



THE MARCH OF CRIME

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA - SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER
NOVEMBER & DECEMBER 2011

MYSTERIOUS GALAXY A BOOK LOVER'S HAVEN

BY PAMELA SAMUELS-YOUNG

Mysterious Galaxy, the South Bay's newest independent bookstore, isn't just a place to purchase a book. It's a book lover's haven.

"We are more than a bookstore," says co-owner and General Manager Terry Gilman. And she means it.

Inside Mysterious Galaxy's 6,000 square-foot space, in addition to books, you'll find a state-of-the art media room where live author web chats will take place. The media room also doubles as a community room, which can be rented for literary, business or community events. There's a café in the works and plans to host workshops for the community.



Photo by Mysterious Galaxy

The store recently held its grand opening and its first web chat via Skype with author Walter Mosley. A four-hour workshop on Wild Writing will be held in November. Future workshops won't be limited to the literary arena. For example, Gilman envisions having non-profits come in to talk about their organization and share tips on how to start a non-profit.

Located in Redondo Beach, Mysterious Galaxy's core genres are mystery, science fiction, fantasy and horror. But you'll also find young adult fiction and mainstream fiction titles.

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THE PRESIDENT'S RAP SHEET GARY PHILLIPS

Well gang the year is winding down and we have several book festivals behind us already what with the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books being at USC for the first time this past year, the Tucson Festival of Books and the recent 10th anniversary of the West Hollywood Book Fair held at the gorgeous new library facility. I want to thank again the members who put in time at our both at these venues and look forward to doing it up bigger and better next year.

Upcoming we have an event honoring Erle Stanley Gardner, the attorney and mystery writer who created the nigh immortal crime fighting or at least crime ferreting out attorney Perry Mason. Not only did Gardner write some 82 Mason novels – who was an instant hit on radio and movie serials years before movie heavy Raymond Burr personalized him on TV -- he penned 151 books of fiction and non-fiction all told, among them an overlooked series under the name A.A. Fair (other pseudonyms included Kyle Corning, Carleton Kendrake, Charles J. Kenney, Les Tillray, and Charles M. Green).

These books were about Bertha Cool and Donald Lam. She was a big woman who owned a detective agency and Lam, a runt of a guy, her best operative. Unlike Mason who like any

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Opinions expressed herein are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Mystery Writers of America, or of the Southern California Chapter.



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YOUR EDITORS SPEAK

DAVID J SHERMAN & NATASCHA JAFFA



Hello and welcome to the new issue of The March of Crime. Let me apologize for the delay in publishing this issue. We - and by we I mean I - was plagued with issues that caused one delay after another.

Natascha and I would like to thank everyone for stepping up and providing us so many articles. We apologize if your piece hasn't made it into an issue yet. We will get to it as soon as possible.

As we wind down 2011, we would also like to express our gratitude for giving us this opportunity to serve the membership. We will continue to do our best for you.

Have a wonderful holiday season and a safe New Year. See you in 2012.

Dave

GET UP TO \$500 FOR WRITING CLASSES

Every year, MWA awards two promising mystery writers up to \$500 each for tuition or registration fees for classes, courses, workshops, or other programs to improve your writing -- whether your mystery is in the form of a short story, novel, script or nonfiction. Submissions for the annual Helen McCloy-MWA Scholarship must be postmarked no later than the last day in February. Live classes (not online) must take place in the U.S. and may begin any time after April 30. There are no membership requirements or application fees. Complete rules and the official application form are posted on the national MWA website: <http://mysterywriters.org> (click McCloy scholarship in the sidebar).

If you email me at mccloy-mwa@lycos.com, I'll send you a copy of FAQs and answer further questions about the scholarship.

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good criminal defense attorney would go up to the line, Cool and Lam didn't mind crossing that line time and time again. According to the Kevin Burton Smith's Thrilling Detective website, noir director Jacques Tourneur (*Out of the Past*, *Cat People*, etc.) shot a pilot in the late '50s featuring these two but it never aired nor was the show picked up.

