

THE DAMES' DOCKET

A Quarterly 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

Here we are in a new season! And that means we can look forward to new opportunities, new adventures, new authors, and new books. I, for one, am not sorry that the blistering heat and humidity of a D.C. area summer has passed.

The Dames would like to thank you for your patience, caring, and support as we rallied around our Shawn as she battled a very serious health condition. Having been friends for so many years, we know what an amazingly strong and resilient woman she is and are confident she'll overcome this hurdle and move on.

It makes us so happy to see so many of you at the Besties meetings, posting in LBB authors, and contacting us with news of your awards, public appearances, and attendance at conventions. Keep sending us the news! We love it.

Verena and I are looking forward to seeing many of you at New England Crime Bake. We're hoping we can gather for drinks or a meal, and in some cases, actually meet you in person for the first time. We know Shawn would love to be there, but, for now, she's sticking close to home.

I hope you're enjoying The Dames' Docket. Our authors have so much information to share and, in this issue, I can relate to each of our three articles. First of all, I am a huge fan of historical fiction and have written a number of historical short stories. Thank you to Skye Alexander for her very interesting article on researching the Roaring Twenties. Linda Lovely's article on HOAs will strike a chord with so many of us. While my HOA is basically helpful to my community, the rules can sometimes be overwhelming. Laraine Stephens' article on life after retirement really hit home. After I retired from working at a children's residential mental health treatment center, I thought I'd have all the time in the world to sit back and relax. But that was not meant to be. I found myself busier than ever! And, then, along came Level Best! I guess some of us are not meant to live the quiet life.

Beginning with this issue of The Dames' Docket, we'll be publishing the newsletter quarterly. Please feel free to send me articles and tidbits that can be included in future issues.

For the Dames,

Harriette

JAZZ, FLAPPERS, AND PROHIBITION: RESEARCHING THE ROARING TWENTIES

Skye Alexander

Writing historical fiction requires doing a lot of research, which may sound tedious to some people. But once I started delving into the Roaring Twenties for the first history-mystery in my Lizzie Crane series, *Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife*, I was rewarded with all sorts of fascinating facts, fads, and trivia.

For example, I learned that Prohibition didn't outlaw drinking alcohol or serving it in your home, only making, selling, and distributing it were illegal. In the 1920s, police roamed beaches performing "modesty checks" on women bathers by measuring the distance from the bottoms of their swimsuits to their knees. Charles Lindbergh, before he became famous for flying across the Atlantic Ocean, performed air acrobatics in barnstorming events across the central U.S.—his risky demonstrations earned him the nickname "Daredevil Lindbergh."

The Devil's in the Details

Because mystery readers are sticklers for accuracy, I had to make sure I got the information right. To that end, I sought resource materials that would provide the details I needed. I purchased a 1925 Sears catalog that showed what ordinary people wore, the products they used, and how much things cost in those days. I bought old postcards, newspapers, and magazines. I downloaded period menus from restaurants to learn what people ate then—Jell-O, it turns out, was considered a classy dessert because it meant the person who served it owned one of the new refrigerators. I found vintage maps on eBay, including a hand-drawn one of Greenwich Village in 1925 that indicated which ethnic and cultural groups lived in which areas, and one of New York in 1926 that showed which elevated railways were being transitioned to subways.

To familiarize myself with Jazz Age slang I turned to slang dictionaries including Tom Dalzell's *Flappers 2 Rappers* and *The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life from Prohibition through World War II* by Marc McCutcheon. There I learned that the convertible one of my characters drives was known as a "breezer" and that a hot-blooded young woman was called a "bearcat," which became my protagonist's nickname.

To augment my Sears catalog, I sought fashion advice from style expert Debbie Sessions at Vintage Dancer, who gave me a course in 1920s clothing. To expand my knowledge of jazz, I listened to old recordings and watched performances of Louis Armstrong, Al Jolson, and other jazz greats on YouTube. I read books, stories, and plays, and watched movies from the period. What fun!

The Personal Touch

On a few occasions, I talked with elderly people who shared personal stories. A gentleman in his nineties whose parents had owned a grand resort featured in *Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife* recounted his family's tales of the good old days spent there. Another man whose father worked in the film industry in Los Angeles in the 1920s explained how early records were made. And a woman centenarian told me how ladies tended to their personal hygiene.

Settings are important to me, and the locations in my books are based on actual places. Crane's Castle in Ipswich, Massachusetts (former summer home of the plumbing magnate Richard Crane), served as inspiration in *Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife*. The second book in my series, *What the Walls Know*, takes place in an eerie seaside castle much like the Gothic Revival home of inventor John Hays Hammond Jr. in Gloucester. The Peirce-Nichols House in Salem, Massachusetts, designed by Samuel McIntire in 1782, served as the prototype for the mansion in book three, *The Goddess of Shipwrecked Sailors*. For the sake of authenticity, I visited every house, restaurant, hotel, museum, train station, store, library, factory building, cemetery, and park I've written about, from Boston's Gardner Museum to Salem's Old Burying Point Cemetery, from New York's Penn Station and Carnegie Hall to the fishing docks of Gloucester, Massachusetts. If it's mentioned in my books and if such a place still exists—for sadly some have been destroyed—I've been there.

