
OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2022 | VOL. 15

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

Holiday Greetings from the Dames.

We wish you the most wonderful
New Year filled with happiness, good
health, and contentment.



THANK YOU

2022 certainly brought its share of challenges. At the very beginning of the year, I was diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma, a rare, aggressive form of cancer. In February, I started chemo, which was initially supposed to wrap up by June, all things being well. Unfortunately, progress was slower than we'd hoped, and those treatments continued into late fall, with me logging eight long months of infusions along with increasing and cumulative exhaustion, pain, infections, hospital stays, and general overall nausea and sickness. But chemo finally did its job, and I then graduated to six weeks of daily radiation treatments, which were much easier to tolerate. Radiation caused pretty severe pain but not much fatigue...a walk in the park in comparison to chemo. I finally wrapped up all cancer-related treatment at the end of November and got to ring that bell, ten long months after it all began.

Throughout this ordeal, even in the hardest moments, I focused on things that make me happy as a way to cheer myself up. An item on that list is the work I get to do at LBB. Editing, collaborating on covers, working out plot points, or talking about characters with our authors is so fun and fulfilling—I do truly have my dream job, and I feel so lucky I get to do it!

The support and caring I received from the mystery community in general, and the Level Besties in particular, really helped me get through what I had to endure physically and gave me hope and something to focus on mentally. I can't thank you enough for sending all of the thoughtful and kind gifts, and for all of the calls, emails, text messages, cards in the mail, so many flowers delivered, and the generous donations to the Meal Train campaign. I've lost count of how many times I've been moved to tears by a simple note or message wishing me well or from someone praying for my recovery. I do believe that staying positive and being lifted up by the love and support from others helped my recovery reach the finish line. You all have my immense gratitude for everything you've done to help me recover.

I am very much looking forward to 2023!! I can't tell you how excited I am to hit the ground running, renewed and recovered, the battle behind me. We are so proud of the work we're doing, of all of you, and of all of your wonderful books. I cannot wait to see what this new year brings!

With Love and Thanks to you all,

Shawn

FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY IN CRIME FICTION

Katherine Ramsland

When I wrote *I Scream Man*, I was in a Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing. I aimed to create a female forensic psychologist, Annie Hunter, who runs a PI agency, so I used my thesis research to look for a potential role model in another series. To my surprise, despite the many useful skills psychologists offer to the legal system, consulting forensic psychologists are most often used in fiction as criminal profilers. This shortchanges the profession and limits creativity.

Here's why: The discipline of forensic psychology covers those interactions between law enforcement and psychology that benefit from psychological research and clinical experience. Such practitioners can apply their knowledge and experience to the civil and criminal arenas. For the court, forensic psychologists usually evaluate defendants' present or past mental states, or their future potential for violence. They offer information to help triers-of-fact make informed decisions. They might perform assessments on specific populations in the correctional system—sex offenders, psychopaths, or juvenile offenders—or might assist with legal strategies. In addition, psychologists assess such behaviors during interrogations as lying, malingering, and falsely confessing.

I wondered if fiction writers just think that profiling provides for the greatest conflict and suspense. The method does offer some predictive value. Still, many detectives can do what profilers do, especially if they're among those who've received training at the FBI's National Academy. And the FBI offers profiling at no cost. In most cases in the U.S., anyway, there's little need for a psychologist to perform this service.

Great Britain's another story. Behavioral Investigative Advisors (BIAs) there generally take courses in applied psychology programs and learn police investigation techniques. They act as assistants but don't necessarily have graduate degrees in psychology, let alone a clinical license. They help to gather information that gets interpreted within a scientific framework based in sociology, geography, and psychology. They learn to collect victim and crime scene information.

For my research on this topic, I eliminated cozy mysteries, novels that were factually wrong about psychological consulting, and protagonists who were cops with degrees in psychology (because it's not really the same). I looked at representatives in crime fiction not just in the U.S. but also in Britain. Still, I mostly found consulting psychologists or BIAs acting as profilers (or criminal mind readers).