Gardner was also involved in the formation of an organization called the Court of Last Resort, a kind of Innocence Project of its day. This organization successfully defended and had freed several wrongly indicted or convicted individuals. Did I mention too that Gardner dictated a good number of his books? Often dealing with more than one book at a time to secretaries he kept busy at his ranch in Temecula. He did, and it's in Temecula where we're having our next event on Saturday, November 19 at the Temecula Museum. The event includes a presentation on a sensational case Gardner was involved as well as a look at his recreated office in the museum. Check out our website for more information.

I leave you with this; October marked the 70th anniversary of the release of John Huston's version of Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*. As the script wisely lifted dialogue straight from the book, I believe most would agree this was the best adaptation of the classic detective novel. Here's Spade to Archer after the departure of their new client from their office, the supposed Mrs. Wonderly.

"You've got brains, yes you have." He began to make a cigarette.

It doesn't get much better than that. Until next time.

Gary

CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR NEWSLETTER

Have you penned an article that you'd like to share with your chapter? Have any upcoming events you'd like us to know about? Be sure to send in your articles and news by the 15th of the month prior to publication. The next deadline is December 15th for the January/February 2012 issue.

Our guidelines are simple. No word count minimums or maximums, no BSP, no book art. Just make the article relevant to your fellow members and stick to the point. That's it ;-)

We can't guarantee we'll publish everything, but we'll do our best.

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Hence the store's tag line, "Books of Martians, Murder, Magic, Mayhem *and More.*"

Mysterious Galaxy's business model is both innovative and aggressive. Unlike many of its competitors, the store actively reaches out to build its customer base. Mysterious Galaxy has its own blog (www.mystgalaxyblog.com), publishes two newsletters, one in print, the other electronic (The Plot Thickens/Thins and The Virtual Plot), and is active on Twitter and Facebook. Through its Signed First Mystery and Signed First Edition programs, readers can purchase signed first editions of debut and speculative fiction titles.

The owners of Mysterious Galaxy are not relying solely on in-store sales to keep them in business. "We will go anywhere to sell a book," Gilman says.

The store partners with local libraries and also supports author events, speaker events, and conferences, such as Comic-Con, the LA Times Festival of Books and the Tucson Festival of Books. Gilman has even created her own literary events, which not only help to boost the store's visibility in the community, but allow the store to give back to the community.

Ladies, Lunch and Literacy is one of Gilman's proudest creations. Debut novelists are handpicked by Gilman to participate in a literary luncheon benefiting a local non-profit organization. Other events supported by Mysterious Galaxy include Authors, Books and Conversations, which hosts events for Jewish authors and Jewish themes in the South Bay Jewish Community and Men of Mystery, an annual mystery conference in Irvine, which brings together 50 mystery authors and over 500 avid mystery fans. Next year, Mysterious Galaxy is launching Passion and Prose, which will bring 50 romance writers and 500 romance readers together for a day of conversation, programs and signings.

Opening a bookstore in a depressed economic climate when independents are dropping like flies and even giants like Borders can't survive, might sound like a bad business move. Not so, says Gilman, who's wanted to own a bookstore since she was twelve.

"I think it's exactly the right time to open," she insists. "People are looking for a place to come and have conversation. They'll get tired of their electronic devices at some point. Maybe we'll full circle back to being human beings who are interested in connecting and learning about something new."

A veteran bookseller who has an MBA in marketing and finance, Gilman knows the book business well. For the last eighteen years, she has successfully managed Mysterious Galaxy's

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Mystery Writers of America, Inc. (MWA) was established in 1945 by a dozen or so like-minded mystery writers for the purpose of promoting and protecting the interests and welfare of mystery writers and to increase the esteem and literary recognition given to the genre.

FRESH BLOOD

Active

Adrienne Barbeau

CRIME DOESN'T PAY ... PERIOD

By EJ MCGILL

Googling MWA's unofficial motto, "crime doesn't pay enough," brings up more than a few links to pages confirming that, as a whole, crime writers are a poorly paid lot.

Topping the list of my Google search results is Harlan Cobin's 2008 blog promoting the idea that no crime writer must fail so that another may succeed. In other words, the genre is not like a college composition class where As are reserved for the chosen few.

