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THE DAMES' DOCKET

A Quarterly Newsletter from Level Best Books



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GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES

A MESSAGE FROM THE DAMES

A RESOURCE WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN GOLD

The days of writers having the ability to sit at their desks or wherever else they create their magic is over. Nowadays, they're called upon to participate in the promotion of their books, which includes leaving the sanctuaries of their comfort zones to move out into the world and publicize their books. Not so easy for those who spend most of their waking hours in solitude crafting those literary gems we all love to read.

Needless to say, negotiating the world of promotion can be confusing and frightening. But fear not! There's a resource I can highly recommend that will certainly increase your comfort level and give you a great deal of food for thought.

In 2022, Sisters in Crime published an anthology, edited by Diane Vallere, which contains sixty-three essays by writers who, just like you, have had to negotiate these waters and eagerly share their recommendations and experiences on every aspect of the mystifying world of promotion. Both Shawn and I contributed to the anthology, along with a Bestie or two.

The book, *Promophobia: Taking the Mystery Out of Promoting Crime Fiction*, was the recipient of the Malice Domestic Agatha Award for Best Nonfiction Book in 2022. It was a labor of love by all its contributors, and especially by its editor, Diane Vallere, who overcame the obstacles that kept popping up to delay publication. And kudos to Sisters in Crime for once again providing one helluva resource for crime fiction writers.

Purchase the book. Keep it on your desk. Refer to it every day. You'll be glad you did.

For the Dames,

Harriette

A GOOD PLACE TO DIE

Skye Alexander

The real estate agent's axiom about the importance of "location, location, location" holds true for me, too, as a mystery writer—usually the setting is the first thing I establish in a novel. The place where a story occurs provides a backdrop for the action and creates ambiance. It also grounds the tale in a time/space framework with a history, culture, and physical features that dictate what can or cannot happen there. A crime that transpires in a seventeenth-century French chateau, for instance, will be different from one that takes place on the mean streets of Al Capone's Chicago or in a California mining town during the Gold Rush.

Sometimes the setting assumes a life of its own and becomes a character in the story, such as the marsh in Delia Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing* and the Four Corners in Tony Hillerman's novels. In some cases, the setting serves as an antagonist, like the Dust Bowl in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and the Parisian flood in Sarah Smith's *Knowledge of Water*. The environment challenges the protagonist and either helps or hinders her efforts to solve the crime—or to stay alive.

Much as I enjoy reading about Louise Penny's fictitious town of Three Pines, Quebec, and Susan Oleksiw's Hotel Delite in Kovalam, South India, I didn't want to limit my series to only one setting. Consequently, I created a cast of New York Jazz Age musicians whom wealthy people hire to perform at special events. Each stint takes the entertainers to a different location where they're presented with a unique set of obstacles and opportunities.

The second novel in my Lizzie Crane Mystery Series, *What the Walls Know*, is set in a spooky castle in October of 1925. When the musicians accept an invitation to perform at a Halloween party there, they have no idea they'll be trapped on an isolated peninsula with real-life wizards, witches, ghosts, fortune-tellers—and a murderer. The actual neo-Gothic Hammond Castle in Gloucester, Massachusetts, inspired me, and I incorporated its magnificent pipe organ and some other notable features into the story. The oceanside estate of the plumbing magnate Richard Crane prompted the first book in my series, *Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife*. Two future novels in the series, *The Goddess of Shipwrecked Sailors* and *Running in the Shadows*, take place in Salem, Massachusetts. This city's colorful history offered up intriguing plot elements, including the clipper ship trade and the notorious smuggling tunnels that once ran beneath the old town.

For the sake of authenticity, I physically visit each place mentioned in my novels—every house, store, hotel, restaurant, church, library, museum, park, railway station, and cemetery. If it ever existed and still does, I've been there. In *Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife*, my characters eat lunch at a resort that unfortunately burned down in the 1950s, dashing my hopes for a site visit. Luckily, though, I located an elderly gentleman whose family owned the resort when he was young and he kindly spent an evening recounting the "good old days" with me.

What are some of your favorite story locations? How do you feel they contribute to the tale? Does reading about a particular setting make you want to go there?

Skye Alexander is the author of nearly 50 fiction and nonfiction books. Her stories have appeared in anthologies internationally, and her work has been published in more than a dozen languages. In 2003, she cofounded Level Best Books with fellow authors Kate Flora and Susan Oleksiw. The first novel in her Lizzie Crane mystery series, Never Try to Catch a Falling Knife, set in 1925, was published in 2021; the second, What the Walls Know, was released in November 2022. The third, The Goddess of Shipwrecked Sailors, is scheduled to come out in August 2023. Skye lives in Texas with her black Manx cat Zoe.

