



THE MARCH OF CRIME

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA - SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

DECEMBER 2012 & JANUARY 2013

**SAY HELLO TO OUR NEW PRESIDENT,
JERI WESTERSON**



[continued on page 4]

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

THE PRESIDENT'S RAP SHEET, 2
YOUR EDITOR SPEAKS, 3
WHAT'S IN A NAME?, 5
CHAPTER NEWS, 6
THE PRO SHOP, 7



THE PRESIDENT'S RAP SHEET GARY PHILLIPS

Happy new year. Your votes have been tallied, and let me offer a tip of my hat to the incoming president, Jeri Westerson, and the new and returning board. It's been a blast being your chapter prez these last two years and I leave you in capable hands. Now then, here's to 2013 being the most coolest and rewarding to all of us in the writing game. And though you won't have me to kick around anymore, to paraphrase Richard Nixon – and of course I'm just kidding, you haven't seen the last of me.

Remember this chapter is only as strong as your involvement makes it. All the best, and keep pounding those keys, keep telling those stories.

Gary

THANK YOU, GARY

The SoCal membership thanks you, Gary, for your two years of hard work and dedication. Your leadership has been a great asset to the organization.

We wish you all the best.

YOUR EDITOR SPEAKS

DAVID J SHERMAN



Welcome to the December 2012/January 2013 issue of TMOC. It is with a heavy heart that I bid farewell to our esteemed President, Gary Phillips. It has been an honor to work with Gary since I began editing TMOC in mid-2011. Your sharp eye and wit will be missed, my friend.

Not to worry, there is also good news at hand. I have the pleasure to welcome our new President, Jeri Westerson, to the helm. As many of you may remember, Jeri was Editor of TMOC before taking the gig as VP, and now Prez. She never went anywhere... just likes changing hats.

John Morgan Wilson's *The Pro Shop* is back. This time he has an awesome interview with Denise Hamilton. And finally, Jennifer Moss makes her debut in TMOC with *What's in a Name?*, an interesting article about naming our characters.

Dave

The March of Crime is the newsletter of the Southern California Chapter of the Mystery Writers of America. TMOC Editor: 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.



PO Box 55215, Sherman Oaks CA 91413 - www.socalmwa.com, info@socalmwa.com

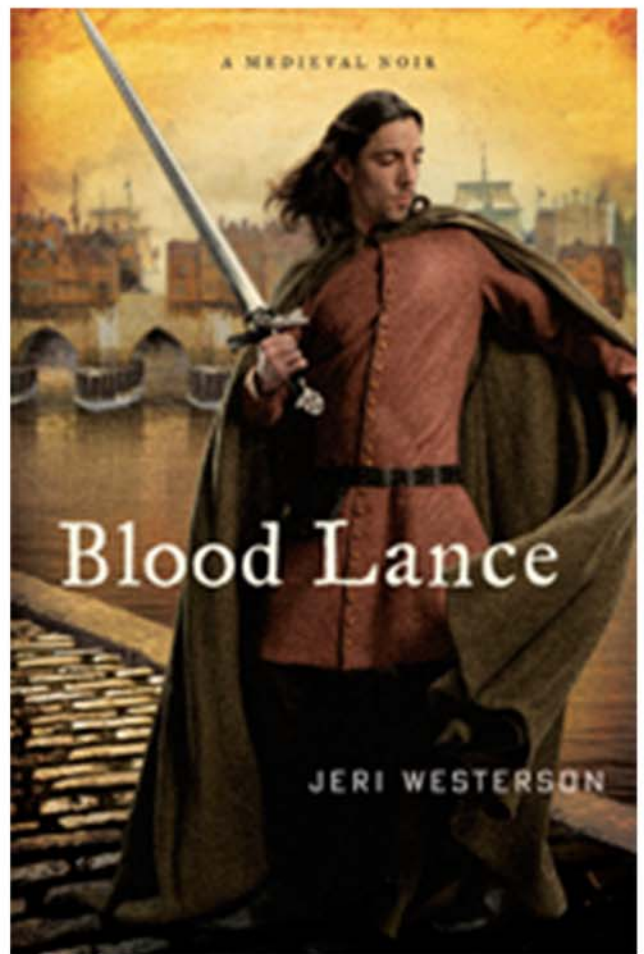
WHO IS JERI, ANYWAY?

Perhaps you're wondering... who is this woman who has just been elected to the highest office in the land? Or the highest office in our chapter, anyway. Officially...

Jeri Westerson was born and bred on the mean streets of Los Angeles, inhaling smog and enduring earthquakes. Newspaper reporter, would-be actress, theology teacher, graphic artist; these are the things she spent her time on before becoming a novelist. She took all that gritty edginess and dropped it into the Middle Ages, creating her own style of medieval mystery that she calls *Medieval Noir*.

