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# THE DAMES' DOCKET

*A Bimonthly Newsletter from Level Best Books*



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The Dames of Detection  
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## GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES

Hope you all are enjoying this summer to date, particularly because it brings with it a heightened sense of normalcy. I wanted to share my impressions of a recent experience because I believe they're particularly relevant for Level Best authors.

I had the opportunity to attend the Historical Novel Society's virtual conference which was held June 21-June 27. As so many organizations were forced to do, HNS's plans for an in-person conference were canceled due to COVID. The HNS Board and organizers did a wonderful job and, aside from having to sit in front of my computer for great lengths of time, it was a highly informative and enjoyable experience. For a person who is a huge fan of historical fiction and has written a number of short stories set in historical times, I was in my element.

I observed that this virtual experience, as well as others I've participated in, gave me the opportunity to see and hear authors in an "up-close" way. Maybe because of my years working in the mental health care field, I pay close attention to facial expressions and body language. If I'm sitting in a large room with a panel of speakers way up front, it can be harder to do this. So, I've come to realize that "going virtual" can provide me with certain advantages.

I took tons of notes and kept a record of authors and books I'd like to know more about, just as I do when at an in-person event. Even though I have enough books in my home and on my kindle to keep me engaged until I'm a thousand years old, like you I still keep purchasing more. There's no end to the topics I'd like to explore and the authors I'd like to sample.

For the Level Besties, I can only encourage you to get out there, in person or online. So many of you are doing a stellar job of that. Books don't sell themselves and readers want to see you and hear what you have to say. Share your passion with your readers!

And while I'm on my soap box, I hope you've all signed up to attend More Than Malice. The Board of Directors, which just happens to include the Dames, has worked very hard to make this virtual event an enjoyable one.

Have a wonderful summer!  
Harriette for The Dames

# THOUGHTS ON MARKETING AND SALES

James Ross

As authors, we spend years honing our craft and working on individual projects. Our hope is that the result of time and effort is a polished product that readers love and in which we can take pride. THE END.

But as many of us have learned, a completed book is not The End. Nor is finding a publisher or any other step between authorship and readership. The End is satisfied readers, the more the better. To reach them requires a different set of skills and effort than the writing itself: sometimes referred to as sales and marketing.

I wrote my first book in college and published my first the same year I started collecting social security. So my apprenticeship to craft was not a short one. And since the gods have a sense of humor, that first book came out during the only worldwide bookstore shut down since Gutenberg invented the printing press. *Hunting Teddy Roosevelt* eventually won the Independent Press Distinguished Favorite award for historical fiction, was a finalist for the National Indie Excellence Award for historical fiction, and was shortlisted for a Goethe Historical Fiction Award. But for many months, finding a physical copy or a place to buy it was nearly impossible. When the bookstores eventually reopened, the backlog at the printers (who could not work remotely from home) created more challenges. In the process of finding readers for a book that couldn't yet be printed, or sold in its usual venue, I learned some useful things about marketing and sales which I'll now share.

People still read during the Covid-19 shut down. They just did it differently. Bookstores may have been closed and printers backlogged, but the e-reader market was ready to serve, with a click and a credit card. But information about new books came to the attention of new readers in a new way. Book tours and bookstore appearances were out. There was this new thing called Zoom. People were trying new things with it, like virtual book tours, and there was a lot of hit and miss.

At first, I used a traditional publicist. But the traditional methods, like sending out ARCs to reviewers, did not work well without physical books in hand. I tried digital marketing, which worked better, but not perfectly. I set up a Facebook author page, put up ads, and soon had over 5,000 "followers." But as I soon learned (when I got my first royalty statement), a FB "follower" isn't a sale; and to convert one into the other is not a straightforward task. The secret of converting fans, likes, and followers into book buyers seemed to be a more closely guarded secret than the formula for Coke.

But there are folks out there who seem to have figured it out and, for a fee, are willing to share the secret sauce and/or do it for you. For my second book, *Coldwater Revenge*, published by Level Best Books just last month, I hired one of these frontier experts. This is what I found.

