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THE DAMES' DOCKET

A Quarterly Newsletter from Level Best Books



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The Dames of Detection
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GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES

A MESSAGE FROM THE DAMES

First of all, I'd like to thank all the authors who've contributed to The Dames' Docket each time we put out a call for articles. I can't tell you how much I appreciate the perspectives and information you've shared and, for my part, I've learned a great deal from you. Keep those submissions coming!

Now, Shawn and Verena join me in congratulating all the 2023 Agatha nominees. We look forward to seeing you all at the convention in a few weeks. We're also delighted to see so many Level Besties registered for Malice. It, like so many conventions, is a wonderful venue for meeting and engaging with other authors and fans. I've found over many, many years that Malice is like a class reunion—seeing old friends, making new friends, getting together, and celebrating the traditional mystery. And, in addition, this year is Malice Domestic's 35th anniversary!

Level Best will have tables in the Dealers' Room, so be sure to stop by. The Hospitality Lounge will have space for authors' promotional materials and is a great place to mingle. Please take advantage of all the opportunities available at the convention, and there are so many. Most importantly, have a great time!

We look forward to seeing you, in many cases for the first time in person, and spending time with you.

Safe travels!

For the Dames,

Harriette

WHAT MAKES JEWISH FANTASY JEWISH?

Mark Levenson

If you want to know if your house is infested with demons, place fine ashes around your bed, and in the morning, the demons' footprints will appear like chickens' footprints in the ash. If you want to see the demons, take the afterbirth of a firstborn female black cat, born to a firstborn female black cat, burn it in the fire, grind it, and place it in your eyes, and you will see them.

That advice might sound like something out of the Brothers Grimm but it's actually from the Talmud, the ancient, encyclopedic compendium of Jewish knowledge. The sages of nearly two thousand years ago clearly accepted demons—and more—as real enough to be the subject not just of lore, but of law. For example, putting out a light on the Sabbath was forbidden—but allowed exceptions for one who was fearful of heathens, robbers, or an evil spirit. The distance one could walk on the Sabbath was also proscribed, with a limited extension allowed for one who was forced beyond the standard limit by factors including evil spirits. And one was forbidden to enter ruins because they were often inhabited by demons.

Discovering all this during my continual study of Jewish texts was a revelation. I'd long loved fantasy—I'm old enough to have grown up not on Harry Potter but on *The Lord of the Rings*—and I'd also long identified with my Jewish faith. But the idea that these two, fantasy and Judaism, might mix seemed to me as unlikely as mixing chocolate and peanut butter (which is why I'm not today a multimillion-dollar candymaker). Of course, they do mix. Publishers have recently given us *The Golem of Hollywood* by Jonathan Kellerman, and Jesse Kellerman, *The Golem and the Jinni* by Helene Wecker, and *The Frozen Rabbi* by Steve Stern, for example.

Armed with this insight, I continued to read Jewish folktales (Howard Schwartz is the master reteller of these tales, if you're interested) but in a new way: as rich ground upon which I might build a modest contribution of my own. That's how my novel of Jewish fantasy, *The Hidden Saint*, came to be, inspired by bits of Torah and Talmud, rabbinic legends, folktales, and more.

I knew I wanted my novel to be something other than a typical fantasy clothed in a veneer of Jewish characters and settings. That would have been mere costume Jewry. So I first had to answer another question: what makes Jewish fantasy Jewish? That took me back to those ancient Sages.

What makes their acceptance of evil spirits, ghosts, and demons so remarkable was that theirs was not a pagan world with competing supernatural forces, but a monotheistic world. They had to find a way to make a world governed by an ethical, benevolent God consistent with a world of demons and evil spirits. So did I. It's a puzzle quite similar to the question of why evil exists. A traditional Jewish answer is that the presence of evil is necessary for man to choose good—and that free choice is central to the tradition. Demons and evil spirits also can be looked upon as a mechanism for evil, much as are disease, hurricanes, and wild animals.

But the Sages didn't just tolerate these supernatural creatures. They used them to validate principles that are linchpins of Judaism (and, in many cases, have become universal values). For example, the Sages say that one is not permitted to allow the ritual fringes of his shirt to drag along the ground in a cemetery so as to avoid insulting the dead who can no longer honor God by performing the commandment to wear them. That in turn leads to a discussion as to whether the dead are indeed aware of the living.