Easy for the A-student of crime writers to blog. The unfortunate fact is that mystery writing is one of the most competitive fields a writer can put his mind to—that is, if the writer's goal is financial security. For those who measure success based on line 22 of their IRS form 1040, mystery writing is not the way to go.

There was a time when magazines published mystery fiction. Most you've probably never heard of. None of the magazines that published Raymond Chandler's 22 short stories in his lifetime are still active. In today's market, you're either in or out, depending more on geographical location than on talent. For most of us living in the sticks, the sense of satisfaction we get from writing the story just has to do.

That's the bad news. The good news is that mystery writers, whether they're aware or not, are especially well equipped to write stuff that can make actual money. It's called non-fiction.

After some encouragement and motivational goading, I finally began dabbling in travel pieces. My rejection rate dropped dramatically and I was suddenly selling just about everything I wrote—several pieces more than once. When I ran out of travel experiences, I switched to military aviation-related articles. One led to a paperback sale and now (very late in life) the hardback edition is due as I write, and a brand new hardback, commissioned with an advance before a word was written, has been accepted and is scheduled for publication this coming winter.

My experience with non-fiction is but another example of the old saw, "write what you know best." Even though our closets may be filled with rejection slips, we all attempt this in our mystery writing—avoiding non-fiction because it's not so much fun. Perhaps we forget that all



Photo by Rhonda Oglesby, <http://sfp.to/sYIMeN>

GRAPHOLOGY

BY DOUGLAS CORLEONE

Like fingerprints, no two individuals' handwriting is identical. No matter how many handwriting traits two people share, upon close inspection, an analyst will discover certain differences. The reason each individual's writing style is personal and entirely unique is that handwriting is the result of unconscious and automatic movements – actions that stem from the brain. Given the fact that the act of handwriting is unconscious and unique, many scientists submit that an individual's handwriting reveals his personality traits, and therefore, handwriting analysis can be used as a tool for determining a person's personality.

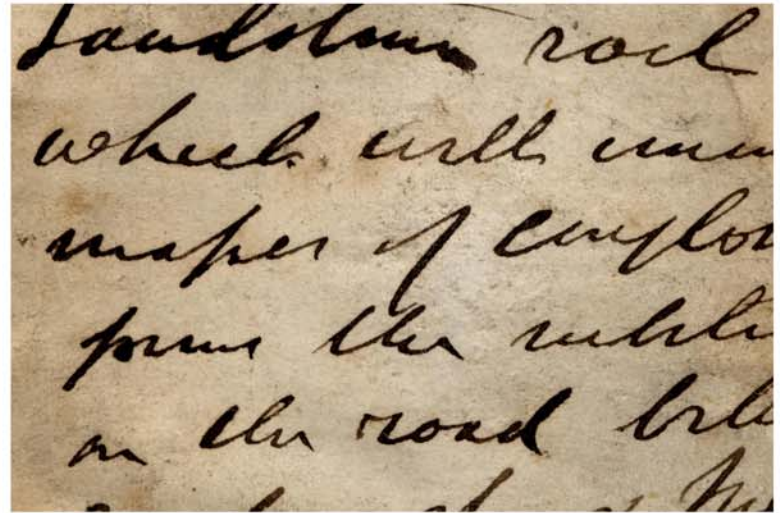


Photo by Kevin Walsh, <http://sfp.to/vOp2WH>

The study of handwriting to determine the writer's personality type is called graphology. Graphology, in some form, has been around for nearly four centuries, though the term itself wasn't coined until 1875, when Jean Hippolyte Michon first systemized handwriting analysis by associating hundreds of graphic signs with specific personality traits.

Today there is no single method or theory that governs graphology. Indeed, many graphologists have developed their own system to determine personality traits from an individual's handwriting. There are, however, some common elements found in these differing systems. Graphologists tend to seek particular features, such as the size and slant of individual letters, the curvature and angularity of certain characters, and the amount of pressure likely applied to upward and downward strokes.

