

October 2019



The  
MARCH

of CRIME

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## SoCalMWA & SinCLA

*present*

## POLICE INTERROGATION TECHNIQUES

Saturday, October 26

10 a.m.-1 p.m.

Join SoCalMWA and Sisters in Crime Los Angeles for an exciting special event presented by the LAPD's leading instructor on interview and interrogation techniques.

Learn what authors get right, get wrong, and how to elevate your work no matter what your genre.



Detective Toosbuy

Detective Ninette Toosbuy retired from the LAPD with more than 24 years of service. Toosbuy began working sex crimes investigations in 2002, quickly learning that in order to be most effective she needed to be more than just a cop. A good detective knows that communication is her currency. The work demands the ability to talk with and interview people of all ages, from all walks of life, in a manner that encourages unrestrained and truthful information sharing.

### Save the Date!

TAM LUNCHEON  
November 10  
Los Angeles

Audiobook production &  
publishing panel

South Pasadena Library Community Room  
1115 El Centro Street  
South Pasadena, CA 91030

This event is free and open to the public however RSVP is required for room capacity. Click the email address below to RSVP with the word ATTENDING in the subject line: [sinclaworkshops@gmail.com](mailto:sinclaworkshops@gmail.com).

\* This activity is not sponsored by the City of South Pasadena or the South Pasadena Library. \*



## The President's Rap Sheet

*Glen Erik Hamilton*

Happy Autumn, All. With a brief pause in my writing schedule while I wait for feedback from my editor—and try to stop nervously chewing my fingernails—I've had some time to skim the top off the ever-growing TBR pile on my bookshelf. It's always exciting to read for the sheer pleasure of it, because Wow, there are some wonderful storytellers in our community, and also daunting, because Wow, these authors are skilled. At least I'm in great company, even if it adds to the abuse of my manicure.

The reading reminded me that I've been lax recently about giving back in one way: leaving reviews. I don't have to tell you how important reviews are, whether from news services, industry magazines, or just the accumulated responses on Goodreads and Amazon. Publishers do pay attention.

But should we? A good review is lovely encouragement, and from the right source at the right time, it can seriously boost your book's visibility as well as your mood. A bad review, even from some rando on the internet, can stick with you like gum in your sneaker treads. I'd learned that lesson from theater early on. Nothing like a snide insult echoing in your head to derail creative flow.

So when my books were first published, I knew exactly what to do. Hide behind my wife. She vets any online mention of me or the books and only shows me the stuff she thinks I should see. A beta reader for the cruel world at large. I highly recommend the approach. And in appreciation for a good year, I'll up my game by leaving reviews for these terrific books, accentuating the positive. Any vicious bon mots I'll keep between me and my snifter of brandy.

Our chapter has two outstanding events coming up in quick succession: On Saturday October 26, SoCalMWA and Sisters in Crime LA host Detective Ninette Toosbuy's exciting two-hour seminar on police interrogation techniques. Her class at CCWC in June was so involving we knew immediately that we needed more! See the front page of this newsletter for details. Then—once Bouchercon in Dallas is behind us—we'll hold the third and final luncheon of the year at the Tam O'Shanter in Los Feliz on Sunday, November 10, with a superb panel of experts on audiobook production and publishing. Watch your email for more information soon!

All Best,  
Glen

## CHAPTER OFFICERS

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## The EDITOR'S CORNER

Holly West

*You guys.* I'm so excited. It's finally fall!

Those of you who follow me on social media might know that I recently hosted a writing retreat at my home in Northern California. SoCalMWA members **Sarah M. Chen, Stephen Buehler, and Travis Richardson** traveled all the way from Los Angeles to spend a long weekend with me and my husband. Much fun was had, but more importantly, we wrote.

Having never attended or hosted a retreat before, I wasn't sure what to expect. There was some worrying on my part. Would my guests feel the trip was worth it? How would I feed all of them for four days? Is the house clean enough?

Now that it's successfully completed, I can share a few tips for planning/hosting your own writing retreat:

- 1) Discuss goals in advance. What does each person hope to gain/accomplish from the retreat?
- 2) Plan easy meals that don't require a lot of prep. Use your slow cooker. If no one's an official host, have each participant plan a meal, or a set of meals (one person does all the breakfasts, one does lunches, etc.). Unless a third party is catering the retreat, accept that you won't be eating (or serving) gourmet meals.
- 3) Know your purpose—writing! But also plan some fun time. Of the three days we had available, we did two half-days and one full day that included critique sessions.
- 4) Relax! You've come together as a group, but take some time for yourself. It's a retreat, after all.

