

# THE DAMES' DOCKET

*A Bimonthly Newsletter from Level Best Books*



Editor: Harriette Sackler  
Production: Rita Owen

The Dames of Detection  
Verena Rose  
Harriette Sackler  
Shawn Reilly Simmons

## GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES

Hope you are all well and reading and writing! With Spring almost here and Covid diminishing, we're looking forward to more time out of our homes and being able to see friends, both old and new, in person.

As you know, the Dames, aside from being the co-publishers and editors at Level Best Books, are very long-time members of the Malice Domestic Board of Directors. The Board is busily planning for our first in-person convention since Covid reared its ugly head. Malice Domestic 32, 33, and 34 will be celebrated April 22-24 in Bethesda, Maryland. We anticipate one big reunion bash and look forward to seeing, and in many cases, meeting many LBB authors, face-to-face, for the first time.

Needless to say, we're thrilled that a number of Level Best books have been nominated for Agathas. Congratulations to Gabriel Valjan, Mally Becker, Lori Duffer Foster, Judy Murray, and Chris Chan. You done good!

If you haven't registered for Malice yet, we encourage you to do so, if you're able. We can ensure that you'll have a great time: mix and mingle with authors and fans, attend or serve on engaging panels, see interviews with our honored guests, and have a helluva good time.

Cheers,

Harriette

# WRITE THE FIGHT RIGHT

Kerry K. Cox

Every story requires conflict, and for those of us who write crime fiction and thrillers, that conflict often involves physical violence.

But here's the thing: how many writers have much experience with actual physical violence? How many know what it feels like to be kicked in the mouth, or sink a fist into someone's floating ribs, or trade blows with a guy who is bigger and stronger?

Well, I do.

As a black belt in Tang Soo Do, I taught martial arts for fifteen years, during which I sparred almost daily. I competed in tournaments—including the Ed Parker Internationals, two years running—and did my share of winning and losing, the latter of which ended a few times with a run to the ER for stitches. I also boxed (amateur only) for five years, where I learned firsthand that the finest headgear doesn't keep you from getting your bell rung.

Is it any wonder that one of my pet peeves about novelized fight scenes is that they simply couldn't happen the way they're written?

This is not just an issue for writers new to the craft. Nor does it have to do with gender. I've seen laughable fight scenes written by some of the genre's biggest names, male and female. "So what?" you might ask. "If nobody but you cares, why should I?"

Fair question. Clearly, people are getting away with writing implausible fight scenes. But as crime novelists, don't we always want to strive for verisimilitude? I think the answer is yes. To that end, I offer a few simple techniques to help your scenes of violence crackle with authenticity and clarity.

**1. Who is Fighting Who?** This is the most important factor in any fight, and the reason there are weight classes in professional fighting. In your scene, what's the match-up? What skills or handicaps does your hero have, versus the bad guy? What's their respective training? What's the size and strength differential? If your hero is physically overmatched, whether in size, skill or both, how will he/she somehow triumph? **Tip:** The smaller woman kicking the big guy in the nuts and dropping him like wet cement? Don't do this. First, (apologies, guys), it's not a big target. It's very easy to miss, especially under duress, and when you miss, you hit nothing vulnerable. Second, men instinctively protect this area, making it an even harder (ahem) target. Finally, his adrenaline is flowing, too, and unless your kick is right on the money (under and up, not straight in, for those who want to know) it won't stop an attack.

**2. Where Are They Fighting?** The environment can play a huge role in any physical conflict. Are there potential weapons nearby? Are they battling in a narrow hallway, where your hero's awesome kicking skills might not be as effective? Next to a busy street, or in a secluded park? Is the floor slippery? Is it someplace familiar to the bad guy, but unfamiliar to the hero? In my latest novel, *Canned Hunt*, my protagonist instigates a brawl in a crowded, noisy biker bar. The setting gave me lots of confusion, obstacles, unconventional

weaponry, and logistics to deal with, and turn to the hero's advantage. **Tip:** Involve the environment in any physical conflict, because it matters. If possible, walk through a setting reflective of the one you're writing about. What's around you? What could you use as a weapon? What would get in your way?