Graphologists are also particular in the types of samples they analyze. Most prefer spontaneous handwriting samples, i.e. samples not written for the express purpose of analysis. They favor longer samples that were written with an instrument that is sensitive to speed and pressure. Of course, graphologists would also elect to have as much information about the writer as possible, including age, sex, education and other biographical material.

The claims graphologists make about handwriting analysis vary widely. Some claim they can predict what the writer will do and how he will react in specific situations. Others claim they can forecast the writer's future actions and intellectual performance. Still others suggest that by altering one's handwriting, one can alter his own personality.

The validity of graphology is still being debated, but there is plenty of information available, including nearly two hundred books authored by graphologists. Some graphologists offer their services over the World Wide Web, while others market expensive handwriting-analysis software. Is handwriting analysis an effective tool for determining personality traits?

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flagship store in San Diego with co-owners Maryelizabeth Hart and Jeff Mariotte. Gilman has also been a past president and long-time board member of the Southern California Independent Booksellers Association. Next year, she will again take the helm as president. Gilman says her partnership with co-owner Hart, the store's Publicity and Events Manager, is one of the reasons for their longevity in the book business.

"She's one of the smartest people I know in books," Gilman says, "which makes her uniquely qualified to set up our events, talk to publishers and set the tone for the store." Hart handles her end of the business from her home in Arizona.

The store boasts a staff of well-read, knowledgeable booksellers whose personal recommendations are posted around the store via shelf talkers, a short summary or blurb of a book.

"We hired our staff based on the fact that they like to read," says Gilman.

"That's what this whole bookstore is about," echoes LeAnna Herrera, Marketing and Events Manager. "We recommend books that we love."

Herrera, who lost her job during Borders' first round of layoffs, plans to ensure that the store is customer focused.

"I want customers to say, 'I'd rather go over to Mysterious Galaxy to get this book because they're going to know a little bit about me and care what they recommend to me.' I want our staff to understand the customers and what they're looking for. That's how we'll be a success."

While the sale of e-books continues to skyrocket, Gilman isn't grumbling about it. She's embracing them. Visitors to the store will soon find Quick Response or QR codes on Mysterious Galaxy's book shelves. By using their smartphones, customers can click on a QR code (which is similar to a bar code), to purchase Google e-books via the Mysterious Galaxy website right there in the store.

Gilman also isn't concerned about the e-book revolution wiping out brick and mortar bookstores. "People love this experience," Gilman says, as she reaches for a book from a nearby table and caresses the cover with the palm of her hand. "Will we be around in 2050? I don't know. But I think that for the foreseeable future, there's enough of us who love the tactile experience with a book. I love everything there is about reading a book including this experience."

Herrera stresses that bookstores serve an important purpose. "A bookstore is like your local coffee house where everybody congregates to have a cup of coffee and conversation to talk about things. I think that's why coffee houses and bookstores go so well together, because of the whole sense of community."

Authors will find a very welcoming and supportive environment at Mysterious Galaxy. Herrera is particularly excited about hosting authors in the store. "I'm the biggest nerd in the world when it comes to meeting authors," she says. "If you have the wherewithal to start a book and finish it, I have a high esteem for people who can do that. I really like being around

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WRITE MIND: THE JUDGE

BY DENNIS PALUMBO

Among the majority of my writer patients, a salient concern is the struggle against one's "inner critic," the persistent, sometimes harsh and almost always shaming "voice" that belittles or invalidates one's work. Indeed, the term "inner critic" is such a well-known concept in our culture that millions of dollars are spent on books, DVD's and seminars promising to silence—or even banish altogether—this punishing element of most people's inner world.

The problem with this approach, in my view, is two-fold: first, the goal of killing off the self-critical, judgmental part of your psyche confirms the idea that there's something wrong with you that needs to be fixed. It suggests that there's a perfectable "you" in the future who's unencumbered by such conflicts.



Photo by Seattle Municipal Archives, <http://sfp.to/sdXkgk>

Not to mention my second objection, which is that it isn't even possible.