Ads, Buy Links, and Discounts. No one buys your book until they've heard about it. Ads, interviews, podcasts, reviews, and contests are tools for getting the word out. However, only ads can be easily linked to buy buttons at book sellers like Amazon, B&N, Kobo, Apple Books et. al. Even then, something has to prompt the reader to hit the buy button. As it turns out, significant discounts off list price, available for a limited time but no longer, appear to work as an effective trigger—at least for now.

If your inbox is anything like mine, you get daily push mails from discount booksellers promoting today's daily bargains. These push mail companies target large preselected audiences of active discount buyers. But that audience is shopping only for as long as it takes to open an email, have their attention caught by your book, like it, be motivated by the attractively discounted price, and then hit the buy button. The sequence takes seconds (or maybe a few minutes) and the discount price which triggers and completes the sequence is usually available on that site only for that day. Then what?

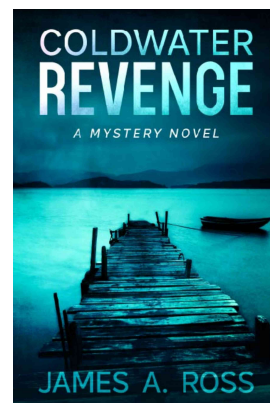
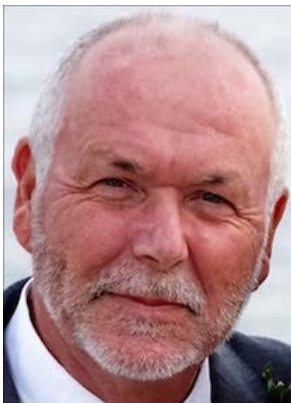
To be honest, I'm still trying to figure it out. But the answer for now seems to be to start the process again (Ads, Buy Links, and Discount) at different venues and at intervals wide enough to keep your book out there (Advertising) and available (Buy Links) discounted at intervals calculated to inspire the price-sensitive buyer, without cannibalizing sales from the price-indifferent.

Marketing and sales is an art, not a science, and it's constantly evolving. But by using methods like the above, and with the help of people who seem to know what they're doing, together we managed to raise *Coldwater Revenge* to #15 on the Amazon mystery bestseller list in the first week after its launch. I'm happy. But I'm still tinkering.

James A. Ross  
Jackson, Wyoming

*James Ross is the author of Coldwater Revenge, published by Level Best Books. Jim's short story fiction has appeared in numerous literary publications and his short story, "Aux Secours," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His historical novel, Hunting Teddy Roosevelt, is discussed in*

*Jim's article.*



# MURDER IS NO JOKE, BUT IT CAN BE

William Ade

Last year, when Harriette sent me a letter offering a contract for my novel, *Do It for Daisy*, she mentioned the humor in the story made the manuscript stand out. I was puzzled. My book was about a morally-weedy shoe salesman manipulated by a cold-hearted older sister. People were being shoved down stairs, shot in the head, thrown off bridges. I knew publishers were a twisted lot, but seriously, how could she find humor in my manuscript?

Not to say, I was opposed to inserting humor in my work. I'd had enough success that I felt confident that I could pull it off. But Harriette's comment confused me. Only while refining my manuscript under her and Shawn's merciless flogging did I see where I might've been funnier than intended.

In my attempt to portray my protagonist, Tommy Lyle, as down-on-his-luck and in need of reader empathy, I mentioned he'd been twice married. Not funny, right? I supposed when I noted that his second wife ran off with the officiating priest, I might've gone too far.

Perhaps my character descriptions were too colorful. The police officer, "Brute" Brutkowski, was described as looking like the offspring of a slag pile and a landslide. Now that's a big, ugly guy. Even I had to smile at the image.

Slipping into a more erudite mode for a minute, let me introduce author Dean Gloster\*, who wrote about the value of humor in serious fiction. He claimed readers found witty protagonists more relatable. Humor, like metaphors, he said, required readers to slow down and pay attention. He felt a sense of playfulness revealed character, conveyed attitude, and was an excellent tool for foreshadowing.

