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THE DAMES' DOCKET

A Bimonthly Newsletter from Level Best Books



Editor: Harriette Sackler
Production: Shawn Reilly Simmons

The Dames of Detection
Verena Rose
Harriette Sackler
Shawn Reilly Simmons

GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES

After a year of pandemic, it does seem that we're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. And I do mean this literally. For so many, these past months have been dark. You all know why, so I don't have to go into detail.

For the Dames, our positions as publishers and editors at Level Best have kept us busier than ever. In addition, Shawn, with a young child at home, and Verena, with full-time employment as an accountant, have admirably maintained their sanity. I, long retired from my work at a residential mental health facility for kids, have had a bit more free time. And, I've tried to use that time well.

A hundred years ago, and I may be exaggerating, but not by much, I majored in Sociology and Psychology at Hunter College in New York City, then went on to earn a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology from the University of Maryland. Over the years, my interest in how people function within their worlds and what makes them do what they do, has never dissipated.

And, what does this have to do with anything, you might ask? Well, I'll tell you what I think.

During this past year, I've spent most of my time sitting behind a computer. I've been editing manuscripts and reviewing submissions. But, I've also used the time to explore. Through webinars, virtual tours, and television streaming, I've visited the infamous Five Points of Old New York City, coal mines in Appalachia, and mill towns in historic Massachusetts, among other places. And, yes, all these have given me insight into how people lived and dealt with their societies in far from ideal circumstances. Not only have I maintained my passion for how people function within their worlds, but I've been able to use these insights in writing short stories about a diversity of subjects that have captured my interest. And I'm sure I'm not alone. I'll bet that you're doing the same thing.

So, the past year has been a learning experience for me and, it seems, the more I learn, the more I want to learn. Thank you to Smithsonian Journeys, Amazon, Netflix, the New York Adventure Club, the Tenement Museum, Google, and so many other sites, for offering me the chance to explore.

Hope to see you all soon!
For the Dames,
Harriette

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE PUBLISHED?

by Mally Becker

“How does it feel to be published?” friends ask.

“Wonderful,” I answer. It’s the response people expect to hear, and it happens to be true. But it’s only partially true.

Launch day for my debut mystery, *The Turncoat’s Widow*, came on February 16, just a few weeks ago. It was a combination of the best birthday party ever and a ride on a loop-de-loop roller coaster. More about the roller coaster ride later.

As for the party, the fact that Level Best Books published *The Turncoat’s Widow* validated the work I put into it. And there’s nothing like hearing people tell you that they can’t wait to read or, from advance readers, that they loved your book.

Old and new friends, family, and former coworkers all stopped by virtually for online high fives and hugs on the day my book was published. Neighbors toasted the event with a socially distant A.M. mimosa party in the driveway. My husband brought home flowers and my favorite takeout meal. That night, during a mystery bookstore event with three other Level Best authors, some of those old friends hopped on Zoom to say hello, including a former camp counselor, a woman I hadn’t seen since I was 21.

I was euphoric, and I was astonished how broad a net of friendship a book’s publication casts. I wanted to stop time to savor it all a little longer, maybe just for another year or two.

That day and the handful of weeks since my book’s launch have also been a roller coaster ride.

That’s the part I don’t tell people. I’m not sure anyone but another writer would understand what a wild, surreal ride it is to see the story that’s lived quietly on your laptop out in the noisy world.