Unquestionably, there's nothing more painful about the writing process than struggling against feelings of self-doubt, even self-loathing. I've worked with patients who literally hate everything they write—it's not good enough, funny enough, smart enough, commercial enough. Even those with a more balanced view of their output acknowledge the stress of continually having to keep deeply critical inner voices at bay just to get through the damn thing.

"Killing off" your inner critic won't work; it isn't even desirable. It's part of who you are. A necessary part. As much as your enthusiasm, your work habits, your loves and hates, your joys and regrets. Because, like these other aspects of your emotional life, an inner critic is a two-edged sword.

Think of it this way: the same inner critic that judges our work so severely provides us with the ability to discern our likes and dislikes, to form opinions, to make decisions. It reinforces the faith in our subjective experience that allows us to choose this rather than that.

We need a sense of judgment to navigate in the world. The amount and intensity of that judgment, as with most things, lies along a continuum; hopefully, we possess neither too much, nor too little.

Imagine waiting to cross the street at a busy intersection: With too little judgment, you might ignore the "Don't Walk" sign and get run over; with too much judgment, you stand frozen even

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CHAPTER NEWS

Linda O. Johnston's *Cougar's Conquest*, from Harlequin Bites, is part of her Alpha Force miniseries about a covert military group of shapeshifters and will be released in November. The novel follows her October release of *Hawk's Challenge*.

Lee Goldberg is thrilled to announce that Amazon's Thomas & Mercer imprint has picked up The Dead Man series in a unique and exclusive 12-book digital & print deal with an option for more. But that's not all. Brilliance Audio will be also be rolling out their own editions of the books. The sixth book in the series will be released in November and will be followed each month by another new adventure in the continuing saga of Matt Cahill, a man resurrected from the dead to battle evil among us that only he can see. Lee's short film, "Remaindered", which premiered at Bouchercon 2010 before hitting the Festival circuit, is now available to see for free on Vimeo. Written and directed by Goldberg, the film is based on his short story, a Reader's Choice finalist in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine a few years back.

Co-editor of The March of Crime, **Natascha Jaffa**, has officially launched her freelance editing services. SPJ Editing is currently offering 20% off all manuscript services for Mystery Writers of America members. Please visit www.spjediting.com for further information.

Leslie S. Klinger has two new books that will be released soon. *A Study in Sherlock*, published by Random House (in tpb) and Poisoned Pen Press (hb), co-edited with **Laurie R. King**: A collection of stories inspired by the Sherlock Holmes Canon, written by 18 major writers.

Robert L. Hecker's musical, "Honestly Abe", is in rehearsal for a November or December Off-Broadway opening! His dramatic/comedy, "That Other Woman", is also in rehearsals for a November Off-Broadway opening. His newest novel, *Rachel's War*, a WWII romantic/thriller, is now available at Bookstores and from Amazon.

Dennis Palumbo's second Daniel Rinaldi mystery, *Fever Dream*, comes out this month from Poisoned Pen Press. It's the sequel to his acclaimed debut novel, *Mirror Image*.

Robert S. Levinson shares cover billing and has the lead story (illustrated), "Unexpected Truths," set in the world of comic strips, is in the December issue of Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, now available at newstands. December's Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine carries a **** review for Bob's *A Rhumba in Waltz Time* in its monthly "Jury Box" feature by Steve Steinbock, while a large print edition is due in February from Thorndike Press.

The latest adventure in **Kris Neri's** Lefty Award-nominated magical mystery series, featuring fake psychic Samantha Brennan and Celtic goddess/FBI agent Annabelle Haggerty, will debut in late-November. Kris has arranged a SoCal tour for early February, and she hopes to meet up with old friends then. Kris Neri will repeat her popular online mystery and thriller writing class, *Committing the Perfect Crime*, for the UCLA Writers' Program's Winter Quarter. The ten-week class will begin January 18th. The class is ideal for both beginners as well as those with a WIP that they need help shaping. For more information, visit her website: <http://www.krisneri.com/classes.html> or <http://www.uclaextension.edu>.

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authors.”