**3. The Opponent Isn't a Tackling Dummy.** Sometimes I'll read a scene where the hero pulls off a series of punches, kicks, whatever, and the opponent's response is to conveniently subside into unconsciousness. Remember, the bad guy/girl wants to win just as much as the good guy/girl, so while your hero is throwing all those cool moves, think about what the opponent is doing. **Tip:** There are lots of self-defense videos available online. Be wary of relying on them as models. Typically, they show the "good guy" using some kind of technique to foil an attacker—but the attacker is unusually cooperative. It's rare that a single technique or blow stops a determined attacker. This is especially true if your protagonist is not a trained fighter.

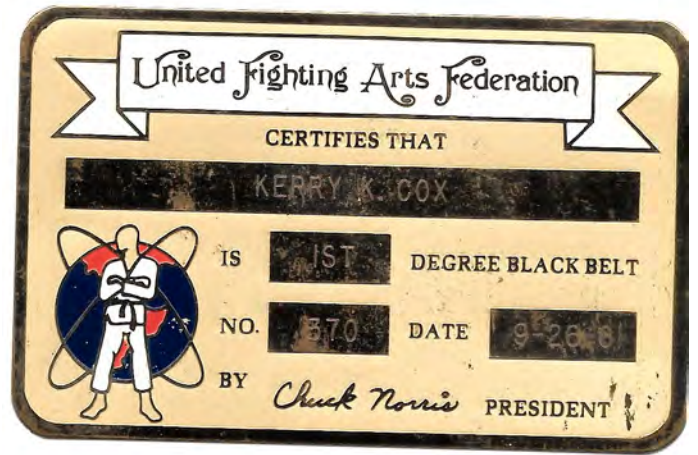
**4. Get the Details Right.** I read a novel recently—admittedly, a self-published one I was (regrettably) asked to review—wherein the author, in describing a violent escape scene, said, "He somehow got loose from his bindings." Another line: "She twisted his hand in a way that caused him to release the gun." Yow. That goes beyond lazy writing, it's flat insulting to the reader. For an action scene to be credible, you have to answer the question, "How'd he/she do that?" That means you have to put the action into slow-motion, and include the details. For instance, in an unarmed hand-to-hand combat situation, you have a number of weapons to keep track of. Fists, fingers, elbows, knees, feet, head, teeth, they're all weapons. Is your villain using his left hand or his right to throw that haymaker? If your hero's in a fighting crouch, is she sweeping out the bad guy's leg using her back leg, or front? Which of the opponent's legs is she aiming for? Help me visualize the fight with specific details. **Tip:** Walk through your action with a partner (eschewing actual contact, of course!). Note movements that come naturally, movements that don't, which hand does what, etc.

**Another Tip:** Specify precisely where a given blow lands. The difference between punching an overweight man in the stomach, for example, versus a few inches higher in the solar plexus, is the difference between pissing him off or potentially causing his diaphragm to spasm. Which do you want to happen?

I could go on, but I want to be cognizant of word count. I will, however, make this offer: If any of my fellow Level Besties are feeling unsure about a fight scene you've written, and would like me to take a look and offer any suggestions I might have, I'd be happy to do so (gratis, of course). Realistic description of physical conflict adds to the overall authenticity of our work, and makes us better writers. And that's the goal, right?

\*\*\*

*Kerry K. Cox writes the Nick Tanner Crime Thriller series. The first, Money Bear, was released in 2021. The second, Canned Hunt, launched in March of this year. The third, Cold-Blooded Trade, is scheduled for a February 2023 release. Kerry Cox lives by the ocean in Cambria, California, with his wife and too many critters. When Kerry isn't writing, he volunteers with various wildlife, marine mammal, and feral cat/kitten rescue groups on California's Central Coast. Kerry's Nick Tanner Mysteries are published by Level Best Books.*  
kerrykcox@yahoo.com  
<https://kerrykcox.com>



**My Black Belt card, signed by Chuck Norris, who headed up the 10-sensei judging panel on my black belt test.**



**Me, at the test, deftly blocking my opponent's kick with the side of my face. Not a highly recommended technique. Somehow, I recovered enough to get some payback.**

# WRITING TWO SERIES: A STUDY IN TIME MANAGEMENT

Liz Milliron

When I started my writing journey, my goal was to have one published series. Well, one book, but I dreamed of having a series. In December 2017, I signed a contract with Level Best Books to publish The Laurel Highlands Mysteries. My dream had come true and I was finished.