Her Crispin Guest books have been shortlisted for a slew of mystery awards, including the Macavity, the Agatha, Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award, and the Shamus, the first medieval mystery to be nominated for this prestigious PI award.

Jeri wrote historical fiction for a decade, unable to get her offbeat historicals published until she turned to writing historical mysteries. She's still uncertain if this persistence has paid off, however, as she struggles to find a new home for her orphaned medieval series. In the meantime, she still writes her gay mystery series under the pen name Haley Walsh, presides as Vice President for the Los Angeles chapter of Sisters in Crime and co-chair for the California Crime Writers Conference. Her long-suffering husband is a commercial photographer and award-winning homebrewer, and her son—despite seeing his mother's struggles—has shrugged off the easy life in computer science to become a screenwriter. May God have mercy on his soul. Besides writing and swooning over anything British, Jeri herds two cats, a tortoise, and the occasional tarantula at her southern California home.



Unofficially? You'll just have to meet her to find out.

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

What's in a Name?

JENNIFER MOSS



*Guest columnist Jennifer Moss makes her TMOC debut in this issue. She is the founder and CEO of babynames.com, and the author of *The One-in-a-Million Baby Name Book* (Perigee Press, 2008). Her debut mystery novel, *Town Red*, was published by Black Opal Books in September 2012. For more information, visit www.jennifermoss.com.*

Over fifteen years ago I started a website for names and naming. It has been an obsession of mine since childhood, when I'd pore through the phonebook in search of unique examples. At babynames.com, we get many writers using the site to name their characters. After all, our characters are practically our "babies," aren't they?

But naming a character is different than naming a child. There are certain guidelines that every writer should follow when choosing names for their beloved "children." Here are the most important:

Make the name age-appropriate. The biggest mistake writers make—in both print and on-screen—is choosing a name that is inappropriate for the character's age. Ethan may be a popular baby name now, but it was not common thirty years ago. Calculate the approximate year your character was born and look at the Social Security Name Index for that year. (<http://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/>). The SSA will give you a list of the top 1,000 names for any year, dating back to 1900.

Don't go overboard with meaning. It's wonderful that you want to give your character a name with meaning, but don't make it too obvious or your novel will sound like a 1950's Harlequin romance. Stay away from heroes named Rod Boulder and Chastity Grace. Instead, dig deeper. The name Pearl, for example, implies femininity and charm without being too deliberate.

Make the name easy to pronounce. When a reader comes across a difficult name, they'll stumble, rewind and reread it, taking them out of your story. Remember the first time you

read *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*? It took a while to absorb the Nordic monikers, didn't it? Consider making your character names easy to spell and easy to pronounce. If you want to name a character Rachael, why not just name her Rachel? Unless it's integral to the plot that she have a traditionally Hebrew name. Which brings us to...

Know your character's backstory. A person's name reflects person's culture, geographical location, family background and parental characteristics. You must know your character's backstory in order to give her a more believable name. What is her ethnicity? Where was she born? Are her parents religious? If so, she may be more likely to have a biblical or traditional name like Elizabeth or Sarah. If her parents were carefree hippies of the 60's, she may be named Sunflower or Meadow. This applies to your minor characters, too. And especially your villain!

Sci-fi names don't have to sound alien. So you are writing a fantasy novel about another world—or perhaps our world, four thousand years in the future. That's fine, but you still have to consider the above rules. Don't get crazy and name a Zxyxylfx just because it sounds alien, or your readers will give up after chapter one. Great science fiction names are still easy to pronounce and easy to spell. Great examples of fantasy names include Bilbo Baggins (*The Hobbit*), Anakin Skywalker (*Star Wars*), and Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*). There are many resources for fantasy names including mythological characters, gods/goddesses and nature names. Another trick is to combine two more common names, like Brenerine (Brenda+Catherine).

By following the above rules, not only will you help your reader enjoy your novel, but you will also make your storyline more authentic. Naming your characters is one of the most exciting aspects of creating your story. I envy every writer who is currently at that phase of his creation!

CHAPTER NEWS

Amnon Kabatchnik's book, *Blood on the Stage, 1975 - 2000*, was released in October. It is the fourth in a series, following three *Blood on the Stage* volumes covering suspense plays produced during 1900-1925, 1925-1950, and 1950-1975.

Craig Faustus Buck's short story "Dead Wrong" will appear in the February issue of *Twisted Dreams Magazine*, the magazine for those whose blood runs a darker shade of red (both print and online).