Halloween 1925, Gloucester, Massachusetts: Jazz singer Lizzie Crane thinks ghosts in a creepy castle are her only worry, until a woman dies of a suspicious heroin overdose and Lizzie becomes a murder suspect—or maybe the next victim.

https://www.amazon.com/What-Walls-Know-Lizzie-Mystery/dp/1685121861/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1667590614&sr=8-1

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/what-the-walls-know-skye-alexander/1142463455?ean=9781685121860>

Website: www.skyealexander.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/skye.alexander.92>



WRITING HABITS: YOURS, MINE, AND THEIRS

Katherine Ramsland

Among the key behaviors that can hinder or assist our writing pace are our habits. Successful writers identify routines they can trust for momentum and production.

I've published a lot over the past three decades, so people often ask me how I manage it while I'm also working full-time. Mostly, I've paid attention to my body rhythms. I've learned that my most focused time is during the morning and evening, so I arrange to write early and late. I also take long walks right after I've been writing, with no music or distractions, to let my brain work out its own mash-ups with the material. Usually, I get new ideas, even plot twists I hadn't planned. I set no daily goals for a specific number of words or pages, but I keep an organizing guideline throughout the week. Often, I'll leave a sentence or scene unfinished to lure me back.

Now, what have other writers done?

In *On Writing*, Stephen King said that he writes (or did write) 10 pages a day without fail, even on holidays. "There are certain things I do if I sit down to write," he stated. "I have a glass of water or a cup of tea. There's a certain time I sit down, from 8:00 to 8:30, somewhere within that half hour every morning. I have my vitamin pill and my music, sit in the same seat, and the papers are all arranged in the same places. The cumulative purpose of doing these things the same way every day seems to be a way of saying to the mind, you're going to be dreaming soon."

John Grisham developed a set of rituals: "The alarm clock would go off at 5, and I'd jump in the shower. My office was 5 minutes away. And I had to be at my desk, at my office, with the first cup of coffee, a legal pad and write the first word at 5:30, five days a week." His goal was to write a page every day before he transferred his attention to his job as a lawyer.

Truman Capote would supposedly write while lying supine, with a glass of sherry in one hand and a pencil in another. "I am a completely horizontal author," he said. "I can't think unless I'm lying down, either in bed or stretched on a couch and with a cigarette and coffee handy. I've got to be puffing and sipping. As the afternoon wears on, I shift from coffee to mint tea to sherry to martinis. No, I don't use a typewriter. Not in the beginning. I write my first version in longhand (pencil). Then I do a complete revision, also in longhand." His third draft, done on a typewriter, would be done in bed—with the typewriter balanced on his knees.

Ernest Hemingway aspired to write 500 words a day. He woke early so he could write in peace and quiet. Despite his reputation, he claimed he did not get drunk while writing. "You write until you come to a place where you still have your juice and know what will happen next," he said in an interview, "and you stop and try to live through until the next day when you hit it again."

Vladimir Nabokov reportedly stood up to write. He liked to put scenes on index cards so he could write them in no particular order. For some novels he used over two thousand cards, which he would then arrange as he pleased.

Joyce Carol Oates prefers to write in the morning, before breakfast. On the days she taught creative writing classes, she'd write for an hour before leaving for class. On other days, when the writing was going well, she'd work for hours without a break, sometimes not eating until deep into the afternoon.

Simone de Beauvoir first had tea and waited until mid-morning to write. She'd quit during the early afternoon to see friends. Around five o'clock, she'd return to work and continue until nine.

So, what do you do to keep creativity flowing? Pay attention to what works and turn it into a habit. Create a specific space if you can. Life gets in the way, certainly, but consistent routines that support your writing will settle into your bones and call to you to keep going.

Katherine Ramsland teaches forensic psychology and has published 71 books, including Bliss: Writing to Find Your True Self. She writes the Nut Cracker Investigations series for LBB, featuring I Scream Man and In the Damage Path (August).



CREATING THE RIGHT BOOK COVER

Jacqueline Seewald

It stands to reason that writers want to create an appealing cover that draws the eye. Cover art can make or break a book, especially if the author isn't well-known. What kind of front cover will grab the reader's attention? What kind of cover art should a book display? A lot depends on the genre of the book itself.

Here's what I've discovered in researching this topic:

The cover should be appropriate to the type of book. A basic question to ask: is the book going to be sold on the shelf of a bookstore or is it going to be available only online? Is the novel going to be a hardcover, trade, paperback, e-book or audio—possibly all of these?

With hardcover fiction books, as with all others, the cover needs to fit the genre, be attractive, while the title should be easy to read and intriguing. Cover art needs to play fair with readers so that they don't feel cheated when they select a book.

Paperbacks need simplicity in covers. The artwork should also support the title and the genre. E-book covers shouldn't be too fussy or busy either. The old saying "less is more" works best for a book cover that's displayed online. A short title with a large, easily readable font and bright contrasting colors shows up well on the computer screen. Avoid covers that are complicated and hard to read. Plain, simple graphics are preferable.