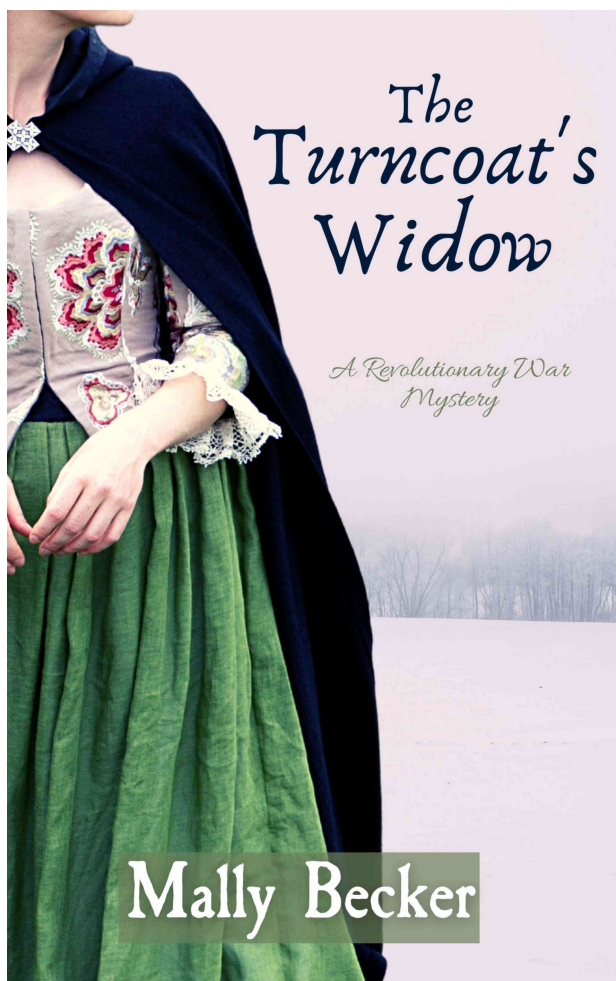
I remember roaming through a bookstore a few years ago imagining which shelf might hold my story. I thought, “Look at all those books. Why not me?” Now, there are times I ask, “Is this really me?” Today was one of those days. I stopped in at a local indie bookstore to sign their copies of *The Turncoat’s Widow*. I got to see my book on the shelf where it belongs.

It’s all been hectic, occasionally disconcerting, and exactly as it should be. I’ve hosted Facebook and Goodreads pages, drafted posts for mystery writer and book review bloggers, booked appearances at bookstores and libraries, put time into drafting the sequel to *The Turncoat’s Widow*, and ... tried to remember to breathe.

In the process, I'm doing my best to hold tight to some of that publication-day joy. There have been times when I only appreciate what a privilege it is to have my story in print late in the day. (Thank you, Level Best. Thank you, Verena, Harriette, and Shawn.)

But occasionally, when I look up from my laptop, the sight of several copies of my story lined up on the nearby bookshelf still catches me by surprise, and the wonder and euphoria I felt on launch day floods back.

Mally Becker is the author of *The Turncoat's Widow*. Her professional career included her work as a publicist and freelance writer, as well as an attorney and advocate for children in foster care. She lives with her husband in the wilds of New Jersey.



HOW MY GENRE FOUND ME

by Kerry Peresta

My second grade classroom in Misawa, Japan became a petri dish for nightmares.

The instructor told us to hunker down quick! Under our desks! Now! Bomb drill. When my father was transferred back to the USA, classrooms were much the same. Bomb drill! Get under your desk!

Such practices are, thankfully, unnecessary now. These experiences left a major mark on me as a child. I dreamed of war and explosions and terror stalking the night. The world was a dark and scary place.

When my father retired from the United States Air Force when I was thirteen, life settled into a calmer, steadier routine. A straight line instead of a series of disruptions. A line I could trust. Sometimes.

Like the bomb drills, I found that life was indeed full of land mines: explosive situations that could go off at any time, without warning. Relationships dissolved. Expectations shattered. Hopes dribbled away, shuttered by the many disappointments life can bring.

So I walked carefully, avoiding stepping on toes. Avoiding telling people what I wanted or needed. Became a classic 'people pleaser' which, in the end, both frustrated and angered me. In my mid-forties, I experienced what one might today call a 'woke' experience. I found a support community for codependency, and learned why I acted a certain way, that my upbringing had yielded a certain type of behavior. At this, I heaved a great sigh of relief! There were others just like me that had experienced resurrection of their hopes, their dreams, and did not live expecting life to throw them a bunch of rotten tomatoes.

Such delicious resurrection was mind-boggling. And when paired with the experiential sense of darkness that still lived in the world, it caused my writing to have wry twists and bizarre elements. I remember one of my writing instructors, in my earliest attempts, was unhappy with a story I wrote that ended on a complex and intriguing note. The instructor declared that I shouldn't write anything for public consumption that didn't have a happy ending, because Americans expect a happy ending.

I thought, but that isn't realistic! Life is full of unhappy endings! And isn't a 'happy ending' relative, anyway? What, exactly, constitutes a happy ending? In any event, I was conflicted about this bit of instruction. So I settled on flawed protagonists to make a very huge point: nothing's perfect in this world. Not even endings. And especially not people. They might be enjoyable, or compelling, or any number of wonderful things, but to always have a boilerplate happy ending? That was an unrealistic expectation, to my mind.

As a side note, it was interesting that all the males in the class didn't like the ending, but every woman had raised eyebrows and wide eyes and breathlessly asked, "What happens next?"

