



The
MARCH

of CRIME

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LUNCHEON

at the

TAM O'SHANTER

JOHN LENTINI
Forensic Arson Investigator

Sunday, February 16

John Lentini, a premier forensic arson investigator, has personally conducted more than two thousand fire scene inspections and has been accepted as an expert witness on more than two hundred occasions. He's also worked with The Innocence Project, among other defense attorneys, to clear those unjustly charged with or convicted of arson.

Don't miss this opportunity to hear from a top caliber forensic scientist!

TAM O'SHANTER RESTAURANT
2980 Los Feliz Blvd, Los Angeles CA 90039

[RESERVATIONS OPEN SOON](#)

Tucson Festival of Books March 14-15

[Email Fred Andersen](#) to
schedule a spot.

[More info](#)



The President's Rap Sheet

Jessica Kaye

Hello, my dear Chapter members.

Welcome to February. The calendar says it is still winter but I see beautiful blooms in my neighborhood.

Speaking of winter, I had my orientation and first board meeting in New York last month, where it is still winter, and met the other Chapter Presidents, Officers, and at-large members, (including our own former President, **Elizabeth Little**) and it is an impressive group. I came back educated and energized.

As for what is going on around here, our first luncheon of the year will happen on February 16 at Tam O'Shanter restaurant in Los Feliz.

Our speaker will be John Lentini, the premier forensic arson investigator. He has worked with The Innocence Project, among other defense attorneys, to clear those unjustly charged with or convicted of arson. This is a unique opportunity to hear from a top caliber forensic scientist.

Other events coming up include the Tucson Book Festival, March 14–15, with opportunities for our members to take a slot in the signing booth.

A big congratulations to our Chapter nominees for Lefty and Edgars and Malice Domestic, in alphabetical order: **Ellen Byron, Steph Cha, Matt Coyle, Tori Eldridge, Dianne Freeman, Rachel Howzell Hall, Attica Locke, John McMahon, Wendall Thomas, and Carl Vonderau.**

If I have missed a nominee who is in our Chapter, please let me know so that we can recognize that achievement in the next newsletter.

See you at the Tam on February 16.

Jessica

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The EDITOR'S CORNER

Holly West

Have I ever told you how much I love writing first drafts? It's true! Once I have an outline, fleshing out each scene is lots of fun. If you give yourself permission to write crappy first drafts (and I absolutely do), the words just flow.

I spent the last few months putting the finishing touches on a first-ish draft. I say "ish" because the history of this project isn't all that straightforward, though I'll spare you the nitty-gritty details. But last week, I wrote THE END, which means I accomplished my goal of completing it by January 31.

Yay me.

Now comes the part that always stops me in my tracks. Doing the first edit of a crappy draft is soul-sucking for me. So much so that I haven't completed a full-length novel since 2014. Admitting that makes me cringe, but it's not the first time I've confessed my writing sins here and it definitely won't be the last. I say it in case there's someone out there reading this who is just as stalled as I am.

Over the years, I've succeeded in convincing myself that I don't know how to write a polished novel, or, more accurately, that there is a magic formula* to all of this that is somehow unknown to me. That's caused a lot of mental paralysis. But today at the gym I thought of an analogy that seems to fit: There are boxes of varying heights that I sometimes jump up onto as part of my workout. Jumping onto the lowest height, about one foot, is easy—I'll liken that to writing a first draft. It's jumping up on the higher boxes that gets dicey. I feel confident, step close, squat to jump, and then—boom—I psych myself out and back out at the last moment. I obviously can't do it, so why bother? That's where I'm at now with my project. It's time to jump to the higher box and I'm psyching myself out.

Except I actually *can* jump to the higher box. I've done it, more than once. And I've written, edited, and successfully published a novel, *more than once*. So as I begin the editing process, I need to remember I do know how to do it. Step up to the box, squat, and JUMP.

Holly

* Actually, there is a magic formula and it's called Do. The. Work.

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:
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**Join the SoCalMWA
Discussion Group**

groups.io/g/MWA-SOCAL
(members only)

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Meet SoCalMWA's New Board Members



Fred Andersen

Fred Andersen is a writer, editor-of-necessity, and marketer of last resort. For the last several years he has helped run the MWA booth at the Tucson Festival of Books. His paid professional writing experience has been as a historian. History seems to Fred like a mystery through the other end of the telescope. You know what happened, and the interest comes from finding out how, and then the why behind the how. Although he loves realistic, streetwise crime writing, he has also spent a lot of time in author critique groups with all kinds of writers, and have come to see the similarities more than the differences in genres and styles.