Right? Maybe not.

I'm not sure how long after, my editor, Harriette Sackler, told me that Level Best was starting an imprint for historical books, called appropriately enough Historia. "I have a historical book, if you want to read it," I said, rather hesitantly. Harriette told me to send it on and I did. She loved it. Then came the sixty-four-million-dollar question.

"Can you write two books a year?"

Now, in my head, before I really thought about it, I was sure this was doable. But after Harriette asked the question, I had to think. Was this really a possibility? I knew other authors who wrote four books a year, and that was definitely out of my reach, but could I do two?

I sat down. I thought. I talked to friend and critique partner Annette Dashofy. "Am I insane?"

"You might be," she said. "But the question is can you do it?"

I went back to Harriette. "If you schedule due dates six months apart, I can do this." Harriette was amenable to that. I signed the deal for The Homefront Mysteries.

The third book in that historical series just came out in February. Over two years, this is what I've learned.



1. Be disciplined. It takes me six months, give or take a week, to write a first draft. That's assuming I write the number of words Scrivener tells me I need to write. I try to exceed that every day.
2. Keep to the schedule. I start a Homefront book on January first with a target completion date of June 30. The submission date for that book is in August, so that gives me a month to polish it for submission. In the second half of the year, it flips. I start a Laurel Highlands book on July 1 with a completion date of December 31, leaving me the same one-month period for polishing. It sounds crazy, but as long as I keep to those dates, I'm good.
3. Don't write two books at once. Early on, I thought "These aren't really that close—it's not like I'm writing two contemporaries. Maybe I can write two at a time." Nope. Turns out the skills needed to draft demand my entire concentration. I can revise and edit when I'm drafting, but draft two books at once? It's a mess.
4. Don't multi-task. Now, you might be thinking, "You are multitasking, aren't you?" But no. While I'm in that drafting phase for a Homefront book, developmental edits on that year's Laurel Highlands book might come in from my editor. At first, I tried to do both on one day: draft in the morning, edit in the afternoon. I quickly realized that didn't work. It took too long because the quality wasn't there. Now, when those edits come in, I set aside the book I'm drafting until I'm done with the edits. Then I go back to the drafting. You might think that sounds lengthy, but I produce higher quality work—which makes the overall duration shorter because I spend less time in rework.
5. Keep the stories straight. I keep series bibles for each in an online application called *Airtable*. I record every book in the series, all characters and associate them with a series, and any important locations, again, associated with a book. You can use Excel, or some other application, or even just a notebook. Whatever works. But when you're trying to remember "What was the name of that character I used two books ago?" it's very helpful to be able to go back to my series bibles and quickly find it. Bonus: I don't confuse the character I want with a character I actually created for the other series.

There's no doubt writing two series a year keeps me on my toes. But on the good side, I'm guaranteed to spend time with all of my fictional friends at some point during the year.

\*\*\*

*Liz Milliron is the author of The Laurel Highlands Mysteries series, set in the scenic Laurel Highlands of Southwestern Pennsylvania, and The Home Front Mysteries, set in Buffalo, New York, during the early years of World War II. She lives outside Pittsburgh with her husband, two children, and a retired racer greyhound.*

<https://lizmilliron.com/>

# GIVING HISTORY A TWIST

Jason Monaghan

One challenge of writing a thriller set in a historic period is that we know what happened. Even if most of your readers are not history experts, they will be aware of the big picture and can quickly dive into Wikipedia to flesh out the facts. We know which US Presidents were assassinated, who won WW2, and are sure the Titanic sank. A reader can anticipate what is going to happen.

Even if we know our history, tension can be created against a historic backdrop that is fixed. For example in the Philip Kerr books set in 1930s and 1940s Germany, innumerable crimes and misdemeanors and cunning plots can be fitted into this 'Golden Age' with only passing nods to the historic timeline. Much happened that is not in the history books. Even if writing a thriller faithful to a well-known event such as Robert Harris's Munich, a great deal of the dialogue, plot and behind-the-scenes action needs to be made up.