Gay Totl Kinman's latest short stories on KindleShorts feature an inept thief who likes indoor work, but is being paid to steal a famous plant from The Huntington Library in "Spyder's Plant." Written with Jill Cogen and first published in *Gone Coastal: A Mystery Anthology*. Gay's series of five short mystery stories featuring Jane Jillson, "The Coyote's Find", "The Corpse Flower", "The Fire Drill", "Hide in Plain View", and "Theft of the Rare Books" are all available on Kindle.

Gary Phillips has a short story, "Black Caesar's Gold" in the *Heroin Chronicles* edited by Jerry Stahl, out now from Akashic Books. These two and other contributors will read from, discuss and sign copies of the anthology on Thursday, January 17, 7p.m. at Book Soup, 8818 Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood, 90069. 310.659.3110



THE PRO SHOP

JOHN MORGAN WILSON

In each installment of The Pro Shop, John Morgan Wilson interviews a chapter member about a particular aspect of crime writing and writing in general. This month, Denise Hamilton discusses "From Fact to Fiction" – the transition from journalist to novelist.

Prior to writing fiction, Denise Hamilton was an award-winning staff writer for the Los Angeles Times. Her crime novels have been finalists for the Edgar, Anthony, Macavity and Willa Cather awards. She has five books in the Eve Diamond series; a nourish standalone, The Last Embrace (2008), set in 1949 Hollywood; and her latest novel, Damage Control (2011), which earned starred reviews in Publishers Weekly and Library Journal and is now out in paperback. Denise also edited the bestselling Los Angeles Noir and Los Angeles Noir 2: The Classics. For more about Denise, visit www.denisehamilton.com.

JMW: Like many fiction writers, you come from a journalism background. When and why did you decide to try your hand at fiction?

DH: Journalism was a great way to get paid to write and to travel the world and to collect the raw material that would later form my novels. With journalism, you are both very engaged and very removed, and I liked that dichotomy. The profession provided a membrane, a way to mediate the world. So when I would sit with a family that had just lost a child to gang violence, I would cry with them, and their sadness would seep into my bones and mingle with my own, but I would also always be conscious that I was there to get details, to get them to open up to me, to give me the information that would allow me to tell their story. I often retreated behind this shield, that pad of paper. It was a safe place for a shy person like me. But I would hear astounding stories, and often they didn't fit into the parameters of daily journalism, the Who, What, When, Where and Why and then Goodbye of daily journalism. I do believe I have the personality of a reporter. I love nothing more than to ask you a million questions, find out everything about you, then run off and write about it. But after 10 years, I realized that I didn't want to stick to the facts anymore, that I wanted to make the stories I heard even better, I wanted to put words in people's mouths, create secondary characters and plots. I wanted it all to be malleable. So I came full circle after 10 years as a reporter and started weaving fiction and fact together in my spare time, creating the story that became my first novel, *The Jasmine Trade*.



DENISE HAMILTON
Photograph by Blake Little

JMW: The benefits of a reporting or feature writing background seem obvious – research and writing experience, attention to craft, developing a sense of story structure, working on deadlines, et al. But were there any drawbacks and challenges in your creative transition?

DH: The hardest thing I faced was giving myself permission to make shit up. As a journalist, I'd been taught and indoctrinated to stick to the facts, and not to put words in peoples' mouths. I totally understand why journalists must do that. But in my head I'd already moved beyond that point, and I ached to use the raw material of the journalistic stories I was telling to write fiction. And so I created a reporter character [Eve Diamond], drawn somewhat on me, and the experiences that my friends and I had as reporters, and started to write fiction. Journalism was the perfect apprenticeship for fiction, once I was able to break through the fact-prison.

JMW: What role does research play in your work now and what advice can you provide neophyte writers who lack your journalism experience and might be weak in this area?

DH: I got paid well to collect raw material for 10 years as a journalist. And that was wonderful. Now I have to do research for new books that don't feature a journo sleuth, but I always remember the admonition about research, how you can get lost in it and it can take you over and serve as a procrastinating wedge. So I try to do much of the research as I write. Sometimes I'll write a scene and do the research afterward, changing and filling in as needed. It's said about journalists that we have knowledge a mile long and an inch deep. We fake it. We need to know enough to create a sense of verisimilitude and to get our facts right, but not so much that we get lost in it. I think this is also true with novels. So the advice I'd give to neophytes is: Do a little research so you get comfortable with the material, but then start writing. Trust your voice and your plot and write and then fill in and enhance and correct in the second draft. Don't let the research become a barrier to writing.

JMW: In *Damage Control*, your female protagonist works in the high echelons of PR and crisis management. How did you plumb that world for detail and authenticity?