Gilman loves discovering new authors and apparently has a knack for it. After reading an advance copy of *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, she started pushing the book and nabbed Stockett for her Ladies, Lunch and Literary event long before the book hit the New York Times Bestseller's list.

“My claim to fame is that I picked Kathryn Stockett's book before she was Kathryn Stockett,” she says with a laugh.

The same support Gilman shows to authors is also extended to other bookstores. She started a coalition of independent book stores in San Diego to partner in programming and advertising ventures. She plans to do the same thing in the South Bay with Pages Bookstore.

“Independents have to support each other,” she says. “It's really about getting the word out about what an independent bookstore brings to the community versus being in competition.

“I believe passionately in the bookselling business,” Gilman says. “Every single one of us is in it for the love of the game.”

Mysterious Galaxy is located at 2810 Artesia Boulevard, Redondo Beach, CA 90278. To find out about the store's upcoming events, visit www.mystgalaxy.com



Photo by Mysterious Galaxy

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writing depends on techniques that can be applied across genres, and effective mysteries require the best techniques. The same can be said of non-fiction.

While crime writing may not be a dog-eat-dog exercise in futility, it's limited market makes making a buck highly problematic. So, if bucks are what you need, think about applying your experience, research, and talent to writing that other stuff, non-fiction.

E. J. McGill's non-fiction, Black Tuesday Over Namsi and Jet Age Man can be ordered online. His previously published mysteries and other non-profit titles are available for download to your Kindle.

An invalidated pre-employment test could be deemed unlawful—and subject an employer to legal liabilities—if the test is determined to have a discriminatory impact. Title VII bars discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or reprisal. Given the fact that most studies show that graphology is ineffective at predicting future job performance, many employers decide that employing the test is not worth the legal risk.

Still, a great number of graphologists purport to have big name clients, though few are willing to share the identities of those clients.

No certification is required to become a graphologist, as no certification is recognized. Up until the turn of the century, Felician College in Lodi, New Jersey, offered an Associate Arts degree in Graphology. However, since 2000, no accredited academic institution in the United States offers a Graphology degree. Training, however, remains available through correspondence courses.



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Like any trier of fact, it is vital to examine the offers of proof on each side of the issue.

Today, graphology is frequently used to screen candidates for employment. Despite studies demonstrating graphology's apparent ineffectiveness in reflecting future job performance, many large businesses continue to use handwriting analysis during the evaluation process. Businesses utilizing graphology generally seek candidates with personality traits consistent with honesty, reliability, and productivity. For instance, many graphologists agree that small handwriting indicates an ability to focus attention and avoid distractions, while missing t-bars demonstrate forgetfulness and absentmindedness—in other words, someone who lacks attention to detail, will literally fail to dot i's and cross t's.

Some large corporations and local governments refuse to use graphology because of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination.

The lack of more formal training is one argument set forth by detractors of graphology. Opponents of handwriting analysis as a way of determining the writer's personality traits contend that graphology is a pseudoscience and that there exists no clear and consistent correlation between handwriting and basic personality traits. While some detractors

concede that handwriting analysis should be studied further, the research currently available is generally inconclusive at best.

In 1992, neuroscientist Barry Beyerstein authored a book titled *The Write Stuff: Evaluations of Graphology—The Study of Handwriting Analysis*, which provides a summary of the research literature available on the subject. In an interview on PBS's award-winning science series "Scientific American Frontiers," hosted by Alan Alda, Beyerstein called graphology a "pseudoscientific 'character reading' method," and suggested that its use "to make decisions that can seriously affect people's reputations and life prospects" is "scandalous."

In addition to scientists, several courts in the United States have weighed in on the issue of handwriting analysis and its validity. Courts have routinely ruled that a handwriting analyst could not offer expert testimony regarding a person's physical or mental condition. In order for graphological evidence to be deemed admissible in court, most jurisdictions require (at a minimum) that it pass the test set forth in the case of *Frye v. United States*, 293 F. 1013 (D.C. Cir. 1923). The Frye test requires that when scientific evidence is offered, there must be a general consensus in the appropriate scientific field that the theory behind the technique is sound, and that it has been reliably reduced to practice.

