivid background and the investment in character development for two reasons. First, because without these two aspects, no viewer will really care how

clever or intricate the plot is. (For example, as much as I admire the plotting in the film *The Last of Sheila*, I don't love the movie because I don't care about anyone in it.) And second, because of the happy fact that most good mysteries only have two or three pertinent clues in them anyway. This is really important. Most new writers of mysteries seem to think the plot has to be filled with clues. It doesn't. One or two gems - the misleading planted evidence, the comment a suspect makes that belies his alibi - are all you need to put the villain away. Or all your hero or heroine needs.

Remember, too, that many clues are just as likely to indicate something that's missing as they are to reveal something that's present: the unfound murder weapon, the missing wedding ring or the victim's finger. Remember this classic exchange from Conan Doyle's story *Silver Blaze*:

Holmes to the Inspector: "I refer, of course, to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

The Inspector: "But, Holmes, the dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That is the curious incident."

Okay, let's wrap this up. The three things to keep in mind when writing mysteries are: 1) establishing the unique character of the protagonist, 2) making narrative use of the world in which the story takes place, and 3) planting clues (remember, only a few) that derive from the particular aspects of that world.

One final hint, to spark your creativity when thinking about writing a mystery: is there a little-known fact, an oddity of history or natural science, that you were taught or stumbled upon and has always intrigued you? For example, I was blown away years ago when I learned that after famed psychologist Carl Jung broke with his mentor Sigmund Freud, Jung founded a clinical journal devoted to "non-Jewish" psychoanalysis. I'm still figuring out a way to weave that painful chapter in the history of psychoanalysis into a mystery story.

What's in *your* background that you can use? What's filed away in that mental Rolodex in your head that might serve as the germ of an idea for a mystery? Maybe your grandfather was the first guy in his town to own a car. Or the guy who bought the last Edsel. Maybe your mother tells the story of getting hit on by some dorky guy at a bar who went on to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Everybody has some story, some incident, unique to them and them alone. All a writer has to do is "twist" that story a little bit - the "what-if" that inspires all storytelling - and a mystery emerges. Because, in the end, that's where all the best stories come from. Life itself. The greatest mystery of all.



Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (*My Favorite Year*; *Welcome Back, Kotter*), Dennis Palumbo is now a licensed psychotherapist in private practice, specializing in creative issues. Author of the noted nonfiction book, *Writing From the Inside Out*, his mystery fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *The Strand* and elsewhere. His latest book, a collection of mystery short stories, is called *From Crime to*

CRIMES OF OUR TIMES: FINANCIAL FRAUD

Oct. 25 SoCal MWA Program at Beverly Hills Library Features Federal Prosecutor in Major Frauds

By Les Klinger



Brian E. Klein, October's speaker.

"Some will rob you with a six-gun, some with a fountain-pen." Those words of Woody Guthrie's, sung about the Depression era, are no less true today, when headlines are filled with accounts of prosecutions of Bernie Madoff, fraudulent tax shelter promoters, executives back-dating stock options, and the like. Although financial crimes may not be as dramatic as murders or abductions, they affect far more people.

To explore the subject, the SoCal chapter of the Mystery Writers of America presents "Crime of Our Times: Financial

Fraud," with Brian E. Klein, Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Central District of California. The program will be at 1:30 pm. on Sunday, October 25, 2009, at the Beverly Hills Public Library, 444 N. Rexford Drive; Beverly Hills, CA 90210, and is open to the public. Admission is free.

Klein is a federal prosecutor in the Major Frauds Section of the United States Attorney's Office in Los Angeles. He handles significant white-collar criminal cases, including corporate fraud, money laundering, and mortgage fraud. Mr. Klein is currently a member of the team prosecuting the Grand Rabbi of Spinka, a religious group within Orthodox Judaism, along with a number of his associates and Spinka charitable organizations. The defendants are charged in an indictment that alleges a wide-ranging conspiracy to defraud the IRS, to operate an underground money transfer system, and to launder money through an Israeli bank.

The Major Frauds Section handles the most significant white-collar cases in both the public and private sectors. One section priority is corporate fraud. The section also prosecutes a wide range of business crimes, including securities and investment fraud, mortgage fraud, telemarketing fraud, savings and loan and bank fraud and embezzlements, and bankruptcy fraud. Another section priority is public corruption cases. Public corruption priorities include bribery and corruption of government officials, mail and wire fraud, and tax evasion cases. The section also handles the most significant white-collar cases involving fraud against the government. The public sector focus includes fraud in government contracts (in particular, Department of Defense contracts), government program fraud, and health care fraud.

Before joining the United States Attorney's Office, Mr. Klein practiced criminal defense law in New York City, where he represented clients including NFL star Plaxico Burress, Michael Jackson, class-action attorney Melvyn Weiss, and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs.



It's a crime not to buy the new SoCalMWA T-shirts. Next time we meet, fork over the ten bucks. Don't be just another chalkline on the street.

MWA Booth at West Hollywood Book Fair

We will have a booth at the West Hollywood Book Fair on Sunday, Oct. 4, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. There are some great mystery panels, and lots of MWA members on mystery and non-mystery panels. For example, Laurie R. King will be on a "spiritual-themed literature" panel, Jan Burke, Charlie Huston, Linda Johnston and others and I will be on a supernatural-themed panel, Jeri Westerson is on a panel on historical fiction, and Nicholas Meyer, author of "The Seven Percent Solution" will be interviewed. Sign up for shifts at the booth, another great opportunity for meeting both readers and fellow writers. To sign up, contact Bill Fitzhugh at one of the following email addresses:

mail@billfitzhugh.com or
bfitzhugh@socal.rr.com



SoCal chapter of the Mystery Writers of America

Crime of Our Times: Financial Fraud

Interested in learning about the complexities of financial fraud?