I wish I could say I had all that in mind when I wrote *Daisy*, but my writing uses a different part of my brain. But Gloster did get me to thinking.

Looking more analytically at my writing style, I realized that I embedded humor into *Daisy* in two ways. One approach involved how I constructed the inner world of a character. My crusty old detective, Bongiovanni, was not cynical and bitter, so when observations appeared in his mind, they came across as him being bemused. Not something that would make a reader laugh out loud, but they'd smile in recognition.

Tommy and Daisy and the other assorted characters probably were funny because of their behaviors. When Daisy failed to kill her husband, she wailed, "Sweet Jesus, why can't I get a break?" Tommy guilelessly confided to the reader that he didn't have time to tell his sister how Jesus worked.

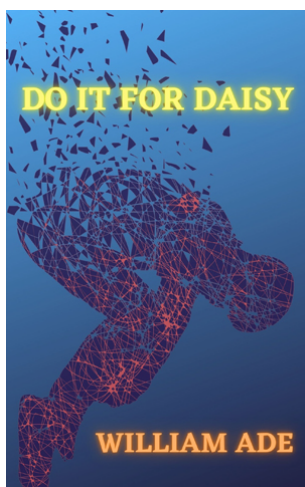
I can admit to one purposeful use of humor, however. The scene had Detective Bongiovanni glowing with pride when Office Brutkowski recited a bit of police street wisdom. He expected Brute to tell him he'd once heard Bongiovanni share that tidbit with a group of rookie cops. When asked, Brutkowski blushed and admitted he read the line in a pulp fiction novel featuring an oblivious private eye named Nic Knuckles. Only my most devoted readers would recognize Nic Knuckles from some of my previous humorous short stories. Now that was a planted laugh treat, inserted not because it achieved any of the objectives, Gloster suggested. Instead, I just wanted to give a shout-out to my loyal fans.

Now, if I wanted to write mysteries in a baldly funny manner, I'd use parody. I'm currently experimenting with a short story that sends my private eye, Nic Knuckles, over to England to find a woman who went missing after WWI. All he knows is her name, Jane Marple.

Crazy, yeah, I agree. I'm not sure such a story would find an audience. It seems to me readers of traditional mysteries expect to see a standard plotline and respectful characterization. Bad people are not funny, and the crime fighters, while often flawed, are not cartoon characters. Maybe mashing up two subgenres while hijacking an iconic character might be too much for readers. For all I know, it might be too much for even Harriette.

\*Gloster, Dean, "7 Reasons Writers of Serious Novels Should Use Humor in Their Fiction," *Writer's Digest*, Nov. 14, 2016

*After retiring from his day job in 2014, William Ade decided to try his hand at writing. His work has appeared in a number of publications, including the 2018 and 2019 Best New England Crime Stories anthologies. His short story collection, No Time for His Nonsense, was released in 2020 as was his first novel, Art of Absolution. Do It for Daisy was published by Level Best Books in May, 2021.*



# WRITING MONTANA

Mark Lechliter

From 2012–2014, National Public Radio featured a wonderful summer series titled “Crime in the City” that focused on a series of crime fiction writers and the places they lived in and wrote about through the guises of the fictional detectives they created. Whether plying the streets of L.A., Istanbul, or Natchez, Mississippi, listeners learned about local histories, unique flavors, and the distinct identifiers that shape the lives in distinct places. Listeners discovered what the fans of the authors interviewed already knew, the fictional parallel of the old market adage: all real estate is local. The NPR mix of interviews, readings, and on-foot exploration of place often unearthed a phenomenon well-known to crime fiction aficionados—the unique ability of the genre to capture the sociological and cultural patterns of place.