My first book leaned toward women's fiction, but it still had dark elements. I couldn't help myself. When I did a deep dive into genre rules, to my consternation (and also one frustrated reviewer) women's fiction demanded a happy ending. And certainly a minimum of flawed protagonists. I got a virtual tongue-lashing from this woman that still lives on in my reviews on Amazon today. In brilliant epiphany, I decided that maybe trying to write women's fiction wasn't for me.

Obviously, my proclivities were darker than that.

And that is how the suspense genre stamped itself on my forehead. I'm branded for life.

Kerry Peresta is the author of *The Deadening*, which she has decided will be Book One of a series. Before starting to write full-time, Kerry spent twenty-five years in advertising, as an account manager, creative director, and copywriter. She lives with her husband in Hilton Head Island, S.C.



MEET MARCO CAROCARI

HS: Marco, we're so happy to have you with Level Best Books. Please tell our readers something about yourself.

MC: I was born and raised in Switzerland. My love of mysteries began at an early age, right after seeing Margaret Rutherford portray Miss Marple in "Murder, She Said," even though I was disappointed when the "real Miss Marple" bore no resemblance to the formidable actress. After that, I read any mystery I could get my hands on and that my parents would allow, considering I was only ten. Throughout my adult years, I worked in different areas (including a twelve-year-stint as a flight attendant for Swissair), before becoming a full-time photographer. Six years ago, I immigrated to the U.S. and moved to Palm Springs, after marrying my now-husband, Mark.

HS: Marco, what was the inspiration for Blackout which will be published by Level Best at the end of March?

MC: When I started this project eight years ago, I was missing the representation of queer protagonists in traditional crime fiction. So I set out to write a novel I wanted to read, and am happy to see the current landscape in publishing is changing to include more diverse voices. Blackout tells a story that could happen to anyone, from a gay perspective. It's as much a mystery novel as it's about self-discovery when faced with traumatic and life-threatening events.

HS: What have you learned during the publishing process that you'd like to share with other writers?

MC: Patience is a virtue. As someone who's a bit of a control freak, I had to learn to let go. I definitely have a much better understanding of, and deep appreciation for, what you guys do than before. Still a control freak, though—just ask.

HS: What are your future writing plans?

MC: I've outlined a sequel to Blackout, if there is an avid interest from readers. Fortunately, there's a natural continuation of Franco's arc, and repercussions of his actions during the book's climax. But these characters can only have so many adventures without this turning into "Murder, He Wrote," and I have no interest in writing that. Most of 2020, I spent researching and writing an LAPD procedural with a darker tone and totally new characters (intended as a potential series, if picked up.)

From Blackout:

Straight-laced, forty-something Franco picked the wrong night to get freaky. A hook-up with a hot guy and hard drugs on this Manhattan rooftop leaves him dazed. And, if memory serves him, the sole witness to a murder across the street.



Marco Carocari grew up in Switzerland, where he, over the past fifty-odd years, worked in a hardware store, traveled the globe working for the airlines, and later as an internationally published photographer, and frequently jobbed as a waiter, hotel receptionist, or manager of a professional photo studio. In 2016 he swapped snow-capped mountains, lakes, and lush, green pastures for the charm of the dry California desert, where he lives with his husband. 'Blackout' is his first novel.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SENSE OF PLACE IN CRIME FICTION

by Cynthia L. Tolbert

The sense of place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind, surely they are somewhere related. It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are. - Eudora Welty

“Knowing where you stand” is essential to crime fiction, especially a murder. The scene of the crime is the first place law enforcement gathers evidence and presents essential clues in any mystery. Place can shape behavior. It shifts moods, inspires beliefs, and affects the plot.

My interest in mysteries began early on, when I was eight, and my younger brother inherited our cousin’s Hardy Boys Mystery library. There were well over fifty books in the collection and I read the entire series in one summer. I realized I loved deducing, figuring out the “who dunit.” Graduating to Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle in the eighth grade, I discovered warm and comforting worlds created by these two writers, even though their stories centered on gruesome murders. I loved Christie’s English villages and grand manors. I grew accustomed to the culture of those environments, and came to expect certain behaviors from the bobbies and housekeepers of Christie’s stories. I expected manor houses to have hidden rooms or dark staircases. I even drew comfort from reading Doyle. The back streets and opium dens of London might be frightening or creepy, but Holmes always returned to 221B Baker Street. I wanted to travel back to the environments each author created and visit them again and again.