**Hear from an expert, Brian E. Klein, Assistant U.S. Attorney for
the Central District of California**

Beverly Hills Public Library

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Free admission; open to the public

Sunday, October 25, 2009

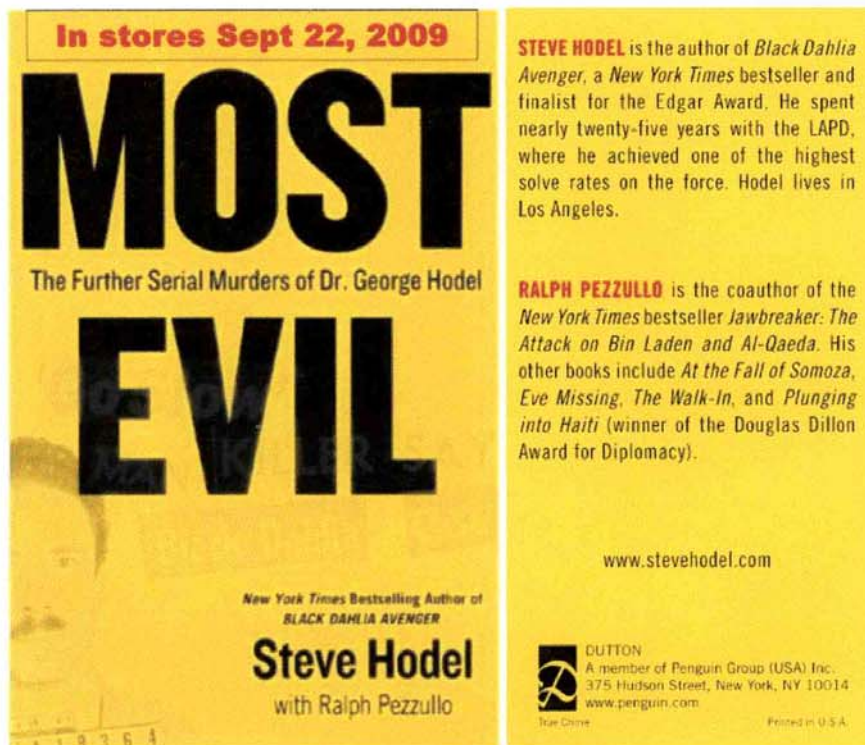
1:30 p.m.

For more information, e-mail speakers@socalmwa.com.

Brian E. Klein is a federal prosecutor in the Major Frauds Section of the United States Attorney's Office in Los Angeles. He handles significant white-collar criminal cases, including corporate fraud, money laundering, and mortgage fraud.

The Mystery Writers of America is the premier nonprofit organization for mystery writers, professionals allied to the crime writing field, aspiring crime writers, and those who are devoted to the genre.

<http://www.socalmwa.com/>



MOST EVIL

The Further Serial Murders of Dr. George Hill Hodel

A headline-making new book from the bestselling author of *Black Dahlia Avenger*.

When veteran LAPD homicide detective Steve Hodel discovered that his own late father, Dr. George Hill Hodel, had known the victim in the infamous Black Dahlia murder case of 1947 Los Angeles, the ensuing three-year investigation became the *New York Times* bestseller, *Black Dahlia Avenger*. Publication led directly to the discovery of a cache of hidden documents, covered up for decades, that confirm George Hodel had long been law enforcement's number one suspect in Elizabeth Short's grisly death.

But for Steve Hodel, that revelation was only the beginning. With twenty-four years of experience investigating homicides as an LAPD detective he instinctively knew that if his father was capable of that level of cruelty, it probably didn't begin or end with the Black Dahlia.

Steve Hodel has devoted the last decade to examining the evidence of his father's fascinating and mysterious life and the shocking new revelations that have come to light in the last five years are the subject of *Most Evil*. His findings indicate that Dr. George Hill Hodel was among the most prolific serial killers in history, beginning as a young man and continuing to kill throughout his long life of ninety-one years. Among his crimes are dozens of unsolved murder cases stretching back sixty years.

***Most Evil* compiles an astonishing amount of never-before-seen visual, circumstantial, and forensic evidence to prove Hodel's case. This relentless, compelling, and persuasive investigation will revolutionize the way we think about some of the most intriguing, brutal, unsolved, and previously unconnected murders in American history—and it may change our understanding of serial killers altogether.**

In bookstores September 22, 2009

MARCH OF CRIME



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Southern California Chapter
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Next Meeting:

The Lost Mystery Novels of L.A. at the Home of Gary Phillips

The SoCal MWA Board invites members and friends to a semi-informal discussion and gathering about The Lost Mystery Novels of L. A., **Sunday, September 13, 2-5 pm at the home of board member Gary Phillips, 1309 S. Sierra Bonita Ave., L.A., CA 90019.** We'll have light refreshments and offer brief presentations and conversation on *The Fast One* by Paul Cain, *In a Lonely Place* by Dorothy L. Hughes, *Fear of the Dark* by Gar Anthony Haywood (former chapter president) and an overview of the works of Mercedes Lambert (*Dog Town*, *Soul Town*).

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LAST WORD



Bill and Les' Excellent Adventure at the Gumbo Party August 15.