My own place is Western Montana, and in creating Detective Steve Wendell, I was quite conscious of the forces shaping the communities he serves as a member of the Flathead County Sheriff’s Department. Other writers, crime and otherwise, have captured the spirit of Western Montana in fiction, perhaps most famously Norman Mclean, James Lee Burke, and Rick Bass. I have lived in the Inter-Mountain West all my life, and there are rhythms and patterns to life throughout the region that remain true here, even if this part of Montana also leans to the Pacific Northwest. So, what’s that mean beyond a mix of Denver Bronco and Seattle Seahawk fans? For starters, the coffee and chai are excellent, and there’s a drive-through coffeeshop in nearly every block. The number of local breweries appears intent on competing with them. But alongside the coffeeshops and upscale breweries are old-school dive bars that now attract tattooed hipsters and ski bums, much to the dismay of loggers and farmhands who can find their grandfather’s initials carved into the bar rail. Behind the bushy beards that were a Montana mainstay long before it became a national trend may be the face of a tradesman or a remote tech worker, a ranch hand or a musician. It’s a place and a region in flux. Like desirable places anywhere—locales immediately adjacent to ski hills, bike trails, big lakes, whitewater rivers, and expansive forests—retirees, remote white-collar workers, and the ultra-rich are flooding in from the coasts. Wages remain low, politics remain conservative, jobs are scarce, and natives with roots that go back generations struggle to keep up with escalating home prices. If locals own property, too often they are forced to sell because the taxes have risen too high. Or they do what one friend does: she rents out her home in the peak summer months as a vacation property and moves into a 5th wheel trailer for the summer. Along Flathead Lake, which is the center point of my own work, you can still encounter the occasional moss-covered, windward-leaning fishing cabin alongside a multi-million-dollar mansion that’s inhabited for a few weeks out of the year. Such phenomena create challenges for the fabric of a place, but they also create tensions that are ideal for any writer. As a crime writer, the police experience offers a useful lens on the place, for cops, EMTs, and teachers must interact with those from every walk of life. Cops must see into the places and lifestyles others can try to keep compartmentalized.

The lens of crime fiction breaks down such compartments and offers readers a greater understanding of a place in a context others might see. Montana’s state slogan has long been “Big Sky Country”. It’s true that its size is a defining quality to the place. The entire state has just over a million people, only gaining a second US representative with the most recent

census despite being the fourth largest state in land mass. Forty percent of the population is concentrated in seven cities that are big by Montana standards but would be viewed elsewhere as sleepy backwaters, and a large majority of the remainder live in unincorporated areas near those cities. Flathead County extends more than 5,200 square miles, and limited resources mean that there are portions of shifts when only four patrol deputies are on duty to cover the entire expanse.

Flying into Glacier Park International Airport, those new to the valley are often mesmerized by the expansive views of the surrounding “Crown of the Continent”—the largest intact ecosystem in the United States, spanning 10 million acres—and by the serpentine bends of the Flathead River. It can feel like an idyllic place. What they likely won’t see, even once on the ground, are the deep woods hideouts and decaying trailer parks that harbor meth labs or the despair etched in faces of those working minimum wage fast-food jobs and serving the tourist trade as housekeepers and dishwashers. In Montana, minimum wage remains \$8.65 an hour; show me a place where anyone can live on \$18,000 a year, let alone do so where the median home price in its best-known ski town is now north of \$700,000. Logging families that go back generations now are often dependent on nonprofits to help support their families as the industry sheds jobs, particularly so when a loved one is injured when a logging chain snaps or a widow-maker branch drops unexpectedly. These kinds of discrepancies aren’t uncommon to most places, but in Montana the juxtaposition of the monied, the impoverished, and the shrinking middle class are stark and visible. It’s not a place where you only go home to your own neighborhood, for those who have quite different experience from yours are visible in the foreground rather than the background. The decaying farmhouse with seventy years of accumulated junk on its front porch is next to the neighborhood school, not something unseen from the distance of a passing interstate. A place largely made up of villages and small towns can’t compartmentalize the haves and have-nots into enclaves more common in urban areas. Here, we’re all more likely to rub shoulders. To properly capture Montana, the writer has to capture its beauty and the underbelly the stunning physical surroundings can mask.