In summary:

What are the qualities of good cover art?

- We can read the title and author and all subheadings with ease.
- The image doesn't interfere with the written information.
- The book cover is memorable: simple yet vivid and pleasing to the eye.
- The theme is expressed by the image and in keeping with the genre of the book.
- The bottom line for good book covers is that they make you want to read what's inside.

Jacqueline Seewald has taught creative, expository, and technical writing at Rutgers University, as well as high school English. She's worked as both an academic librarian and educational specialist. Twenty of her books of fiction have been published, along with short stories, poems, essays, reviews and articles.

Her novel, Heart of Wisdom, will be published by Level Best Books.



JUDGING FOR THE PWA SHAMUS AWARD

Greg Stout

Each year, the Private Eye Writers of America (PWA) sponsors a competition for the best new entries in the area of private detective fiction. As a general observation, the category is fairly loose, as the term “Private Eye,” for contest purposes, includes male and female protagonists who are journalists, lawyers, judges and, of course, real PIs. Excluded are cops, FBI agents, and ladies who live in cottages in the English countryside with a cat (think Miss Marple, but Poirot would qualify). There are four categories, which are Best First Novel (I won this one last year), Best Original Paperback, Best Original Hardcover, and Best Short Story. This year I was invited, along with two other individuals, to be a judge in the Best Original Paperback category, which turns out to be the one that garners the most participants. Unlike some other contests, there is no entry fee, but those wishing to compete are asked to send a copy of their book to each of the three judges. Judges do not receive compensation, other than, of course, a bunch of free mystery novels.

Entries began arriving in my mailbox in early February and continued through the end of March, until I had received 35 entries in all, and just 12 or so weeks to read them. This year’s contest drew entries from eight “Besties,” including Linda Lovely (*Neighbors to Die For*); Jode Millman (*Hooker Avenue*); Cynthia Tolbert (*Sanctuary*); Lane Stone (*The Collector*); Lida Sideris (*Gambling with Murder*); Lori Duffy Foster (*Never Broken*); Gabriel Valjan (*Hush-Hush*); and J. R. Sanders (*Dead-Bang Fall*). By the time you read this, the five finalists will have been selected, and the winner will be announced at this year’s Bouchercon gathering. You can follow the results at the PWA website, which is <http://www.privateeyewriters.com/>.

The first Shamus was awarded in 1982. Previous winners in all categories since then include (among many others) Bill Pronzini, Ross MacDonald, Lawrence Sanders, Loren Estleman, Sue Grafton, Rob Kanter, Jonathan Valin, Dennis Lehane and Walter Mosley, so this year’s winner will be in good company indeed.

Greg Stout has written more than twenty books on the history of American railroads. Now retired from the day-to-day workforce, he still writes for at least two hours each day. Greg resides with his wife and two cats, Wallace and Gromit, in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.



MIRTH & MAYHEM

Charlotte Stuart

The first rejection I got for a humorous mystery began with a comment that I couldn't argue: we don't all laugh at the same things. That was followed by the knock-out punch—the publisher didn't find my book to be funny.

Since that first rejection I've spent a lot of time thinking about humor, especially humor in mystery novels. There's a lot of research and information out there on the topic of humor, but from an author's perspective, I find three key questions intriguing: 1) What are the different types of humor in mystery novels and how does the type influence story development? (Okay, I admit, that's two intertwined questions.) 2) What does a reader bring to the reading experience that attracts them to a particular type of humor? 3) Perhaps most importantly, how do you "sell" your brand of humor?

One genre, five categories:

We do not all laugh at the same things, but all humor is not the same. Researchers have analyzed humor from many perspectives and in a variety of venues, but since I'm interested in mystery novels, I created a matrix that breaks down types of humor into five basic categories:

- Kooky – Characterized by outrageous situations and very quirky characters. Humor comes first.
- Comic – Benign, non-offensive humor found in most cozies. There is a focus on humor, but the story is usually character driven.
- Amusing – Light-hearted but not necessarily overtly funny. Humor lightens but does not dominate the story.
- Edgy – Intermittent and nuanced humor; seldom laugh out loud scenes. Non-conformist protagonists often engage in sarcastic or dry humor.
- Dark – Makes light of taboo topics. Tragicomedy. Gallows humor. We laugh because we are uncomfortable.

My goal for developing these categories was twofold. First, I was trying to define my audience by clarifying my own brand. Second, I wanted to create a tool that would help readers quickly identify which authors they were likely to enjoy based on their own humor preferences. We all want readers to buy our books, but we don't want to disappoint them either.

Once I had the categories defined, it was relatively easy to place most books in the matrix. Although the matrix lines are not always absolute, and some authors write multiple series which either fall into different categories or do not incorporate humor. So sometimes it's necessary to list the series as well as the author.