Though I had to miss the recent gumbo party, I'm looking forward to seeing many of you in Dallas at the end of the month. Until then, keep writing.

Holly

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

Editor: [Holly West](#)

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

Contact us at:  
[themarchofcrime@gmail.com](mailto:themarchofcrime@gmail.com)

### Join our SoCalMWA Yahoo! Group

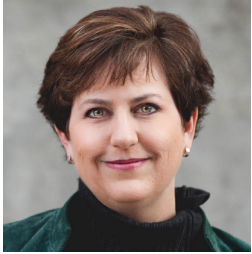
Email [SoCalMWA-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:SoCalMWA-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) to join  
(members only)



Crime writers at Folsom Prison  
L-R: Sarah M. Chen, Holly West,  
Stephen Buehler, Travis Richardson

# FRESHBLOOD

SoCalMWA welcomes its new members



## Allison Brennan

*New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Allison Brennan believes life's too short to be bored, so she had five kids, writes three books a year, and recently relocated from northern California to Arizona. Allison has published more than three dozen thrillers and numerous short stories, including "Bite Out of Crime" in the latest MWA anthology ODD PARTNERS. She is currently writing the Lucy Kincaid FBI thrillers and the Maxine Revere cold case mysteries for Minotaur; and *THE THIRD TO DIE* launches a new series in February 2020 from HarperCollins/MIRA. You can reach her through her website [allisonbrennan.com](http://allisonbrennan.com).

## TMOC Needs You!

TMOC is looking for articles (500–700 words) on subjects of interest to SoCalMWA members. This includes craft, marketing, and all aspects of publishing.

Content shouldn't be overtly promotional, but rather instructional or informational.

Include a brief bio (100 words or less) and a headshot or cover image.

Send your questions and/or pitches to [themarchofcrime@gmail.com](mailto:themarchofcrime@gmail.com).

## SIX WORD MYSTERY CONTEST

**Enter now through Oct 31**

in five categories:

**Cozy, Noir, Police,  
Romance, or Thriller**

\$6/category or all 5 for \$10

**\$100 GRAND PRIZE**

**plus, in each category:  
publication in**

***Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*  
and more**

*Judges: Anne Hillerman, author; Linda Landrigan, editor, AHMM ; Manuel Ramos, author;  
Len Vlahos, Tattered Cover Bookstore; Terrie Wolf, literary agent*

**ROCKY MOUNTAIN MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA**

get all the details >> [www.rmmwa.org](http://www.rmmwa.org)





## OVER the TRANSOM

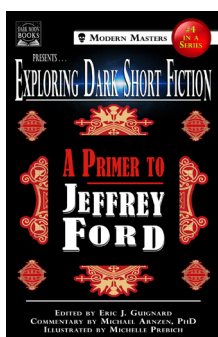
EXPLORING DARK SHORT FICTION #4: A PRIMER TO JEFFREY FORD is now available from **Dark Moon Books**. The latest volume in this series showcases six of Ford's short stories (one written exclusively for this Primer) along with academic commentary by Michael Arnzen, PhD; interview with author; essay; and more, all beautifully illustrated by artist Michelle Prebich. Jeffrey Ford's work has won awards and acclaim across the globe for his stories of humor, horror, and unconventional beauty. "Powerful and disturbing in the best possible way" (*Gawker*) and "Intensely engaging" (*Publishers Weekly*), Ford crosses speculative genres with literary ideals.

**D.P. Lyle's** SKIN IN THE GAME, the first in the Cain/Harper thriller series, will be released on October 8. [See scheduled launch events here.](#)

**Patricia Smith's** debut novel, REMEMBER, will be released by Agora Books on October 8. It tells the story of a young girl, Portia Willows, who struggles with social anxiety and lost her mother in a tragic car accident five years ago. Now, Portia is getting questioned about a horrific crime she does not remember. [See related launch event here.](#)

**Donis Casey** eleventh novel, THE WRONG GIRL, will be released on November 11. The novel introduces a fresh new series starring Bianca LaBelle, star of the silent screen action serial, *The Adventures of Bianca Dangereuse*. Donis will be appearing with British crime novelist, critic, and solicitor Martin Edwards, whose latest novel, GALLOWS COURT, is set in 1930s London. [See related launch event here.](#)

**Craig Faustus Buck's** Macavity Award nominated short story "Race to Judgment," a noir tale of sibling rivalry, blind ambition, lust, betrayal, and murder awash in the mud of Mississippi Delta politics, has been produced as an audio story and is October's featured podcast on the *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* website.