Crucially, although modern readers know how it all turned out, the characters don't. The writer needs to convey their hopes and fears and plans when the future is unknown. To them the end is not inevitable, and even the historic outcome need not pre-determine their fate as individuals. Characters should not be granted foreknowledge and take actions that in hindsight we know are mistakes; they may invest in the stock market in early 1929 because it seemed like a good idea at the time. Even if the reader is not surprised by the outcome of events, they are rewarded by how the protagonists react.

Historic thriller plots are made easier to write if the lead characters are minor players in the great game: a soldier, not a general; a highwayman, not a king. Major historical figures are given only walk-on parts, perhaps spouting lines they actually used. Only a little license is needed for our hero to be one of Columbus' crewmen. Take a little more license and one of our characters can play a pivotal role, such as being one of the senators who sticks a dagger into Julius Caesar.





Writing alternative history such as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* is a bolder step still. It opens up possibilities but requires a suspension of disbelief by the reader. The altered timeline needs to be explained and the bigger the departure from reality, the more thought the writer must put into world-building. Fantastic elements need to be minimized so that once over the initial hurdle, everything about this changed world feels logical. The more recognizable elements of the real historic period that are included, the less of a jump it will be for the reader. The history is 'wrong', but it should feel plausible.

We are not writing history books. So much of the research that underpins a thriller must be set aside, keeping only the nuggets that add richness to the story and provide the context. Unfortunately, some facts can prove to be inconvenient and box the plot in if not derailing it entirely. If a writer makes a conscious decision to change just a few of those inconvenient facts to create the plot, the reader will start to wonder whether we will see history unfold as it should. Perhaps Hitler will be assassinated by our hero, or perhaps JFK will be saved. The character's uncertainty about what could happen becomes more real if the reader also becomes uncertain. It's a thriller, and we expect the unexpected.

\*\*\*

*Jason Monaghan is an author and archaeologist. Blackshirt Masquerade is set in 1935 in a Britain under the rising threat of fascism. It is published by the Historia Imprint of Level Best Books in March.*

[www.jasonmonaghan.com](http://www.jasonmonaghan.com)



# WRITING MOTIVATORS

## Lida Sideris

Sometimes, I don't feel like writing. But when I don't write, I feel dejected and dissatisfied. Not writing is not an option. Instead, I switch direction and take a few minutes to jumpstart my motivation. Here are a few tips:

1. **Step away and relax:** When I shift direction, I come back feeling ready to roll. The shift can be as simple as dish-washing (Agatha Christie credited dish-washing as, "The best time for planning a book.."). Or try reading or walking or spending time with loved ones (human and canine/feline/even poultry in my case). This allows the focus to slide away from writing and onto a task that doesn't require as much mental finesse. The key is finding something to unwind the mind.
2. **Exercise:** Scarcely a day went by that Charles Dickens didn't "flee his desk and take to the streets of London and its suburbs." Mr. Dickens was onto something. Taking in the sights, sounds, and scents of a walk can be refreshing and stimulating on the psyche as well as the body.
3. **Read:** A favorite author's book. That usually ignites a fire beneath me, enabling me to write my own story. I love the power of words to create images, characters, and emotions. And if reading a book doesn't work, I'll hunt down stories of name authors and read about how they wrote some of their greatest stories in conditions that were less than favorable.

Take Robert Louis Stevenson, for instance. He wrote *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* one sleepless night when he was suffering from advanced tuberculosis. In his aggrieved state, he wrote the book in three days! How is that even possible?

Unhappy with the first draft, he ripped it apart, literally, and rewrote the whole shebang, again in his ill state, in three more days. That's 64,000 words in six days. I have to pause right there because even in a state of well-being, I can barely imagine writing as he did. Mr. Stevenson wrote more than 10,000 words...a day. Most writers consider one-to-two thousand words per day an accomplishment.

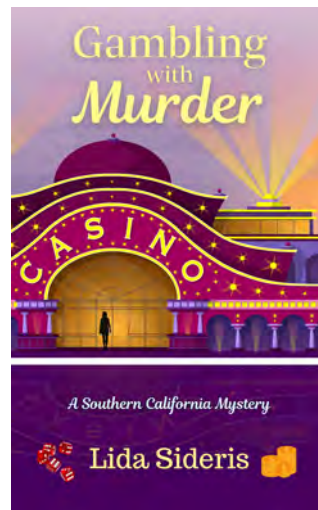
What Robert Louis Stevenson showed us is that:



All we need to do is try. These days, when I sit restless in my chair, and distractions are shouting out my name, I think of Robert Louis Stevenson and stay put. Thank you, Mr. Stevenson for showing us what we're capable of accomplishing.