In addition, most such characters are male. When they're female, they tend to be therapists or patient advocates. Annie Hunter is neither. She's a researcher with clinical background. She can do an assessment but prefers to investigate challenging cases that need special expertise. Hers is suicidology, and she can also consult on reconstruction, motive, staging, and multiple types of behavioral analysis, particularly a psychological autopsy.

I've seen this method in crime fiction, but rarely. Since police officers receive limited lessons on suicide analysis, this would be a valuable area to tap for fiction. It's not as limited as it might sound and it can lead to many other things. Psychological autopsy overlaps profiling on the need for a comprehensive victimology, but these methods are also quite different.

In simple terms, profilers can discern whether the offender is a careful, organized predator versus being impulsive or disordered. They determine whether the offender used a vehicle, showed criminal sophistication, had a specific type of mental illness, paid attention to the investigation, or is addicted to a particular type of sexual fantasy. These behaviors help to develop links among crimes and narrow the potential pool of suspects.

Developing a profile, especially for linkage among incidents, often relies on evidence of psychopathology, such as sadistic torture, postmortem mutilation, or pedophilia. Some killers leave a "signature," or a behavioral manifestation of a personality quirk, such as bite marks, stab patterns, dismemberment or complicated knots. Some behavioral patterns can aid in predicting future possible attacks, pick-up spots, or dumpsites.

A psychological autopsy dives deep into a decedent's life and antemortem state of mind. Such investigators gain informed context from suicide databases that help them to resist erroneous cultural myths, e.g., that most suicidal people leave explanatory notes. Coroners and medical examiners must have accurate information to determine a manner of death as natural, an accident, a suicide, or a homicide, but when the factors are unclear or ambiguous, a psychological autopsy might resolve the impasse. The consultant's role is to crystallize the psychological factors that might reveal a decedent's prior mental state.

My character, Annie, has gone through the British BIA training, but given her niche, she didn't need it. She's also not a Jack-of-all-trades, as we sometimes see in crime fiction, because she has a core investigative team and a network of consulting specialists. She sticks close to her field of expertise. To increase her acumen, she tests herself on resolved cases. She also trains police, attorneys, and death investigators.

After reading multiple crime fiction novels, I found few that feature consulting forensic psychologists using the range of skills these professionals can offer to law enforcement. I use criminal profiling when it's helpful, but I find plenty of plot potential by giving Annie Hunter the freedom to do much more.

Here are some useful resources:

Canter, D. (2004). *Offender Profiling and Investigative Psychology*. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, vol. I, 1-15.

Ramsland, K. (2009). *The Facts about Fiction: What Gil Grissom Could Learn about Forensic Psychology*. *The Journal of Psychiatry and Law*, 37, 37-50.

Ramsland, K. (2018). *The Psychology of Death Investigations*. CRC Press.

Welner, M., & Ramsland, K. (2006). *Behavioral Science and the Law. Foundations of Forensic Science and Law: Applications in Criminal, Civil, and Family Justice*. CRC Press.

Dr. Katherine Ramsland teaches forensic psychology and criminal justice at DeSales University and has published 69 books, including I Scream Man, the first in her “Nut Cracker” PI series for Level Best Books. She writes a regular blog on crime at Psychology Today, and her website for the Nut Crackers is <https://www.katherineramsland.net/>



KEEPING IT REAL

Cynthia Tolbert

I've always preferred realistic fiction. I like to emerge myself in the setting and the characters' lives, and for me that means the story must be credible. The reader must believe that what unfolds in the story could actually happen. Even though it was non-fiction, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which may be the best true crime story ever written, is an icon and a guide for what I'd like to achieve in a story.

When I was five years old, my favorite TV show was Perry Mason, with Raymond Burr. My parents didn't allow me to see it, which made it even more tantalizing, but my aunt did when she babysat my brother and me. I was impressed with Mason's smooth approach, his brilliance in the courtroom, and the fact that, even though he usually represented the underdog or the disadvantaged, he always won.