Jennifer Berg

Jennifer is a historical mystery writer whose novels are set in the Pacific Northwest during the 1950s. Jennifer studied History at the University of Washington and Business at UCLA. Her first two mystery titles were published by Barking Rain Press in 2017. When the press closed in 2019, Jennifer left her day job in order to focus on her writing and on the business aspects of the publishing industry. Jennifer looks forward to serving on the SoCalMWA board and supporting this great community.



Gay Tolt Kinman

Gay has nine award nominations for her writing; several short stories in American and English magazines and anthologies; twelve children's books and stories; a Y.A. gothic novel; eight adult mysteries; and collections of short stories. Several of her short plays were produced—now in a collection of twenty plays, *THE PLAY'S THE THING*; many articles in professional journals and newspapers; and has co-edited two non-fiction books. Kinman has library and law degrees.



August Norman

Originally from central Indiana, thriller and mystery author August Norman has called Los Angeles home for two decades, writing for and/or appearing in movies, television, stage productions, web series, and even commercial advertising. *COME AND GET ME*, August's debut thriller featuring investigative journalist Caitlin Bergman, was listed in *Suspense Magazine's* Best of 2019 issue in the Debut category and *SINS OF THE MOTHER*, the second in the Caitlin Bergman series, will be released in September 2020 by Crooked Lane Books.

OVER the TRANSOM

Jennifer J. Chow's first book in the new Sassy Cat mysteries, *MIMI LEE GETS A CLUE* (Berkley), releases on March 10. Mimi Lee is in over her head. There's her new Los Angeles pet grooming shop to run, her matchmaking mother to thwart, her talking cat Marshmallow to tend to—oh, and the murder of a local breeder to solve... “Chow smoothly mixes intrigue, romance, and humor. Cozy fans will have fun.”—*Publishers Weekly*

Paul D. Marks is interviewed in the January 2020 issue of *Digest Enthusiast* (available on Amazon). He is also quoted, along with several other writers, in Andrew Welsh-Huggins' piece “How Local Can You Go?” at *EQMM's* “[Something is Going to Happen.](#)” Finally, his article “Writing is a Harsh Mistress” was reprinted by Sandra Murphy at *Spawn*.

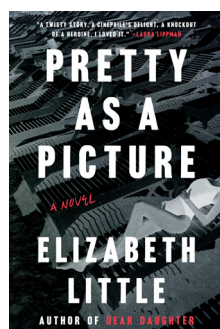
Mark Bruce has placed three short stories featuring his character Minerva James: “Minerva James and the Judgment of the Furies,” with *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*; “Minerva James and the Goddess of Memory” with an anthology with AE Publishing, and “Minerva James and the Good Goddess” with an anthology with Dandelion Revolution.

Elizabeth Little's new novel, *PRETTY AS A PICTURE*, will be published February 25 by Viking. The audiobook, narrated by Audie Award–winner Julia Whelan, will be released simultaneously. [See related event here.](#)

In the Spring issue (#163) of *Mystery Scene Magazine*, **Pat H. Broeske** examines the long-running success (twenty-plus years!) of the U.K.'s wildly popular *Midsomer Murders*. Interview subjects include prolific author Anthony Horowitz, who helped originate the TV series—based on the Inspector Barnaby books by Caroline Graham. Set in quaint rural villages, involving murders most bizarre, the show now airs in more than 200 countries. “Not bad for a crime show about cops without guns,” notes Broeske.

Wendall Thomas's second Cyd Redondo novel, *DROWNED UNDER*, has been nominated for a “Lefty” award for Best Humorous Mystery by Left Coast Crime.

STAR SPANGLED VILLAINS is **Gina Star Pollack's** debut novel. It is a mystery/political suspense novel of vanity, deceit, and murder. It is topical and clever and ends with an ironic twist illustrating how karma can trump a bully. It's available at Amazon.com and on the author's BookShop page sponsored by the publisher, BookBaby.