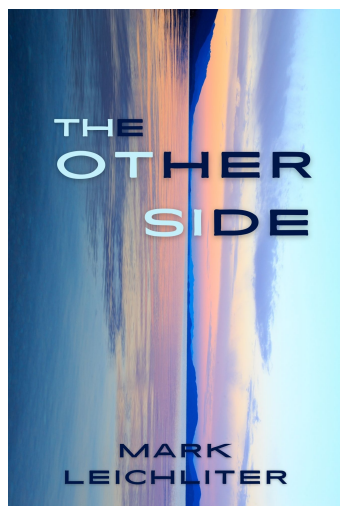
Yet a great unifier for all who call the Flathead Valley home is a sense of pride in ownership of the valley and the state of Montana. Montana depicts a lifestyle that people associate with its big skies and wide-open spaces, one of individualism and deep ties to place. That lifestyle creates another great unifier: lives largely lived outdoors. The venues may differ, back country skiing or rock climbing for some (like my detective Steve Wendell does), hunting or fishing for others. One person accesses trails by mountain bike while her neighbor does so on an ATV. Nearly all spend time on our abundant rivers, whether that’s to fish or to float, and the available floating vessel might be a guided drift boat with fly rod in hand, a pricey kayak, or an innertube begged off the local tire shop. Those breweries not only have enormous patios or decks, they are occupied early in spring and deep into fall and sometimes in the deadly cold of a harsh Montana winter, for Montanans are more comfortable out of doors than anywhere else. Perhaps that explains the bushy beards. The natural rhythms of the place creep into people’s bloodstreams. The cowhand who must navigate a blizzard to tend to the birth of a calf is less removed from the recreating bicyclist who dons layers of tech gear to climb the “Going to the Sun” road in a rain squall than either might guess. They’ll both be wearing Carhartts should they frequent the same bar. That intimacy with weather is something we all experience in Montana, for we live our lives in it. For a crime writer, that not only means the chance to write of haunting mountain mists spiraling through electric green



mountain slopes, it also offers noirish atmosphere when depicting crime scenes. That, and lots of places to imagine how, under the cover of inclement weather, crimes can go easily undiscovered. With a sparse population, witnesses are infrequent, every town is immediately adjacent to river-fed forests thick enough to hide any sort of evidence, and surrounding land expanses create escape opportunities for fleeing criminals.

Such circumstances can be a crime writer's dream—a palette of possibilities. But weather, remoteness, shifting populations, and other factors complicate the reality faced by real law enforcement investigations and shape real lives, too. I try to remember that as I write the place, for in the brand of crime fiction I wish to write, one that wishes to honor those doing the investigating and those whose lives are upended by criminal action, the places I write are also the ones where my neighbors live. When trying to write a place, consciously or not, writers offer a way for readers to create intimate bonds with locales they may never visit in person. Coming to know a place may be a byproduct for a reader consumed by the twists and turns of solving a mystery, but it's a big part of why they grow anxious for the next book in a series they love. In the best mysteries, events are shaped by the place, just as the place is shaped by those who pass their lives in it. In the wake of the receding pandemic, with people anxious to travel, this year Montana is hosting record numbers of tourists. I have little doubt many of them chose Montana as a destination because of books they have loved that fueled their imaginations about the place.

*The Other Side, a contemporary mystery novel, is the crime fiction debut from Mark Lechliter. A former college professor, librarian, and faculty member of several writers' conferences, he is the founding editor of the nonfiction magazine, BioStories. A native of Wyoming, he lives in Flathead Valley.*



# AN HISTORICAL TAKE ON CRIME

Laraine Stephens

I knew there would come a day when I'd throw off my fine woollen twinset, string of pearls, sensible shoes, and 400-denier tights to experience life on the other side of the bookshelves as a hard-boiled crime writer.

But it wasn't that easy to shrug off nearly forty years of teacher-librarianship. By taking on a new career, as a writer of historical crime fiction, it was in my DNA to be as authentic as I could in giving an accurate setting to *The Death Mask Murders*. And that wasn't hard to do, given my background. I studied British, American, and Australian History for my Bachelor of Arts degree, and was a qualified English and History teacher before I studied librarianship.