But even though I enjoyed the intricate plot lines on the show, I knew, even at age five, that courtroom confessions, which Mason often relied on to win, seemed unlikely. I didn't know the name for this anomaly when I was five, but it was my first confrontation with "deus ex machina," a plot device where an unsolvable problem in a story line is suddenly and abruptly resolved by an unexpected and unlikely occurrence, such as the sudden confession. Even then, I wanted the facts and structure of the story to be realistic, not contrived.

Perry Mason also had a couple of sidekicks, one of which was Paul Draper, his intrepid private investigator. Paul didn't hesitate to rough up witnesses so that they would "spill the beans." After a few years of watching Drake misbehave, I developed a strong distrust of private investigators until, as an attorney, I had to hire one for a case. My investigator was a retired police officer, and a stalwart follower of proper procedures. He'd never have roughed up a witness, nor would the majority of investigators.

When I was eight, my brother inherited the Hardy Boys books from a cousin and I read all thirty-two books one summer. I was surprised that the Hardy Boys would often find themselves breaking into houses and buildings to solve crimes, and, later on, as a thirteen-year-old, I appreciated that Agatha Christie was more careful with procedure. Poirot and Miss Marple weren't the sort to trespass.

After retiring from the practice of law, I started working on a short story which featured Emma Thornton, a young, single-mother-attorney, as the protagonist. I entered the story in the *Georgia State Bar Journal's* fiction contest, and, several months later, was very surprised to discover that I had won. This win gave me the confidence I needed to turn the short story into a full novel.

I knew I had a good story to tell. After teaching school for ten years, and practicing law for another thirty-five, I had plenty of war stories. But I was worried about how to keep my writing realistic and still capture the readers' attention and interest. My protagonist, Emma Thornton, as an attorney and law professor, would spend the majority of her day

bogged down in work that is boring, redundant, even mundane. Lawyers spend more time researching and writing than anything else. They ask the same question to different people over and over in an attempt to get to the truth of the matter. This sort of reality would put readers to sleep quickly.

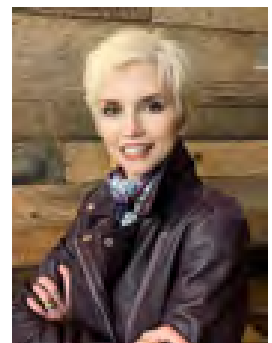
Lawyers are also bound to follow the rules of ethics, or risk disbarment. So, neither Emma nor any person who worked on cases with her could ever threaten a witness, as Perry Mason's Paul Drake, or become involved in Hardy Boys-like trespass. How could I turn Emma's routine-filled and occasionally dull life into an exciting book, and still maintain a modicum of (hopefully edgy) realism?

One truth about trial lawyers is that they love a fight, and Emma is no exception. They also love arguing, and asking carefully wrought questions designed to expose the theory of their case. They also love trial. The courtroom is their temple. So, in each of the books in the Thornton Mystery Series, Emma spends the majority of her time preparing for trial, analyzing evidence, interviewing witnesses, and reviewing autopsy reports, and sometimes arguing with the DA. A couple of the books have courtroom hearings. Emma works for a law school where she directs the Homeless Clinic, and has no money for her own investigations. She, and sometimes her students, do the leg work on her cases.

To keep the story interesting, I gave Emma a personality quirk—specifically, an impulse control problem—and an insatiable curiosity. She also carries, to the extreme, the responsibility of jealously representing her clients, all of which suffer from various societal injustices. Emma's impulse control problem is subtle, and although she's aware of it, she never addresses the issue. But the reader may notice that Emma can't resist pushing her apartment door open when it's been left ajar by someone other than herself, or climbing up the stairs to spy on an intruder. Emma's exploits often backfire, and she ends up in trouble at least once or twice a book. Impulse control issues would be a problem for any attorney, but that's especially true when an attorney is conducting his or her own investigations, as is Emma.