Familiar environments were key to Christie’s and Doyle’s success. Murder and intrigue kept me hooked, but the sense of place kept me coming back. Louise Penny echoes this style today. Her imaginary village, Three Pines, in Quebec, Canada, is a homespun oasis. This village, it’s shops, restaurants, and quaint characters give solace to the harsh brutality of the dozens of murders committed there.

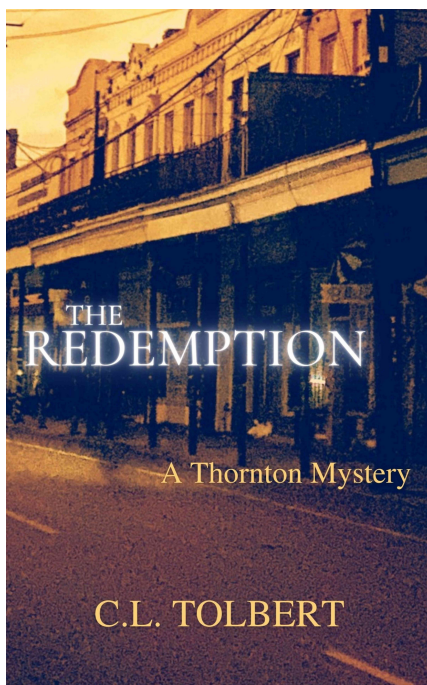
My most recent book, The Redemption, is set in New Orleans, a city rich with centuries old culture, architecture, and streets so old cobblestones are still in place in some areas. The atmosphere, and even the weather, is steamy and thick. Movements are slow, as is the language of the people, and the general pace of the city. Its most prominent street, St. Charles, is filled with pastel painted mansions, and yards spilling over with peonies and wisteria, yet a sense of malevolence hovers over the city, especially at night. You catch yourself looking behind your back as you’re walking down the street, even in the middle of the day.

New Orleans is unquestionably one of the main characters in my novel. The story was set in 1994, when the murder rate was greater than it had ever been, and city corruption was at an all-time high. Those two facts shaped my choice of antagonist. The underlying fear in the city shaped the plot. The breathtaking beauty of the city is diminished by its decay. And the lively, pelvic-thrust energy of Bourbon Street is immediately tempered by the sobering knowledge that wandering off that well-traveled tourist destination could be your last mistake.

New Orleans was built around a crescent shaped river hundreds of years ago. Most of its narrow, cobblestoned streets have been paved over, but not all. Half of the city's sewage lines were installed before World War II, and a third were installed before Prohibition. The city is physically imploding, and the inequities of its culture are exploding, as exposed by the devastation of Katrina in 2005. It is a city whose magnificence and beauty are only met by the desolation of its poverty and crime. People of wealth in the city maintain homes with enclosed courtyards. Most of the courtyards are surrounded by tall brick fences topped with broken glass shards to keep out people the home owners don't know and don't want to know. The fences telegraph fear. The fear creates anger.

This is atmosphere. This is place. This is what causes people to behave a certain way. A sense of place causes us to employ our logical mind, and encompasses physical and cultural environments which constantly shift with weather and mood. Reading transports us to these places, and through the magic of story, we are forever changed.

Cynthia Tolbert is the author of The Thornton Mysteries. She has a background as a special education teacher and a legal career as a defense counsel. Cynthia lives in Atlanta with her husband and her schnauzer, Yoda.



AN ARTFUL WRITER

AN INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDIA RIESS

HS: Knight Light is the third book in your Art History Mystery Series. Your professional background, I'm sure, has given you an abundance of information to draw upon. Please tell us about this subject that is near and dear to you.

CR: One of my responsibilities working for The New Yorker was to choose what drawings ("spots") would appear in each issue and on what page. This is probably the closest I came to plumbing the depths of the art world during my years of working in the field of publishing. In truth, my knowledge—and love—of art and art history began with excursions to all the Brooklyn and Manhattan museums in early childhood, and is bound up in an organic sense to family. My father favored representational art; my mother argued the case for abstractionism. I happily joined the fray around the kitchen table. My brother, Jonny, ten years my junior, horned in on our exchanges much later on, and eventually became an art history professor. He recommended books I should read, like George Bull's Michelangelo, which would become one of the research sources for Stolen Light, the first in my art history series. Intermittently, I've edited art monographs on Renaissance art, an enlightening experience in itself. Whatever knowledge I've gleaned over the years has not been through formal means, but through interest and application.

HS: Is Erika Shawn, one half of your detecting duo, fashioned after yourself?