\*\*\*

*Lida Sideris' first stint after law school was a newbie lawyer's dream: working as an entertainment attorney for a movie studio...kind of like her heroine, Corrie Locke, except without the homicides. Lida was one of two national winners of the Helen McCloy Mystery Writers of America Scholarship and a Killer Nashville, Silver Falchion Award Finalist. Coming March 29th, Book #5 in A Southern California Mystery series—Gambling with Murder. <https://lidasideris.com/>*



# CASTING CALL FOR YOUR NOVEL

## *How Channeling a Movie Star for a Role in Your Novel Can Help*

Nina Wachsman

No matter how much knowledge I think I've obtained on how to write a compelling story, every time I go to a writer's conference, inevitably I learn something new. My latest writing epiphany came from listening to a talk by Chris Grabenstein about his days as a copywriter for James Patterson at the ad agency J. Walter Thompson. Patterson had asked him to develop a radio commercial, but to write it in the voice of Bill Murray in *Stripes*. Immediately, Chris said he knew what to do, and conjuring Murray in that role, I could understand why. So, I decided to try it on a character I was struggling with in my historical novel.

In my novel, *The Gallery of Beauties*, Diana, the rabbi's daughter, has ventured out of the Ghetto of Venice into the salon of a famous courtesan. A nobleman spots her, and intrigued by a fresh face, tries to engage her. At first, I envisioned him as a drunk, but the dialogue seemed stilted, so I began to imagine which actor I would cast in this role. In a sudden flash of inspiration, I got it—George Sanders, the classic movie star who played King Charles II in *Forever Amber*. Perfect! I channeled George Sanders as I wrote the scenes with the character, who had now become a jaded nobleman and more important to the plot.

I was on a roll, and I tried it with my two main characters, Diana, the rabbi's daughter, and Belladonna, the courtesan. I had to make them memorable beauties, so who could fit the part?

A young Elizabeth Taylor, when she played "Rebecca" in *Ivanhoe*, would be perfect as Diana, and could be described with thick black hair and distinctive violet eyes. Ann Baxter, seductive and clever as she was in *All About Eve*, I could see as Belladonna, the courtesan.

There's another benefit to this type of casting: it can be useful for promoting your novel. There are a number of Facebook groups for classic movie buffs and fans of 1970-80s TV shows. Posting how a favorite movie star inspired a character in your book can capture the attention of fans of classic movie and TV stars. A creative way to get to a new audience.

So, just for fun, I started casting classic and contemporary movie stars for leading roles in some of the recent novels I've read by my fellow Level Besties. These are the movie stars I envisioned in the roles of their main characters:

- Kate Winslet—as "Rebecca" in *The Turncoat's Widow* by Mally Blecker
- James Garner—as "Shane Cleary" in *Hush Hush* by Gabriel Valjean
- Winona Ryder—as "Leah Siderova" in *Murder in Second Position* by Lori Robbins
- Olivia Coleman—as "Fiona Figg" in *Villiany in Vienna*

- Susan Saint James (from the old TV show *Kate & Allie*)—as "Bianca St. Denis" in *Winter Witness* by Tina deBellagarde
- Jennifer Garner—as "Stefanie Adams" in *Death in the Aegean* by MA Monnin
- Claudette Colbert—as "Lizzie Crane" in *Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife* by Skye Alexander
- Kristin Bell—as "Lisa Jamison" in *A Dead Man's Eyes*, by Lori Duffer Foster

The fun of this imaginary casting call is the selection of movie stars from any era, at any age. It helped me bring my characters into better focus, and I'll be calling on George Sanders and a young Elizabeth Taylor to help me promote *The Gallery of Beauties* to classic movie lovers very soon.

\*\*\*

*Nina Wachsman lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, but her heart is in Venice, Italy. She visits Venice every two years and is a descendent of a great rabbi of the Ghetto of Venice. Gallery of Beauties is Nina's debut novel and is coming soon to Level Best Books. Visit Nina at: <https://venicebeauties.com>*

# JANUARY-FEBRUARY NEW RELEASES