To prove that they are, the Talmud relates a series of ghost stories. But these aren't horror tales. The most elaborate of the set validates the important Jewish values of justice, care for orphans, and honor to parents. A trustee of orphans' money has died and the money can't be found, leading to accusations that the dead man stole it. His son goes to the cemetery to ask his father's spirit what happened. The father assures him that he didn't steal the money; he buried it for safekeeping and tells his son where to find it. The son also learns that his childhood friend, also deceased, has been denied entrance to heaven because of sins committed in this world. When the proud father tells his son how highly the son is regarded by heaven, the boy replies that on the strength of that regard, heaven must allow his friend to enter. And that's what happens. It's a ghost story, but a very Jewish one.

It also inspired one of the set pieces of *The Hidden Saint*, a scene in a cemetery about spirits with very earth-bound grief to overcome.

Mark Levenson is the author of The Hidden Saint (Level Best Books, 2022). His Jewish-themed fantasy writing has won honors from The National Foundation for Jewish Culture and the American Jewish University, as well as a Union Internationale de la Marionnette-USA Citation of Excellence, an award founded by Jim Henson.



THE YEAR OF “FIRSTS”

Anna St. John

When was the last time you did something for the first time?

Not long ago, the question forced me to stop and think. If I set the bar low enough, I could seek out an answer: Had I tried a different restaurant? Read a book by a new author? Shopped at a boutique in a neighboring city?

But this year has become a “Year of Firsts” to treasure.

Appropriately, the year-long adventure began on my birthday when I signed a contract with agent Cindy Bullard, of Birch Literary. My mind reeled with the thought. Life was good.

In the spring, we traveled to Bangkok, Thailand, to hold our infant granddaughter for the first time. She wrapped her tiny fingers around my thumb. Surely life could not be any better.

Summer brought a series of firsts. Our grandson called with good news on a “first” of his own. “I did it, Grammy. I didn’t think I could make it. But then I tried the trick you taught me and I swam all the way. The kids at camp were cheering for me. Now I can go in the deep end, and down the slide!” Truly a first to celebrate.

I knew how he felt. With Cindy cheering me on, I had made adjustments to my manuscript until we were ready to test the deep end. She sent it off to publishers and landed a five-book contract with Level Best Books. Suddenly, I had the agent I admired and an author-friendly publisher I trusted. Seriously, how could life get better than this?

Before I could absorb these life-changing events, Cindy brought me a contract for audio rights. Then Shawn Reilly Simmons pulled out all the stops, with a gentle redline edit, a fabulous cover, and a fully published book.

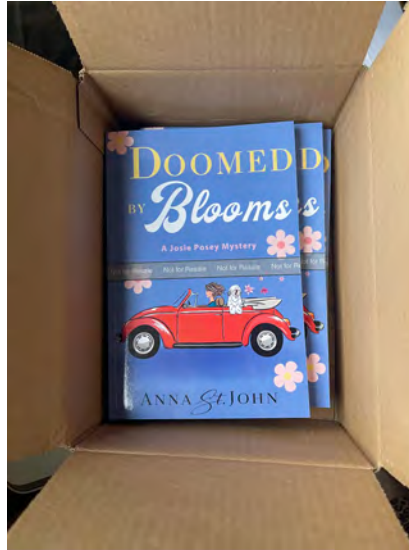
To round out the year, my first novel was released ten days before my birthday. Filled with disbelief, I googled it. The proof was on Amazon and Barnes and Noble, too. “This is it,” I decided. “There could not be more.”

Until the first box of my books arrived at my door.

Now, I understand. There will be more firsts to celebrate. The first audio book will arrive. A first review will appear. A first blog appearance, or book signing, will take place. I will embrace each one with gratitude. I’m ready for life to surprise me.

Still, I can’t imagine a “Year of Firsts” to surpass this one—the year I turned 73.

Anna St. John is a former newspaper journalist, award-winning advertising copywriter, and agency owner. She lives in a small Kansas town with a working blacksmith shop, much like the one in her story.