CR: Well, no, at least not deliberately. Only in retrospect do I realize that in creating a sympathetic character, one that I can readily inhabit, or be inhabited by, I've instinctively bestowed her with a temperament, sensibilities, principles, that are more or less aligned with mine. Erika is a lot braver than I am, though, and has had a much lustier past. As for her career as an art magazine editor, although it's in the same general field as mine, I chose it not for that reason, but to give her broad access to the art world.

HS: It's my understanding that the art world can be subject to quite a bit of shady dealing and criminal behavior. Can you tell us about the underside of the art world?

CR: The art world is where the most sublime instincts clash with the basest. It's essentially unmonitored. A painting's value can be determined by the whims and machinations of influential dealers and collectors or by the aesthetic climate of the times. Because of the subjective component of its evaluation, its price can be manipulated to produce tax deductible losses either through a cleverly crafted "distress sale" or a donation with an inflated appraisal. It can be used to launder money, widely traded on the black market by easily crossing international borders, change hands anonymously through a mediator, and be exposed as forgery. I try to stay up-to-date with advances on the war on art crime in the legislative and private sectors. For instance, in November of 2019, the House of Representatives passed an anti-money laundering bill that had been proposed by Congress in 2018. (HR2514 aka The Counter Act.) To curb illegal movement of artwork, one of the stipulations is that dealers would have to report all transactions over \$15,000. The trade-off of burdening dealers with what might be perceived as overbearing regulations has thus far kept the bill from passage in the Senate.

HS: Claudia, what have you learned during the process of publishing three books in a series?

CR: Combining mystery, art and romance in a hybrid genre—and on top of that, in a series!—does have its challenges, but grappling with them has become one of the rewards. One way I've learned to deal with the balancing act of mystery and romance is consciously deciding that the principal driving force is mystery and sticking to it. To prevent the plot from stalling, I see that Erika and Harrison's personal conflicts have a bearing on their crime-solving. In one instance, say, Erika goes off on a risky mission on the sly, despite Harrison's adamant opposition. Her decision and his reaction play an integral part in both the plot development and the pair's evolving relationship. As an incurable romantic, I have to be on guard about digressing too long on intimate encounters or personal-issues-centered dialogue. I think I've gotten better at cutting scenes down to size. Some of the problems unique to a series are hinting at plots in previous books without giving them away, remembering the names of all the characters and deciding who should re-appear and in what capacity, and being consistent with all the minor facts. Fortunately, I realized before the second book went to print that I'd switched floors where the bedrooms and studies in the Wheatley house are situated. Since then, I've kept a running account of handy facts and new characters, and on what pages they first appear. I've learned that there's a special connection recurring characters have on me. Even now, in the lull before I start the next book, I feel Erika and Harrison tugging at me, insisting that I allow them to get on with their lives.

HS: Are there any authors who have inspired you to write?

CR: I was introduced to the magic of the written word through the sound of my father's voice as he read A.A. Milne to me, from *When We Were Very Young* to *The House at Pooh Corner*. Who knew then that these deeply embedded encounters with the author's delicious wit and his ability to define a character with a smattering of dialogue would one day inspire me to write? That I would acknowledge the influence years later? A few others that have come along: When I read Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way*, I was mesmerized at the start by a description of the ravages of war. The paragraph was a tone poem, moving and strikingly real. It took my breath away. Philip Roth has at times affected me deeply, the way he cuts to the heart of the matter so effortlessly, as in *Everyman*. I admire Anita Brookner's probing eloquence—also how she can write three-page sentences that make perfect sense! It's not that great writers inspire me to write like them. They simply inspire me to write. It's like you hear music, you want to sing.

HS: Can you tell us about your future writing plans?

CR: Lately I've been reading a lot about art and artifacts removed—looted!— from African countries during the colonial era and the worldwide efforts being made to return them. This has led me down various paths, from studying grant-making organizations like The Open Society Foundation and The Humboldt Forum, to examining the profound influences ancient African art had on modern art. I've come across a number of interesting individuals, savory and un-, and at this point I'm trying to concoct some provocative nexus of events that will lead to a present-day challenge for my detecting duo. Right now, all I have are scribbled notes on different colored five-by-seven cards. (I always start off by color-coding categories—plot ideas on yellow, character descriptions on blue, historical facts on pink, etc.— but the system quickly deteriorates to a haphazard rainbow.) Some of my best unifying ideas have popped into mind when I'm on my rowing machine. This provides an impetus to work out, which is a good thing, since I need every shove I can get in that area.

Claudia Reiss, a Vassar graduate, has worked in the editorial departments of *The New Yorker* and Holt, Rinehart and Winston, and has edited several art history monographs.