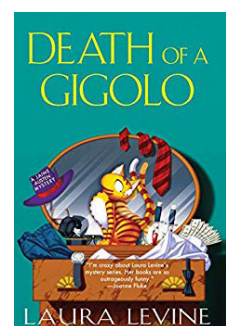
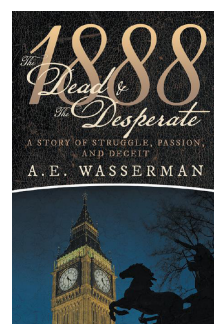
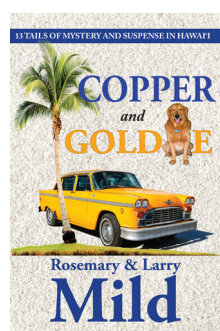
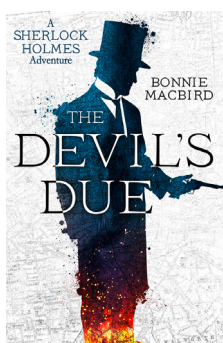
## OVER the TRANSOM

THE DEVIL'S DUE, **Bonnie MacBird's** third traditional-style Sherlock Holmes Adventure for HarperCollins debuts at Bouchercon. London, 1890. A series of diabolical murders of philanthropists with shady pasts has Holmes and Watson on a dangerous hunt facing radicals and royals, mudlarks and musicians, playwrights and policemen with agendas as they race through the fog of a London winter, trying to stop the carnage as a mysterious "Lucifer" draws ever closer to home. "Prodigiously inventive"—*Kirkus*. "Gorgeously crafted and marvellously entertaining!"—Hank Phillippi Ryan. "An extraordinary mystery"—**Les Klinger**. [See related launch appearance here](#).

**Rosemary** and **Larry Mild** have just released COPPER AND GOLDIE: 13 Tails of Mystery and Suspense in Hawaii. Detective Sam Nahoe takes a bullet in his spine in the line of duty. Disabled and divorced, he becomes a cabbie and adopts a golden retriever—with a touch of Doberman—as his partner. But criminals need taxi service too. Sam and Goldie take on Honolulu bank robbers, kidnappers, vengeful wives, even killers. Hobbling on two canes, "Cane and Able," he orders Goldie to chase the baddies. Sam's favorite snitch, card-sharp Sophie, asks him: "You still walkin' wit' dem giant chopsticks?" 13 fun-filled mysteries. [See related appearances here](#).

**A.E. Wasserman's** latest release, another historical mystery/thriller in The Langsford Series: 1888 THE DEAD & THE DESPERATE. London's social season is in full glory when Scotland Yard Inspector Frederick Abberline discovers an unidentified, well-dressed corpse down by the London docks. In this exciting mystery, Lord Langsford must face dire facts about a murder while wrestling with his heart over a lady promised to another. "... Expect the unexpected because Wasserman, in addition to being a superb writer, is very adept at pulling surprises out of the bag." —*Discovering Diamonds Reviews*, UK

DEATH OF A GIGOLO, the seventeenth book in **Laura Levine's** Jane Austen mystery series, is now out from Kensington Books.



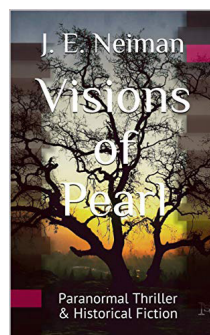
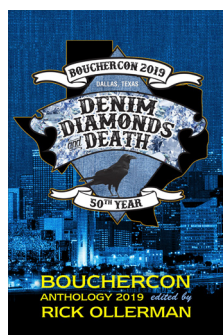
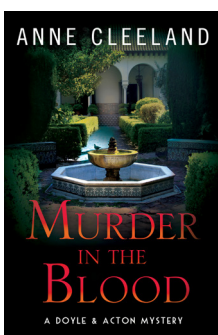
## OVER the TRANSOM

MURDER IN THE BLOOD, **Anne Cleeland's** latest offering from the Doyle & Acton series, is now available on Amazon in kindle and print.