MOTHER OF FORENSIC SCIENCE:

FRANCES GLESSNER LEE

Frances McNamara

For my Nutshell Murder Mystery series, I have chosen Frances Glessner Lee as the protagonist. The first book is set in 1919. As you can imagine, there weren't a lot of women in forensic science. There weren't even a lot of men at that point.

Mrs. Lee is a fascinating character. She grew up in a wealthy family in Chicago. In fact, I heard of her because a friend was docent at Glessner House in the Prairie Avenue area of Chicago. It was a cultured family that could have supported college level study for their daughter, but she chose to marry and have three children. But by 1914, she no longer wanted to be married. She divorced and described herself as "a rich woman with not enough to do with her time." She was frustrated by not being able to do something useful.

During WWI, she went to Boston to run a home for returning soldiers on Beacon Hill. She also reconnected with an old friend of her brother. They attended Harvard together. Dr. George Magrath was medical examiner for Suffolk County, which included Boston. A colorful character who rode a Model T, tricked out with lights and sirens, named "Suffolk Sue" to crime scenes, he eventually became a huge influence on her life.

Historically in 1929, Lee and Magrath were both recovering from surgery in Massachusetts General Hospital, where Magrath confided his frustration with the lack of training police detectives had in dealing with crime scenes. Also, the lack of training for coroners who were elected officials in many jurisdictions. Lee became fascinated with the problems. When she inherited money in the early 1930s, she endowed a Chair of Legal Medicine and a library at Harvard. Magrath was the first chair. After his death in 1936, she continued to support and work with the department.

The Seminars in Homicide Investigations were held twice a year for police detectives from all over the country, from 1946 to 1967. Lee not only attended, but she treated the men to a dinner at the Ritz Hotel in Boston at the end of each session. She also created 20 miniature crime scenes called the Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death that were used in the training. They were not specific crimes, and they did not have specific solutions. They were meant to train investigators. She created them from 1945 to 1948. They were recently repaired by the Smithsonian Institution and returned to the Maryland Medical Examiners office, where they are still used.

Lee's wealth and connection to Magrath, and the men who followed him in the Department of Legal Medicine, gave her the opportunity to explore forensics at a time when things like fingerprinting and ballistics were beginning to be accepted in court cases. She also supported the move to replace the political coroner system with well-trained medical examiners. She was able to make important useful contributions.

To explore Lee and create some interesting mysteries, I am using one of the nutshell studies in each book and weaving a story around it. I am setting the books in the 1920s,

imagining Lee first becoming fascinated by forensics by working with Magrath. I think readers will find her an interesting woman who was able to become known as the “Mother of Forensic Science” by the work she did and the studies and training she supported.

A great video about Lee is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekSHWw_YRmY where Bruce Goldfarb, author of 18 *Tiny Deaths*, a nonfiction book about Lee, describes her career.

Frances McNamara grew up in Boston, where her father served as Police Commissioner for ten years. She has degrees from Mount Holyoke and Simmons Colleges and retired from the University of Chicago. She now divides her time between Boston and Cape Cod.

She is the author of the Emily Cabot Mystery series in addition to the Nutshell Murders series.



WHY WE LOVE MYSTERIES

Skye Alexander

It's generally believed that the world of modern mystery fiction began with Edgar Allan Poe's detective story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," published in *Graham's Magazine* in April 1841—and we readers have been hooked ever since. Year after year, mysteries finish at the top of the bestsellers in the fiction field, usually second only to romance novels. In 2021, they accounted for 11 percent of all book sales, totaling 299 million copies and earning \$728.2 million.

The Ongoing Appeal of Mysteries

Why do we love mysteries? One reason is mysteries are puzzles, elaborate games writers play with their readers. Mysteries invite us to escape from our everyday routines and come along on a journey of discovery full of twists and turns, surprises, and satisfying solutions. Some mysteries resemble jigsaw puzzles, in which each tiny clue elicits an "aha" and reveals a bit more of the slowly developing big picture. Others have more in common with adventure video games, full of action, danger, and suspense.

Another reason is because mysteries are modern-day morality tales, in which problems get sorted out in the end and the bad guys get their comeuppance. We can take comfort in knowing that justice will prevail—which isn't always the case in everyday life—and that good will triumph over evil.