My novel, *The Death Mask Murders*, is set in Melbourne in 1918, in the dying days of The Great War. It was one of those amazing coincidences that in our travels to Europe, my husband and I visited The Somme, the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the war. We stayed at Albert, in Northern France, visited the remains of the trenches, saw the memorials and cemeteries, and felt sad that of the 400,000 Australian men who had enlisted, 60,000 died and 160,000 were wounded in that war. Can you imagine my surprise when, on returning home, I discovered that the locket that my grandfather gave my grandmother was inscribed with the words 'Love Jim, Albert 1917?'

I decided that the Great War, and its effects on those who fought and those who stayed behind, should be one of the themes of my novel. I was particularly interested in shell shock and how it was viewed at the time, as well as the various treatments that were applied to those who suffered from it.

In researching *The Death Mask Murders*, I used digitised newspapers from the time, checking events, classified advertisements (which gave me a wealth of information on cars, clothing, and entertainment), and word usage. I wanted the details to be credible and the feel of the book authentic. Without this resource, Reggie da Costa, *The Argus's* senior crime reporter, would never have worn his impeccably cut linen suit, high-collared cream shirt, and green striped tie from Wallace, Buck and Goodes of Queens Walk. Nor would he have driven a 1917 Dodge Roadster, a flashy, two-seater automobile with a wooden steering wheel, black paintwork, and shiny large headlamps, which was his pride and joy.

Significantly, the storm that lashes Brighton in February 1918, in the first chapter of the book, would not have had that ring of truth unless it actually happened. And it did. It is, to date, the biggest recorded storm to hit Melbourne, with winds estimated at 200 miles per hour. Descriptions were drawn from two newspapers of the day: *The Argus* and *The Age*.

Over the last six years, I have worked as a volunteer guide at The Old Melbourne Gaol (Jail). It opened in 1842 and closed in 1929. Within its bluestone walls were incarcerated dangerous criminals as well as petty offenders, the homeless, and the mentally ill. In the cells are

exhibited death masks of some of the 133 men and women who were executed there, including the infamous bushranger, Ned Kelly.

In 2019, I was interviewed by The Ballarat Courier and, unfortunately, was photographed with the death mask of executed felon Charles Bushby. The jury is still out on who looks worse!

The death masks fascinate me. How to explain the shock of realising that the eyelash protruding from one death mask's eyelid is real? How to understand that these particular death masks were made to prove one of the tenets of phrenology: that the shape, or contours, of a person's skull determined their character? It was suggested that this pseudo-science, popularised in the 1800s, could be used as a predictor of criminal tendencies. And this suggested to me yet another theme for *The Death Mask Murders*: could a person be born evil?

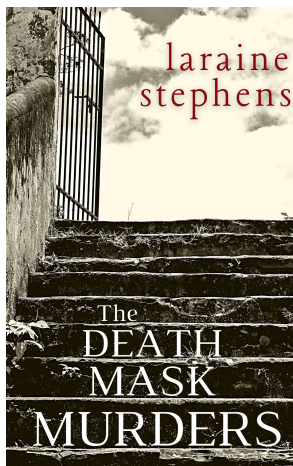
One of the stories that we tell at The Old Melbourne Gaol is of a prisoner who had received a five-year sentence. After two years, the authorities determined that he was insane, and he was sent to the Ararat Lunatic Asylum. After 33 years, it was decided that he was sane again, and he was returned to the Gaol to serve the last three years of his sentence. Incredible! As a result, the Asylum features in my novel.

Suffice it to say, my work at The Old Melbourne Gaol has certainly influenced my writing. Without it, *The Death Mask Murders* would not exist.

I finish with a word of warning. When it comes to writing, historical background and detail should never overwhelm the plot. Our readers buy novels with the expectation that they will read a cracking good story, rather than drowning in a reservoir of information.

**Postscript:** Okay, I made it up. I didn't wear twinsets, pearls, thick tights, or sensible shoes, but I did do the occasional 'SSShhh!'

*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), the Australian Crime Writers' Association and the Crime Writers' Association of the UK. Laraine's debut novel, The Death Mask Murders, is set in Melbourne in 1918. It is the first in the Reggie da Costa Mysteries series.*



# MAY - JUNE NEW RELEASES