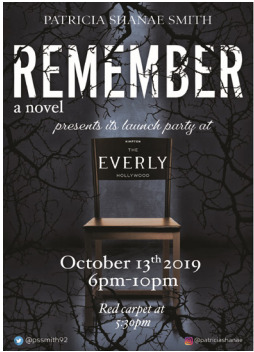
**John Shepphird's** short story "Vinegaroon" appears in the 2019 Bouchercon Anthology edited by Rick Ollerman. Published by Down & Out Books, the anthology honors the memory of Bill Crider and proceeds from sales benefit LIFT (Literary Instruction For Texas) which works to enhance and strengthen communities by teaching adults to read.

**J. E. Neiman's** new novel, VISIONS OF PEARL, is available on Amazon both in paperback and kindle format. It is a thriller and a historical novel with some paranormal.

**Jeri Westerson** is releasing the fourth and final Booke of the Hidden novel, THE DARKEST GATEWAY, October 2. Halloween is coming. And Kylie's misfit coven of Wiccans send her on a dangerous journey to the Netherworld to confront the biggest baddie of them all. Also on October 2, Jeri is releasing the first in the Enchanter Chronicles Trilogy, a steampunk novel of Neo-Victorian London, THE DAEMON DEVICE. Leopold Kazsmer, the Great Enchanter, is a magician who can perform true magic by summoning Jewish daemons. Can he fight Golems, strange murder, and unspeakable evil? Watch the trailer for THE DAEMON DEVICE [here](#). [See related appearances here](#).



## Member APPEARANCES



**Patricia Smith** will celebrate the launch of her novel, *REMEMBER* (Agora Books), on Sunday, October 13 from 6–10 p.m. (Red Carpet at 5:30 p.m.) at The Everly Hotel, 1800 Argyle Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90028. There will be a reading, Q&A, food & drink, games, and special guests. Live music by The Sweet Kill. A portion of book sales go to help suicide prevention. Open to the public. RSVP to 424-652-0132.

**D.P. Lyle** will appear at the following locations to celebrate the release of his new novel, *SKIN IN THE GAME*:  
 Sunday, October 6, 3 p.m.: Launch Party at Mystery Ink Bookstore, 8907 Warner Ave., #135, Huntington Beach, CA.  
 Sunday, October 13, 3 p.m.: Book signing at Book Carnival, 348 S. Tustin St., Orange, CA.  
 Tuesday, October 22, 7 p.m.: Reading at Lit Up! OC, Bardot Bars & Coffee, 662 El Camino Real, Tustin, CA.

**Christina Hoag** will read from her YA suspense novel, *GIRL ON THE BRINK*, at the She-lon Women's Artist's Autumn Salon, Coffee Gallery Backstage, 2029 N. Lake Ave., Altadena, Saturday, October 19, 1–5 p.m.

**Anne Louise Bannon** will be talking about her writing process at the Pasadena Public Library, October 3 at 7 p.m. The library is at 285 E. Walnut St., Pasadena.

The Los Angeles book party celebrating the launch of **Bonnie MacBird's** *THE DEVIL'S DUE* is on Nov 23. Email [holly@hollywatsonpr.com](mailto:holly@hollywatsonpr.com) for an invitation.

**Laurie Stevens, Laura Brennan,** and Elizabeth Harris will be hosting a Halloween Escape Room at the Canoga Park Library (20939 Sherman Way, Canoga Park) on October 19 from 3:15–4:15. Get into the “spirit” and join us!

**Rosemary** and **Larry Mild** are on a fourteen-blog tour for *COPPER AND GOLDIE*. The first six are out: [Dear Reader Love Author](#); Goodreads; [My Book Launch](#); [Read My First Chapter](#); [Book Cover Junkie](#); and [Beyond the Books](#). They will also be selling and signing their fifteen books at the Hawaii Holiday Craft and Gift Fair at Blaisdell Exhibition Hall in Honolulu, October 18–20.



Bonnie MacBird  
Photo by David Myers

**August Norman** and his debut thriller, *COME AND GET ME: A Caitlin Bergman Novel*, will be at Magna Cum Murder in Indianapolis, October 25–27, and Bouchercon in Dallas, October 31–November 3.