In the process of writing my Lizzie Crane series, I've learned about clipper ships, crossword and jigsaw puzzles, art forgery, pipe organs, bootlegging, Ouija boards, merry-go-rounds, elevators, and many other things I didn't realize I wanted to know. And every day I discover something else. Does anyone out there have an interesting story to share about the Roaring Twenties?

Skye Alexander is the author of the Lizzie Crane series of historical mysteries, published by Level Best Books. In 2003, she cofounded LBB with fellow authors Kate Flora and Susan Oleksiw. She has over forty fiction and nonfiction books to her credit, her stories have appeared in anthologies internationally, and her work has been translated into more than a dozen languages. After spending thirty-one years in Massachusetts, Skye now lives in Texas with her black Manx cat. Visit her at www.skyealexander.com.

Article in The Historical Novel Society's May 2022 newsletter



IT'S NO MYSTERY WHY PLOTS THICKEN INSIDE HOAs

Linda Lovely

Many cherished mystery novels feature life in small towns and villages. Consider the appeal of novels by Agatha Christie and Louise Penny, not to mention TV's "Murder, She Wrote" episodes.

Today, homeowner associations and condominium communities are the modern equivalents of Miss Marple's village of St. Mary Mead. In fact, it's a wonder more authors haven't seized on these close-knit enclaves as backdrops that are ripe for page-turning puzzlers with or without a side of humor.

In small communities, characters often know about each other even if they've never met. That knowledge network, reliable or not, provides a rich array of suspects. While few of us hang out with spies, billionaires, CEOs, or professional hitmen, we're acquainted with neighbors we think of as unsung heroes, self-serving loudmouths, arrogant bullies, or timid victims. The familiar characters and commonplace passions make it easy for readers to relate to the stories.

Like every human collective, HOAs are natural incubators for conflict. People aren't clones, even when they all decide to buy an oceanfront condo or build in a mountain retreat. Some residents want stricter architectural rules, others want less. Some lobby for special assessments to add amenities, others want to slash budgets. Nature lovers oppose folks who view all trees as view-blocking weeds. Cliques form, gossip passes for gospel, and outcasts long for revenge.

What's more, in the privacy of their homes, people cope with challenges and heartaches their neighbors never suspect—from mental health and financial crises to domestic abuse and grief for lost loved ones.

While it's doubtful your common-interest neighborhood has seen a murder, it's a safe bet you've met many of the characters—charming and repugnant—in my new HOA Mystery series. I also suspect your manager, if your community employs one, might occasionally mutter that "managing an HOA can be murder."

However, just as Jessica Fletcher's Cabot Cove is portrayed as a nice, friendly place to call home—despite its shockingly high homicide rate—my mysteries aren't meant to be anti-HOA raves. My heroine, a retired Coast Guard investigator, works for her friend's property management company. The dozen-plus fictional South Carolina Lowcountry HOAs the firm counts as clients showcase both opportunities and pitfalls. Some HOAs manage their conflicts well, others fail. The difference? How the individuals who serve as directors view their responsibilities.

If my series has any motive beyond entertainment, it's to spotlight via fiction how HOA directors can help promote peace and harmony within their communities. True, there is no way to prevent unhappy folks from complaining about every decision. Yet, most owners will accept decisions—even ones they dislike—if their boards hold open meetings, value transparency, listen to complaints, and ensure there's majority support for any major change.

HOAs can embrace pure democracy in ways that are impractical with large populations. That's the promise of a good HOA.

Of course, writing only about model HOAs and virtuous directors would make for a very boring book. Conflict is an essential element in every novel. As a result, *With Neighbors Like These*, the first of my HOA Mystery series, features a diversified cast. Some of the directors we meet are autocratic tyrants, and we encounter a few belligerent, rule-breaking owners we wish we had the power to vote off the island. Add in controversial proposals for change and the pot really begins to boil. The friction between opposing camps provides an array of suspects with excellent murder motives. Of course, it's also impossible not to chuckle at the absurdity when rules or regulations get carried to extremes.

What do I hope HOA managers, directors, and members find in my series? First, I hope they enjoy the who-dunnit-twists. Second, I hope the chance to peer into a fictional mirror lets them reflect on their own roles and attitudes, and ask: Do I fit comfortably within the overall mystery of good democratic governance?

A journalism major in college, Linda Lovely has spent most of her career working in PR and advertising—an early introduction to penning fiction. With Neighbors Like These is the first in her new HOA mystery series and is Linda's ninth mystery/suspense novel.