OVER the TRANSOM

The Lifetime Network announced it is developing five more V.C. Andrews novels with the production of “Ruby” (the Landry) series. Casting is underway. **Andrew Neiderman**, the author of the V.C. Andrews novels for over thirty-two years, serves as Consulting Producer. Ruby is a series about a pair of Cajun twins who, previously unaware of each other’s existence, become sibling rivals in New Orleans and the Bayou.

Gay Tolt Kinman announces the publication of the Greenway series: “Greenway,” a story set at Agatha Christie’s holiday home in Devon is [available for free](#) on Smashwords. The second in the series, “Greenway Revisited,” features an American film company with an English liaison that films a murder that happened the previous May. Narrated by an American script writer living in an apartment adjoining the Agatha Christie house, she’s joined by a VIP hiding out because someone is trying to kill her. In “Greenway Revisited—Again,” the movie crew is still filming when another murder occurs on the Agatha Christie property.

Member APPEARANCES

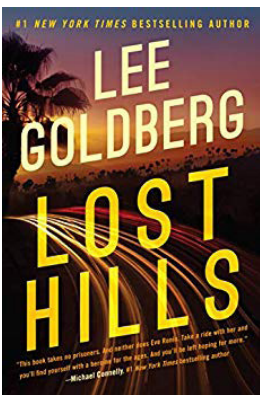
Lee Goldberg, Attica Locke, Tod Goldberg, and Gregg Hurwitz are among the authors who will be speaking at the daylong Superbook Weekend Adventure at the Queen Mary on February 1 from 9-4 pm. [More info here.](#)

Lee Goldberg will be signing his new crime novel LOST HILLS on February 15 at 2 p.m. at The Poisoned Pen in Scottsdale AZ, where he will be joined by famed local pancake chef/artist Lee Goldberg (no relation), who will serving his edible art.

On February 9 at 7 p.m., actors will perform **Barbara DeMarco-Barrett’s** short stories, including “Crazy for You,” that’s included in *Orange County Noir* (Akashic) at the New Short Fiction Series, The Federal, in North Hollywood.

Anne Louise Bannon will join **Ellen Byron** and **Naomi Hirahara** for a Valentine’s Tea, put on by the Friends of the Huntington Beach Public Library. The event is on February 12 at 2 p.m. Reservations are required and can be made [here](#). The library is at 7111 Talbert Avenue Huntington Beach, CA 92648. You can call the Friends’ book store at (714) 375-8429.

On February 26 at 7 p.m., **Elizabeth Little** will be in conversation with Sarah Weinman at Chevalier’s in Los Angeles to celebrate the launch of her new novel, PRETTY AS A PICTURE. For more details, please visit elizabeth-little.com/events.



Marley Was Dead to Begin With

by Michael Kurland

How to bring your characters to life on the page and give them a distinctive personality using as few words as possible.

“You’ve got to bring your characters to life with the very first sentence!” The well-known editor expounded from his seat on the writers’ panel, pounding his fleshy fists on the table for emphasis. From the back of the room, fantasy writer Avram Davidson called out, “Marley was dead to begin with!”—the first sentence of Dickens’ A CHRISTMAS CAROL. Giggles ensued.

Nonetheless, the editor was right. Even the most minor character, if he adds nothing to the story beyond the one thing you brought him in to accomplish, is an opportunity wasted. Taking the effort to bring him to life can add depth and detail, help create the aura of time and place, further the plot, and save you paragraphs of potentially dull exposition. Notice that even Marley came alive (as a ghost) in Dickens’ tale. And note how I brought the “well known editor” to life by having him pounding his fleshy fists on the table.

Bringing a character to life is a trick of immediacy, not history. Consider how you meet people in real life. Nobody introduces themselves by reciting their life story—unless perhaps you’re speed-dating. The facts of their existence, your opinion of them, and your emotional reaction to them stem from the small clues they leave behind as they pass through your purview.

When creating a character you as an author can do the same for your reader as real life does for you. Tell us by the character’s speech, mannerisms and appearance, as described through actions, what we need to know. Writing “he wore a seersucker jacket and khaki shorts with blue tennis shoes and sported a drooping mustache” is indeed descriptive, but if you combine it with action it becomes more useful: “Hitching up his khaki shorts and buttoning his four-button seersucker jacket, he strode forward, his blue tennis shoes thumping under his knobby knees and his drooping mustache bobbing up and down with each step.” Now you have an image—and you’re welcome to it.