**Donis Casey** will launch her eleventh novel, *THE WRONG GIRL*, at 7 p.m. on October 29, at Poisoned Pen Bookstore, 4014 N Goldwater Blvd. #101, Scottsdale, AZ.



## Member APPEARANCES



**Jeri Westerson** will be at the following locations: Wednesday, October 16, 3–4 pm: Halloween Spooktacular. Only on Facebook. Lots of authors all day. [Check it out here](#). Saturday, October 19, 5–9 p.m.: Jeri will be releasing TWO books—THE DARKEST GATEWAY & THE DAEMON DEVICE at her book launch and Sleepy Hollow Event at the Etiwanda Historical Society’s Chaffey-Garcia House, 7150 Etiwanda Avenue, Rancho Cucamonga, CA 91739. Jeri’s event is free and tours of the re-enactment of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow will [require tickets](#). Thursday

and Friday, October 24 and 25, Noon–5 p.m.: [California Library Association Conference](#). She’ll be at the Historical Novel Society Booth #525, Pasadena Convention Center, 300 E. Green Street, Pasadena, CA. Saturday, October 26, 3 p.m.: Facebook Virtual Launch of THE DARKEST GATEWAY and THE DAEMON DEVICE. Only on Facebook! Spend an hour with Jeri chatting, with video readings, plenty of laughs, and giveaways. Sign up [here](#).



Guest of Honor  
Catriona McPherson

## SleuthFest

March 26-29 2020  
South Florida

Register @ [sleuthfest.com](http://sleuthfest.com)

Sponsored by MWA-Florida Chapter



Frankie Y. Bailey



Richie Narvaez



Alex Segura



Chantelle A. Osman

## SleuthFest March 26-29, 2020

Join Guest of Honor Catriona McPherson and faculty members Frankie Y. Bailey, Richie Narvaez, Chantelle A. Osman, and Alex Segura for four days of writing craft and forensic workshops with the industry’s best.

Agents and editors available for pitches and strategy sessions. Manuscript critiques are also available. On-site bookstore. MWA members receive a discounted registration price: 4-Day @ \$445 or 3-Day @ \$360. More info at [sleuthfest.com](http://sleuthfest.com).

*Sponsored by MWA-Florida in  
Deerfield Beach.*

Orange County Sisters in Crime

6th Annual

# Ladies of Intrigue

Featuring Remarkable Women Mystery Writers



**J. A. Jance**

**J.A. Jance** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over 60 books. She writes the Detective Beaumont novels, the Ali Reynolds books, and the Joanna Brady series set in Arizona where she grew up. She also writes the interrelated Walker family South-western thrillers and has received numerous award nominations.

**To be Interviewed by Maddie Margarita (Lit Up! salons)**

**Sunday, November 10, 2019**

**8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.**

## Our 2019 Headliners



**Laurie R. King**

**Laurie R. King** is a *New York Times* bestselling author and won the Edgar Award for her novel, ***A Grave Talent***. ***The Beekeepers Apprentice*** was the first book in her acclaimed Mary Russell-Sherlock Holmes series and her second book in the series won the Nero Award (***A Monstrous Regiment of Women***).

### Panelists:

**Greta Boris, Steph Cha, Mary Anna Evans, Lydia Fitzpatrick, Rachel Howzell Hall, Kaira Rouda, Laurie Stevens, Wendall Thomas, Betty Webb**

**Moderators: Jill Amadio, Barbara DeMarco-Barrett, Ellen Byron**



Hosted by Orange County Sisters in Crime (a non-profit organization)

Location: Mesa Verde Country Club, Costa Mesa, CA

Register at [www.ocsistersincrime.org](http://www.ocsistersincrime.org)/[www.mysteryink.com](http://www.mysteryink.com) or mail

registration to: O.C. Sisters in Crime, P.O. Box 53132, Irvine, CA 92618

**FREE PARKING - LUNCHEON INCLUDED**

## The Care and Feeding of a MacGuffin

by Michael Kurland

As far as anyone knows Alfred Hitchcock was the first to use the term “MacGuffin.” He said it was “[T]he device, the gimmick, if you will, or the papers the spies are after... The plans, documents or secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters. To me, the narrator, they’re of no importance whatsoever.”