KOOKY	COMIC	AMUSING	EDGY	DARK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carl Hiaasen • Lisa Lutz • Laurence Shames 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most cozies and capers • Alexander McCall Smith • Donald Westlake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robert Crais (Elvis Cole) • John Sandford (Virgil Flowers) • Ellie Griffiths (Ruth Galloway) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Janet Evanovich • Sue Grafton • Joe Ide (Isaiah Quintabe) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joseph Wambaugh • Caimh McDonnell (Dublin Trilogy)

There also appears to be a relationship between the category and the approach to setting, plot and characters. For instance, the “kooky” demands situational humor and zany characters that aren’t necessarily grounded in day-to-day reality. What happens in the moment is as important as the resolution. At the other end of the matrix, “dark humor” is all about twisted plots and complicated personalities who find themselves in life-threatening situations. Reader response to the discomfort of “dark” humor may not be laughter, but an eye-roll, groan or shudder.

Books that fall into the “comic” category have predictable puzzle formulas that keep the reader guessing whodunnit until the “happy ending.” The “amusing” and “edgy” are less consistently formulaic. Partly because humor isn’t the main story driver. Even the titles of these books tend to be less humorous and more context focused than the “kooky” and “comic” titles. But they should still bring smiles and laughter to readers, although less often and not as loud as the “kooky” or “comic.”

What readers bring to the table:

As a former communications and management consultant, I’ve spent more hours than I want to count pouring over assessments and helping people try to understand why differences are neither good nor bad, they just are. In German, for example, no one proclaims it to be “hot” or “cold” outside without adding “to me.” It’s the way the language is structured. Similarly, based on what we know about the way the human mind functions, readers might want to consider saying that a book is funny or not funny “to me.”

Few assessments focus solely on the science behind humor preferences, but some cover the topic as part of a larger focus. For example, the brain dominance profile developed by Ned Hermann explains how individuals process information and relate to their worlds based on which of the four quadrants of the brain they use most frequently. One of the by-products of this research is learning how brain dominance preferences influence the type of humor people are drawn to. What’s hilarious to one reader may be unappealing to another because of the way their brain is wired.

Some years ago, I was perusing a rather comprehensive book on brain dominance by Hermann, when I came to a section of cartoons. I didn’t bother reading the intro but immediately started looking at the cartoons, quickly moving through ones I didn’t find funny to those I did. Afterwards, when I read the introduction to each section of cartoons, I realized that I only found amusing those cartoons that matched my brain profile.

Another popular assessment is the less scientific Myers-Briggs Type Indicator that more than 50 million people have taken. Although the assessment only tangentially looks at how personality types relate to humor, if you know someone's type you can make a fairly good guess about which category of humorous mysteries they prefer.

There's a lot more to say about assessments and humor preferences—and assessments obviously have their limitations. But for authors, just the fact that the entire burden of “being funny” isn't about them, at the very least eases the sting of failing to make a reader laugh. That is, unless of course, no one except you appreciates your sense of humor.

Selling your brand of humor:

I admit that I haven't solved all of the branding challenges with my own books. For instance, my first series has been consistently labeled a cozy even though it features a PI and the subtitle includes the word “detective.” Nor does the action take place within a confined community, the covers are all wrong for a cozy, and the titles don't include word puns or scream “this will make you laugh.” They are, however, generally upbeat and do tend to have happy endings.

So, how did these books get branded as cozies? Part of it was my fault for not realizing the significance of the initial branding, so I did little to try to create my own. And, unfortunately, Amazon's algorithms can be a hurdle to managing your own brand. They determine which books are compared to other books on their site, and we have little to no control over their decisions. We can, however, add information on our Amazon page and our own websites to self-define our writing style and try whenever possible to use descriptors from comparable books when running promos, doing podcasts, making presentations, etc.

An additional problem is the way in which genre categories are used by most booksellers. Although we can find some good fits, “humor” is a catch-all phrase for most. That's one of the reasons I started writing about my humor categories when bloggers asked for guest posts. It's a very slow way to educate readers, but it's a start.

Except for cozies, authors who incorporate humor into their mysteries are in the minority. But laughter is universal, and I believe readers sometimes need a laugh, giggle, chortle, smile or snicker to brighten their day. By putting types of humor into specific categories—one genre, five categories—I want to help readers find books that tickle their personal funny bone.

Charlotte Stuart started her writing career with a PhD thesis that had the distinction of being stolen from the University of Washington library. After getting a number of serious academic articles published, she turned to penning humorous stories about boating. Her current passion is for writing lighthearted mysteries that are grounded in real situations and relationships.

Charlotte lives on Vashon Island and is president of Puget Sound Sisters in Crime.



APRIL-JUNE NEW RELEASES