The term 'realistic fiction' sounds like an oxymoron. But it's nothing more than the creation of imaginary characters and situations that depict the world and society as they are. Plots highlight social or personal problems that mirror contemporary life. The books in my Thornton Mystery Series, *Out From Silence*, *The Redemption*, and *Sanctuary*, are murder mysteries that take a look at societal injustices and family dysfunction, but in a way that takes the reader on a journey. The books are offered as entertainment, but, hopefully, the reader will learn something along the way.

C.L. (Cynthia) Tolbert is the author of the Thornton Mystery Series, featuring law professor, Emma Thornton, who calls New Orleans home. Cindy practiced law for thirty-five years and taught for ten years, before retiring and turning to fiction writing. She lives in Atlanta with her husband and pet schnauzer. When not writing, she volunteers for Atlanta Legal Aid Services and visits with her children and grandchildren as often as possible.



THE CHALLENGES OF NAMING CHARACTERS IN HISTORICAL FICTION

Marlie Parker Wasserman

How do authors select the names of their characters? Some look to lists of popular names. Some hold contests among their fans. Some try to emulate Charles Dickens by selecting names that describe their characters. Readers may assume that writers of historical fiction have an easier time because they pluck their characters' names from the historical record. Not always.

For my first historical novel, *The Murderess Must Die*, I established a guiding principle that I continue to use—or I should write 'aim to use'—as I write historical fiction. When a fact is known, I stick to it. When a fact is unknown, I invent. To figure out the known, I research for months, then I start writing. For that first novel, only well into my writing did I realize I had naming problems. Many of my characters, the real people who are part of the story, had the same names, or confusing names. If I could barely keep the characters straight, how could readers?

Now that I'm finishing my third novel, I've come to sort my naming problems into two categories: characters in the historical record who have the same name, usually common names for the Gilded Age and the Progressive Age, and characters with names too common to research.

Let me start with the second category, which always produces chuckles. For my newest novel, *Inferno on Fifth*, I needed to research New York City's Buildings Commissioner in 1899, a real person named Thomas Brady. Googling him turns up thousands of useless leads to a football player. I've also had to research Alfred Pope, an industrialist from Cleveland. I cannot google his full name successfully because newspaper reporters often didn't know it. During the week that Mr. Pope figures in my novel, American newspapers reported on the serious illness of Pope Leo XIII. You can imagine the results from googling 'Pope.'

The more common problem I face is common names. They drive me crazy. Were all men who lived around the year 1900 named William or Frank? Two policemen who witnessed the crime scene at the center of my first novel had the name William Maher. I had to give one a nickname. In my second novel, *Path of Peril*, set in Panama in 1906, I encountered two historical figures with similar names—Elliott Roosevelt, brother of Teddy, and R. B. Elliott, a little-known labor leader. I chose to minimize the role of the labor leader. I encountered two James—valet James Amos and secret service agent James Sloan. I opted to call the valet by his last name.

As I write my third novel, *Inferno on Fifth*, women's names become the issue. Two women named Ida figure in my story—Ida McClusky, sister of a detective, and Ida McKinley, wife of a president. I chose to refer to the former as, simply, the sister. I also manipulate three Helens. I allow only Helen Gould, the daughter of Jay Gould, to keep her name. And I grapple with two Alices, a mother and daughter. I'm still pondering how to keep them straight for the reader.

Even less-common names cause problems. For *The Murderess Must Die*, I researched details about the brother of my primary character, a young man with the seemingly distinctive name of Garrett Terhune Garretson, who fought in the Civil War. I found two men with the exact same name, living at about the same time. I spent weeks going down rabbit holes with the wrong man. With that book I also encountered a problem with nicknames. I thought Penelope, my primary character's mother, was nicknamed Ellen; then it appeared that whether that was right or not, another Ellen was my character's sister.

In each of my novels I erase the correct names of some of my characters for, as the phrase goes, the good of the story. I choose readability over accuracy. Sadly, and cowardly, I let my more well-known characters keep their names as I weigh how likely readers are to notice errors. In every case, I provide explanations and apologies in my author's notes. I want to offer a call for action at the end of this little essay—please, parents, choose distinctive names for your children or we will have generations of novelists trying to sort out Rachels, Emmas, Noahs, and Olivers.