It might seem like he’s denigrating the value of his discovery, but, as a director, he came in after the writer had done his job. Everything always seems easier after the writer has done his job. And it took a good writer to build the structure of the MacGuffin into the plots so well that Hitchcock could ignore it and get on with making movies like *The Thirty Nine Steps*, *The Lady Vanishes*, and *Strangers on a Train*.

The MacGuffin is the linchpin of the story; the gizmo, situation, or event that lies behind the motive.

Is it possible to write a story—even a mystery story—without a MacGuffin? Certainly. It’s also possible to build a two-masted schooner without a keel, but the ship will be much harder to sail and may be prone to rolling over unexpectedly. The simple truth is that somebody has to be after something, and some force, human, animal, or elemental has to be in his way, or there’s no story.

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**“The MacGuffin is the linchpin of the story; the gizmo, situation, or event that lies behind the motive.”**

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Let’s look at the MacGuffin in Dashiell Hammett’s *THE MALTESE FALCON*. The plot involves murder, mayhem, romance, and deceit in San Francisco in the 1920s, and introduces Sam Spade, the PI from whom a whole school of particularly American private detectives has evolved. The MacGuffin in the story is the eponymous Maltese Falcon, the statuette of a bird, covered with black enamel. And under the enamel is—well as Casper Gutman, Hammett’s original fat man, tells Spade in the novel:

“Mr. Spade, have you any conception of how much money can be made out of that black bird?”

“No.”

“Well, sir, if I told you—by Gad, if I told you half! —you’d call me a liar.”

And a chapter later, Gutman does tell him, using over two thousand words to do it. A foot-high solid gold falcon encrusted with precious gems from beak to claw was crafted in 1530 at the order of Villiers de l’isle d’Adam, Grand Master of the Knights of Malta, as a gift to Emperor Charles V. The gift was lost at sea, found and then lost again and, somewhere along the way, covered with black enamel to conceal its value.

Gutman could have just said, “Black bird; worth a lot of money.” Why two thousand words? Because if the bird isn’t rare, and romantic, and incredibly valuable, why would Gutman spend seventeen years of his life hunting for it? Why not just rob a bank? Half a dozen people die pursuing or protecting the black bird, and Hammett had to make you, the reader, believe that the object was worth the blood spilled for it.

*That’s a MacGuffin!*



## Ending a Novel Series

by Janet Elizabeth Lynn and Will Zeilinger

Ending a novel series can be daunting, yet it is something an author must keep in the back of their mind. Some just stop, and the last book written is the end of the series. However, when faced with the ending of our series, we decided to honor our characters, our fans, and the series itself by formally ending it with a planned last book.

The conclusion of a series is just as important as its beginning. Readers who are following the series may have a sense that there may not be a happy ending. Let's face it, real life does not always have happy endings. However, things need to end okay for the characters. In other words, it's important to deliver on the promises made in the previous books, to take the reader on a journey they will enjoy and leave them with fond memories of the trip.

When planning the last book in an episodic novel there is one important thing to keep in mind. Tie-up loose ends! Where there are lingering questions through each book, solve them at the end. We used a genealogy chart to keep the characters straight with each specific personality flaw/goal/motivation and how they interacted with the other characters, plot or subplot. This way of "tracking" multiple books in a series helped tremendously in wrapping up the series.

Then the question is: Do you do a sequel or a spin-off of the series? Doing a sequel would bring back the character as well as introduce the reader to new and enlightening characters. A spin-off re-orientates the characters we fell in love with and the villains who pushed the twists and turns of each book. Keep in mind that when a spin-off or sequel is written, some readers may want to remember the character the way they were and not the new and "improved" version.

Ending the series can be a big letdown for a writer as well. We'd been living with these characters for years. It was not unusual for our characters to follow us in the car and argue from the backseat over a point we hadn't addressed. Or the character may put their foot down and demand a change in something you've written that took blood, sweat, and tears to finish. But in the end, the character was right and it just didn't work.

Whatever the future holds for a series, it's fun creating great characters, clever plots, fun subplots and making up the twists and turns, and in mystery, the devious red herrings.

We finished our manuscript, the last book in the series and gave it to our editor. Suddenly both of us got depressed. For days we felt lost. I believe the sense of loss was from ending the series. I spoke to several authors and they said it was par for the course. The best remedy was to continue writing. So we did and slowly we came out of the depression and looking forward to another series together. And yes... we are still married!