Finally, mysteries are modern-day versions of the hero/ine's journey into the dark, frightening, unknown realms. The protagonist has to go through all sorts of trials and conflicts in order to figure out what's going on and solve the mystery. As in the old myths, s/he faces demons in the outer world and in her/himself. In the process, s/he finds out what s/he's made of and emerges the victor.

Different Types of Mysteries

What makes it a mystery? In simple terms, a crime has been committed and someone—usually a police officer, private investigator, or amateur sleuth—is trying to figure out whodunit. Writers, however, have devised numerous ways to accomplish that end. As a result, mysteries come in many flavors. I've compiled a list of fifteen sub-genres, although I'm sure I've missed some. Often these categories overlap; for example a detective story may exude a noir ambiance, or a tale of romantic suspense may be set in a bygone era.

1. *Caper*
2. *Cozy*
3. *Domestic*
4. *Investigator or detective*
5. *Thriller*
6. *Noir*

7. *Historical*
8. *Procedural (police or legal)*
9. *Hardboiled*
10. *Softboiled*
11. *Supernatural (or paranormal)*
12. *Suspense*
13. *Romantic suspense*
14. *Espionage*
15. *True crime (nonfiction)*

Each category is defined by what it includes and excludes. Cozies, for instance, generally avoid graphic sex, coarse language, and grisly violence—yes, someone gets killed, but the author doesn't give you an up-close-and-personal, play-by-play of the gory details. Within this basic framework, you'll find domestic cozies offering recipes or quilting patterns, animal sleuths, historical settings, and maybe some sweet (but tame) romance. Tales of suspense may be presented as police thrillers, psychological intrigues, courtroom dramas, or even paranormal adventures.

The “Rules” of the Game

Mystery novels are carefully choreographed puzzle games, and like every game, they have rules that let the reader and writer play together with certain understandings. The game has flexibility, and over time some of the rules have changed. A hundred years ago, for instance, you'd be unlikely to find a young mother as the story's murderer. Female cops were rare (although the NYPD did have its “flapper squad”) in real life and in crime fiction.

Naturally, new weapons, drugs, and technological developments have provided writers with ways to kill their victims that our forebears didn't have. Likewise, forensic advances have enabled police to solve crimes in ways they couldn't have done previously. Nonetheless, many of the old rules still hold, and readers don't like it if a writer doesn't play fair. Here are some of the guidelines mystery writers tend to follow, mainly because doing so provides a workable framework for constructing a story's plot and offers readers a satisfying bit of entertainment.

- Key characters should appear early in the book.
- Readers want to be grounded in the setting and time period right from the book's beginning.
- The crime should be committed early, preferably in the first or second chapter.
- The author should provide enough clues in the first quarter of the book for the reader to solve the crime—though naturally, you don't want the reader to solve it that easily (what fun would that be?).
- The protagonist/sleuth and antagonist/perpetrator should meet early in the story—(in playwriting it's called the precipitating act) and also in the climax scene.
- About six potential suspects should have motive, means, and opportunity to commit the crime.
- In addition to the main plot, the story often has a subplot that involves a personal challenge for the protagonist (relationship issues, problems in their day job, substance abuse, etc.). These are usually referred to as the A-story and the B-story respectively.

- Each scene should further the plot, the subplot, and/or the characters' development.
- The story's pace should escalate as the book's climax nears.
- Each novel in a series should be able to stand alone—writers can't assume readers are familiar with their earlier books.

Although the 1920s and 1930s are often considered the “golden age of mysteries,” today's crime writers have expanded the territory defined in those earlier periods and taken us to new places our predecessors couldn't have imagined. Yet even though contemporary mystery authors may build suspense via emails or texts, use cellphones and computers to incriminate perps, and rely on voice recognition software or iris scans to identify criminals, the fundamentals remain the same even after all these years.

Skye Alexander is the author of the Lizzie Crane series of historical mysteries, published by Level Best Books. In 2003, she co-founded 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. Level Best Books published the first in her series, Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife, in August 2021 and the second, What the Walls Know, in November 2022. Skye is now working on the fifth book. After spending thirty-one years in Massachusetts, she now lives in Texas with her black Manx cat. Visit her at www.skyealexander.com.



JANUARY-MARCH NEW RELEASES