Seventy years after the ruling in *Frye*, the U.S. Supreme Court set forth an even more rigid approach to determining whether expert scientific testimony is admissible. Under the ruling in *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc.*, 509 U.S. 579 (1993), the trial judge is required to ensure that the expert's testimony is "relevant to the task at hand" and that it is based "on a reliable foundation." In other words, scientific evidence must be the product of sound scientific methodology derived from the scientific method. The scientific method requires, among other things, that there be empirical testing that is subject to peer review and publication. Moreover, the theory and technique must be generally accepted by a relevant scientific community.

Although there have been no reported cases of graphological evidence decided under the *Daubert* test, it is likely that such evidence would be deemed inadmissible for purposes of assessing personality.

Outside the courtroom, however, intriguing questions remain. Is a writer with wide e-loops broadminded and free of bigotry? Do tall d and t stems indicate a writer is vain? Does heavy average stroke pressure demonstrate emotional intensity?

Some law enforcement agencies believe the answer is yes—personality traits can be ascertained by examining a perpetrator's handwriting. In determining the identity of a perpetrator, it is often vital for law enforcement to learn as much as possible about the criminal's personality by gathering and analyzing evidence left at the crime scene. Personality traits can be determined by the perpetrator's actions, choice of weapon, choice of victims, and possibly by his handwriting. As such, regardless of whether graphological evidence will ultimately be ruled admissible in court, the science of handwriting analysis has progressed into an important tool used in the profiling of criminals.

Douglas Corleone is the Shamus-nominated author of the Kevin Corvelli crime novels set in Honolulu. His debut novel, One Man's Paradise, won the 2009 Minotaur Books/Mystery Writers of America First Crime Novel Award. His third Kevin Corvelli novel, Last Lawyer Standing, will be released by Minotaur Books in 2012. A former New York City criminal defense attorney, Corleone now lives in the Hawaiian Islands. www.douglascorleone.com.

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when the sign reads “Walk,” and therefore never get anywhere.

What I’m trying to suggest here is that we don’t judge our having an inner judge too harshly. Writing in the face of a persistent inner critic is draining enough. To compound the problem by blaming yourself for being engaged in the struggle is ridiculous.

Remember, too, what I said about your inner critic being a two-edged sword. Because if we can accept with self-compassion this troubling aspect of ourselves, we might even learn something.

I’m thinking of an example from my own experience as a patient in therapy. This was many years ago, when I was struggling with some very painful issues, specifically a rather profound fear of failure that seemed unaffected by my outward success. The sessions were so gut-wrenching, I thought about quitting therapy.

Yet I kept coming, week after week, much to my own surprise. When I mentioned this to my therapist, he suggested that while the issues underlying my fear of failure were indeed painful and difficult, it was this same fear of failure that kept me coming back to therapy every week. In other words, the same thing that was causing the problem was providing the determination to keep slugging away at it. I just wouldn’t quit.

That’s when I realized what a two-edged sword my particular problem was. Like the ancient concept of yin and yang, almost every aspect of our emotional life has both an affirming and an invalidating component. Our job, then, is to examine an issue that troubles us—a harsh inner critic, for example—and learn what is both positive and negative about it, in terms of our work and our life.

If we approach our inner critic from this perspective, that of a life-long process of examination, we can co-exist with it. That along with feeling the pain of its intense scrutiny, we also develop the courage to challenge the self-defeating meanings we give to that pain. This has always been the artist’s struggle. What Rollo May calls “the courage to create.”

Or, to put it bluntly: You’re a writer. Which means, you’re your own worst critic. Join the club.

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is now a licensed psychotherapist in private practice. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine, The Strand, Written By and elsewhere, and is collected in From Crime to Crime (Tallfellow Press). His mystery novel, Mirror Image (Poisoned Pen Press), is the first in a series featuring psychologist Daniel Rinaldi, a trauma expert who consults with the Pittsburgh Police. The sequel, Fever Dream, appears in November. Info at www.dennispalumbo.com.

HAVE A SAFE AND HAPPY NEW YEAR