\*\*\*

**Will Zeilinger** and **Janet Elizabeth Lynn** write individually and together. Janet has published seven mystery novels and Will has three, plus a couple of short stories. *GAMETOWN*, published in March 2019, is the final book in their Skylar Drake series. Their world travels have sparked several ideas for murder and crime stories. This creative couple is married and live in Southern California.

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**"It was not unusual for our characters to follow us in the car and argue from the backseat over a point we hadn't addressed."**

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### MacGuffins, [continued from pg 10](#)

In many narratives, the object is physical: a black bird, a rare manuscript, a one-of-a-kind postage stamp, an atomic war-head, an inheritance, the Naval treaty. But it can be something intangible like Communism or Freedom or winning an ice skating contest. It can be an ideal or a hatred or a delusion, or the orders of your superior officer. “Their’s not to reason why, their’s but to do and die.” Like that.

The MacGuffin motivates the story, and it matters not whether it be the villains or the heroes that do the moving. In THE MALTESE FALCON, the black bird motivates Gutman, the villain; but in Dorothy Sayers’ STRONG POISON, Lord Peter Wimsey, the hero, is motivated by a sudden and overwhelming infatuation with Harriet Vane, who, when he first sees her, is standing in the dock accused of murder. The MacGuffin is love. Sure, the actual murderer is motivated by greed, but his greed doesn’t move the plot forward. Wimsey’s need to prove Vane innocent does.

In Shakespeare’s HAMLET, the MacGuffin is the tale told by a ghost who tells Hamlet that Claudius, his uncle, murdered his father and married his mother to become king. All else follows from the beseeching of this vengeful spirit.

In HENRY V, what King Henry wants is France. The whole country. Now there’s a MacGuffin with size and majesty. And a lot of good wine.

In Daphne du Maurier’s REBECCA, you might think the MacGuffin is Rebecca herself, but we can pin it down finer than that. The MacGuffin is the death of Rebecca. Or, even more precisely, the question as to how she died.

In *Casablanca*, the MacGuffin is not the love affair between Rick and Ilsa, but an envelope containing several irrevocable “letters of transit” that can be used to escape to a neutral country. Their existence motivates the action and causes several deaths.

Finally, in Homer’s ILIAD, the MacGuffin was Helen of Troy’s great beauty; “...the face that sank a thousand ships and burned the topless towers of Ilium,” as Marlowe put it. In real life, the Trojan War was probably fought over land, or trade routes; but that doesn’t make nearly as satisfying a story.

Remember the old one-line master plot that goes: “An appealing hero strives against overwhelming odds to achieve a worthwhile goal”? Well, the MacGuffin isn’t merely the goal. It’s often also the reason for the overwhelming odds. Sam Spade’s partner gets murdered because the bad guys want the falcon. Rick is forced into action because the bad guys want to prevent the letters of transit from being used.

Bad guys don’t ordinarily go around killing people and causing mayhem just to prove that they’re bad guys. They have some goal in mind. It might be an insane goal, but there’s got to be some reason for what they do. In real life, of course, we don’t always learn the reason. But in a mystery story we should. After all, one of the main pleasures in reading a mystery story is knowing that, in the end, the mystery is going to be solved.

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A native of New York City now living in California’s Central Coast, **Michael Kurland** served four years in a branch of Army Intelligence, both in the United States and in Europe. He is the author of over forty books, ranging from fantasy to mystery. He has been nominated for the Edgar award twice, for A PLAGUE OF SPIES and THE INFERNAL DEVICE, the latter of which was also an American Book Award finalist.

## Crime CALENDAR

October 26 – [Interrogation Seminar hosted by SoCalMWA & SinCLA, Pasadena, CA](#)

October 30 – [SinC Into Great Writing! Workshop 2019, Dallas, TX](#)

October 31–Nov 3 – [Bouchercon, Dallas, TX](#)

November 8–10 – [New England Crime Bake, Boston, MA](#)

November 10 – [SoCalMWA Tam Luncheon, Los Angeles, CA](#)

November 10 – [Ladies of Intrigue, Costa Mesa, CA](#)

## The LAST WORD

“It’s unbelievable. Curly hair. Chunky Monkey. Elastic waist pants.  
I think we may have been separated at birth.”

—Laura Levine, DEATH OF A GIGOLO