DH: I had only experienced this world as a reporter on the other end, asking questions of PR people who didn't want me there and were trying to conceal certain facts and spin things in their clients' favor. So I interviewed a bunch of PR people, read profiles of some of the industry's leaders, took a PR executive to lunch and plied him with 'what if' questions about his trade. (Sample questions: Do you have to believe in your client's innocence? Would you ever turn a client down? How do you handle it if they're guilty?, etc) I also followed very closely some of the scandals du jour such as Weingate, Schwarzenegger, Eliot Spitzer, Tiger Woods and others, and read back stories about the Chandra Levy murder case and U.S. Rep. Gary Condit. I was very interested in how PR people in those cases spun the stories, what they told the press and equally important, what they didn't. It was very illuminating.

JMW: Like newspaper and magazine hooks, ideas for crime novels are all around us. Yet choosing a viable premise that can sustain a full-length novel is a crucial decision for an author. What criteria do you apply when you select a story premise that must provide sufficient dramatic material for a satisfying novel and also keep you fully engaged as you write it?

DH: It has to be material that I have an emotional connection with. I have to fall in love with the characters (even the bad ones), to want to find out what happens to them as I write

the story. The plot itself also has to have enough complexity and not be too black and white, it has to have nuances and shades of gray and murk in which I can spin the tale and create a scenario where we don't know who the killer is but many of the players may have the motivation and means to become the villain.

JMW: Do you keep any particular novels or authors handy for re-reading, reference, inspiration, motivation, etc.? If so, which ones, and how do they help you as a writer?

DH: I re-read Raymond Chandler every few years. I always find his work inspiring, and I get new and different things from it each time, perhaps depending on my mood or what strikes me. [But] I am an omnivorous reader, so what inspires and motivates me is usually whatever I happen to be reading at the time. And it certainly doesn't have to be a mystery. I might really like the way a memoir describes a love scene, or a literary novel handles a tiny moment of grace or enlightenment. For me, it's also a lot about mood and tone. Often, I want to recapture in my own writing the noiry or fantastical mood or literary spell that a book casts on me. The emotional hook, the crux of an idea, or a feeling, is what I hope I can convey in whatever I happen to be writing. Recently, when I read *Look Me in the Eye*, a memoir about Aspergers [by John Elder Robison], and then a piece in the *New York Times Magazine* about cutting-edge marketing, I was inspired to write a story melding the two for a Sherlock Holmes anthology. So it's not literal, or linear, or even rational. The influence is more like an Impressionist painting on my writing.

JMW: In today's downsized publishing market, many publishers expect manuscripts to come in more polished and closer to publication ready than in earlier times. What has your experience been in this regard and what advice can you offer to the aspiring author trying to break in?

DH: My most recent book, *Damage Control*, was the most lightly edited of all my books, but it has gotten some of the best reviews. So hopefully I'm getting better and need less editing these days. I do think it's helpful for aspiring writers to get feedback from a teacher or a writing group or trusted friends. You want to turn in the best, most polished and finished draft that you can. But ultimately, your book is going to be bought based on the voice and plot, not on grammar and punctuation. That can be fixed very late in the game. Just be the best storyteller you can.

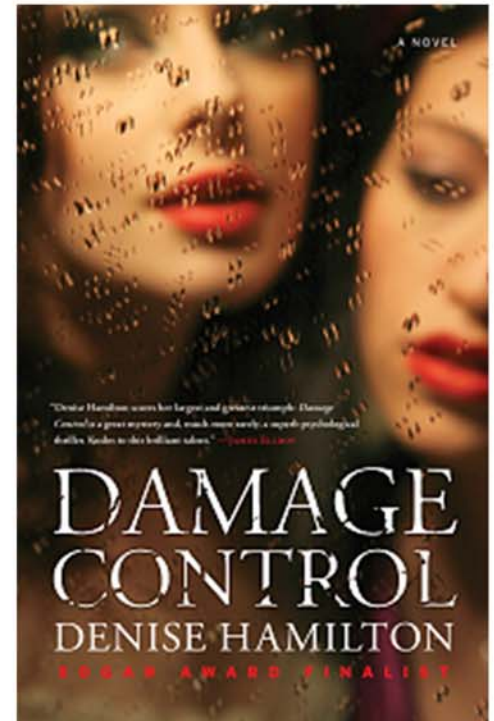


Photo: Scribner

A former journalist and MWA So Cal board member, John Morgan Wilson is the author of eight novels in the Benjamin Justice series, including Simple Justice, which won an Edgar for Best First Novel. John's short fiction has appeared in EQMM and several anthologies.