The same goes for describing a character’s personality or current emotional state. Give some cues and let the reader discover the rest for herself. Don’t say, “he was angry,” say, “he slammed the phone against the wall.” Don’t say “she was sad,” say, “she picked at her food, the dried track of a single tear still visible on her face.” And like that.

You can breathe life into your characters by having them react to their surroundings—and at the same time add depth to the background and setting of your story:

—Melinda slowly turned in a circle, holding the collar of her raincoat closed against the slight drizzle and looking at the false-front buildings all around her. This was the fabled Majestic Pictures back lot, the Boulevard of Dreams, and tomorrow the cameras would roll and she’d be part of it. A very small part, true—but... maybe she wouldn’t have to go back to Kansas after all. The rain ran down her too-blonde hair and dripped off her nose. For no reason she began to cry.

—Thomas hunched the tatty greatcoat around his skinny shoulders and wished that it had all its buttons. He was cold and hungry and it was a long walk across town to save the bus fare. But he’d been promised five dollars for delivering the package, and with five whole dollars a fellow could buy a decent breakfast. He began to skip.

[continued on next page](#)

Marley Was Dead to Begin With ([continued from previous page](#))

—George stopped combing his thinning hair and looked up as the SS Wonderful Life passed under the Golden Gate bridge, the rear funnel looking as though it might well scrape the underside as it went through. The ship, he thought, was the size of a small city. Hell—a fairly large city. He had three days to meet and befriend one of the rich old ladies on the cruise before they reached Honolulu and he ran out of money.

And remember the old show business saying, “there are no small parts.” If you introduce a character for a piece of business—a taxi driver, a bartender, a woman in an elevator, she can and should accomplish more than the business at hand. You need, let’s say, to get your hero from his apartment on the upper West Side of New York City to a kosher restaurant on the lower East Side. So you have him hail a cab. “Where to?” the cabbie asks. The hero tells her, and off they go. But don’t stop there. With a couple of short sentences that cabbie can accomplish much more than mere transportation. She can remind the reader of where and when the story is set: “Say,” she says, calling over her shoulder with a toss of her peroxide curls as they head down Seventh Avenue, “have you heard that Mayor Laguardia’s going to read the funny papers to the kids on Sunday?”

“No kidding,” your hero says, reminding himself that women cab drivers are a novelty since Pearl Harbor took the men off to war.

“Yeah. On account of the newspaper strike. Over WNYC it’s gonna be.”

Minor characters, just passing through, can be used to eliminate the “as you well know” dialog in crime stories (and TV shows) that always drives me crazy. “As you well know,” the forensic examiner tells your detective, “postmortem lividity, cause by the blood settling in the body after death, appears in the first hour to two hours after death.”

Well if he knows, why is the guy telling him?

So bring in a passing stranger: “Judging by the lividity, I’d say this body’s been moved,” the young cop said, peering down at the remains of Judge Winksalot. “And it must have been at least an hour after he was killed.”

“You studying for your sergeant’s exam, Officer Pronzini?” Sergeant Gores asked with the short grimace that passed with him for a smile.

“Well, yeah,” Pronzini admitted.

So make your characters do double duty. Your readers will thank you for it.

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

February 16 – [Tam Luncheon, Los Angeles, CA](#)
 March 12–15 – [Left Coast Crime, San Diego, CA](#)
 March 14–15 – [Tucson Festival of Books, Tucson, AZ](#)
 April 30 – [Edgar Awards, New York, NY](#)
 May 1–3 – [Malice Domestic 32, Bethesda, MD](#)
 July 7–11 – [ThrillerFest, New York, NY](#)
 October 15–18 – [Bouchercon, Sacramento, CA](#)



*Left Coast Crime
 San Diego
 March 12–15, 2020*

Left Coast Crime is currently accepting registrations (and panel ideas from authors) for its 30th anniversary conference to be held in the Marriott Mission Valley (easy to reach by train, with a trolley stop at the back of hotel).

700 mystery fans and authors will meet and discuss books. Remember the debut author breakfast, author speed dating, and other opportunities to network.

More info at <http://www.leftcoastcrime.org/2020/>.
 Contact Kim.lcc2020@gmail.com with any questions.

The LAST WORD

“As soon as they processed my release, Noah and I hit the ground running.”

—Elizabeth Little, DEAR DAUGHTER