A native of Iowa, Linda has called the South home for four decades. She and her husband live beside a lake in South Carolina Upstate.

Connect with Linda at <https://lindalovely.com>



A CAREER AFTER RETIREMENT

Ever wondered what retirement holds in store for you?

Laraine Stephens

I had worked as a head of library in secondary schools for over thirty-five years when I contemplated my future in retirement. Colleagues and friends often seemed to regard this time as one where they could put their feet up and do nothing. But that didn't wash with me. Surrounded by books, and being a lover of reading, I decided that it was time to experience the life of an author, the profession of those who had been my bread and butter for so many years. Eschewing the professional attire of the teacher-librarian, I dived into the depths of my wardrobe and extracted a daggy tracksuit and sheepskin moccasins. Perfect!

I traded in my copies of the Dewey Decimal Classification and purchased a laptop, an ergonomic chair, and a desk. Then I joined Writers' Victoria and, over a number of years, attended workshops on the craft of writing—characters, dialogue, the 'killer' first chapter and crime writing 101—and started my evolution to published author. I was going to write historical crime fiction!

When I wasn't typing my first 'masterpiece', I went on a diet of crime fiction, absorbing what worked and what didn't in the books I read, so that I could improve my writing. And three years later, my first book was finished, ready for publication. Or so I thought. It now lies rotting in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet where it belongs. Honestly, it's appalling!

Back on the bike. I started novel number two, entitled *The Death Mask Murders*. This book took me two years and, for the first time, I could see that it had potential. I should also mention that my husband started sleeping with a knife under his pillow.

By this stage, I was refining my craft, recognising that I had to concentrate on the following:

1. My **First Chapter** needed improvement, so that it would hook the reader into wanting to read on.
2. **Character Development.** After building up a **character profile** of my protagonists, I had to give them a backstory and a character arc.
3. **Conflict** was essential to maintain interest. The main character encounters physical/mental obstacles in their desire to reach a resolution. Tension, conflict, and dilemmas sustain the reader's attention.
4. **Location and setting.** How do they relate to the plot? Do they add to the action? I realised that, in my first novel, I'd been guilty of 'information dumps' that added nothing to the story, except for revealing a large degree of apparent self-indulgence on my part.

5. **Sight, taste, hearing, smell, touch.** The five senses were something that I had not considered properly. How does the protagonist react and respond to situations? How do they add to a descriptive piece within the novel?
6. **Review.** Re-read and review what I've written, on a regular basis.
7. **Manuscript appraisal.** I realised from the start that I had to hand my manuscripts over to a reputable appraiser, not my best friend, an ex-English teacher, or my sister! An objective eye was needed to look for the strengths and weaknesses in my writing.

But it's a hard road from writing to being published. As Stephen King said, 'By the time I was fourteen the nail in my wall would no longer support the weight of the rejection slips impaled upon it. I replaced the nail with a spike and went on writing.'

I took his advice, gritted my teeth, and kept submitting. Thirty-four rejection slips later and I could see that I was running out of options, even though I knew *The Death Mask Murders* was worthy of being published. Two long years of rejection and silence. The sticking point was that I wanted to succeed, even if I knew that it was pure dumb luck that would do it. I was a former librarian with a strong hankering to put a book on the shelf—one with my name on it. Call it ego or just pure persistence, I wanted to do something more with my life than see retirement as the end of a productive existence. And while I waited, I kept on writing.

And then a miracle occurred. Within the space of three days, I had two contracts on my desk: one from an Australian publisher and one from the United States. Tears were shed, champagne was drunk, and I knew that this was the start of something new and exciting. *The Death Mask Murders* saw the light of day in June 2021, published by Level Best Books.

So, what is my message?

My road to publishing has not been easy, but I have been amazed by the support I have received from my family and friends. Even those who hardly know me ask me how it's going! It's been a revelation. I love writing and I'm not stopping anytime soon. It's opened up a new life for me of author talks, writing promotional articles, doing social media, and speaking at events, giving me immense satisfaction at achieving something I never envisaged in my past.

My teacher-librarian garb is hanging neatly in my wardrobe. Those clothes didn't define me then, and they don't now. If you want to try something different, pull on that daggy tracksuit and those sheepskin moccasins and get going. Don't waste your retirement. It's not too late to chase the dream. And you're not too old to try something new.

Take it from a teacher-librarian: don't get left on the (book)shelf.

Laraine Stephens lives in Beaumaris, a bayside suburb of Melbourne, Australia. After a career as a teacher-librarian, she decided to turn her hand to the craft of crime writing. She is a member of Writers Victoria, Sisters in Crime (Australia), International Thriller Writers, the Australian Crime Writers' Association, and the Crime Writers' Association of the UK.

Laraine is the author of The Death Mask Murders, and Deadly Intent, from the Reggie da Costa Mysteries series. A Deadly Game will be published in 2023.



JULY-SEPTEMBER NEW RELEASES