Marlie Wasserman's debut novel, The Murderer Must Die, is about Martha Place who, in 1899, was the first woman to die in the electric chair.

Before turning to novels, Marlie ran a scholarly publishing house specializing in nonfiction books in the social sciences and humanities.

Marlie and her husband split their time between New Jersey and North Carolina.



WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

Erica Miner

When it comes to old adages, “Write what you know” ranks right up there with “Practice makes perfect” and “Have no fear of perfection, you’ll never reach it.”

In a recent webinar, Level Best Books author James L’Etoile discussed how our writers’ life experiences influence what we write. His background of many years working in the criminal justice system infuses his murder mysteries with compelling authenticity. I am able to relate to that concept, as my own life experiences have proved to be a goldmine of material for my fiction.

My 21 years as a violinist with New York’s Metropolitan Opera have provided a sharp-edged realism to my Julia Kogan “Opera Mystery” series. The first in the series, *Aria for Murder*, published by Level Best on Oct. 28, 2022, takes place at the Met. My protagonist, Julia Kogan, is a direct clone of myself when I first started out at the company: a gifted young violinist debuting with the Met Opera Orchestra, trying to make her way in a difficult, demanding profession that is in many ways still dominated by men.

The people Julia encounters—fellow musicians, conductors, chorus members, stagehands, stage managers, and the like—populate this story as reflections of my own relationships with company members. The real-world personality traits of people who were an integral part of my daily life at this home-away-from-home that was the Met Opera formed the basis of many of the characters I created in *Aria for Murder*.

But I also witnessed actual situations that initially inspired me to write this series: a number of nefarious goings-on that sparked my imagination and caused me to embroider and escalate the possibilities of these circumstances into behind-the-scenes murder and intrigue at this venerable institution. Writing this story also gave me a unique opportunity to kill off the people who made my life miserable! (Not all of them...I had to save a few for the sequels, which will thrust Julia into heaps of trouble at different opera houses across the country.)

The Met Opera is a unique world: the most prestigious opera company on the planet, where superstars like Caruso, Pavarotti, and Domingo have been entertaining the cream-of-the-crop of opera aficionados for centuries. Standards are the highest on the planet; so are the stakes.

These elite audiences, however, have no idea what goes on behind all the glamour and glitz. Ultimately, revealing the dark side of the opera world is my rationale for creating these operatic whodunits. Under those crystal chandeliers, behind that “Golden Curtain,” hundreds of people are working in different jobs simultaneously, and always at odds with each other: opera superstars, comprimarios (lesser solo singers), directors, conductors, orchestra, chorus, ballet, stagehands, wardrobe, makeup, wigmakers and more. Egos clash, tempers flare. There’s no love lost between any of them.

Take the orchestra, for example: 100 neurotic musicians thrown together in a hole in the ground with no air and no light, 7 days a week, days, nights, weekends. You see more of these people than your own families. Sooner or later, someone's going to want to kill somebody.

Aria for Murder.

In Julia, however, I have created a protagonist who, unlike myself, is capable of rising above her fears to plunge herself into a murder investigation. I could never be that brave. That is where the beauty of writing fiction can transform “Write what you know” into “Create a character who is the kind of person you'd like to be.”

And what could be better than that?

Former Metropolitan Opera violinist Erica Miner is an award-winning author, screenwriter, arts journalist, and lecturer. Her debut novel, Travels with My Lovers, won the Fiction Prize in the Direct from the Author Book Awards, and her screenplays have won awards in the WinFemme, Santa Fe, and Writers Digest competitions.

Based in the Pacific Northwest, Erica continues to balance her reviews and interviews of real-world musical artists with her fanciful plot fabrications that reveal the dark side of the fascinating world of opera. Aria for Murder, published by Level Best in Oct. 2022, is the first in her Julia Kogan Opera Mystery series. Sequels taking place at Santa Fe and San Francisco Opera are due for release in 2023 and 2024 respectively.

<https://www.ericaminer.com>



OCTOBER-DECEMBER NEW RELEASES

