
JAN-FEB 2020 | VOL. 1

THE DAMES' DOCKET

A Bimonthly Newsletter from Level Best Books



GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES

Well, we may be in the midst of the winter doldrums, but the Dames are not letting that get them down. We're busy at work, reading, editing, and producing the books written by the wonderful authors who have joined the Level Best Team. We're planning to attend several conferences this year and will be selling books under our new entity, RSS Booksellers, at Malice Domestic in May, Writers' Police Academy in August, and Bouchercon in October.

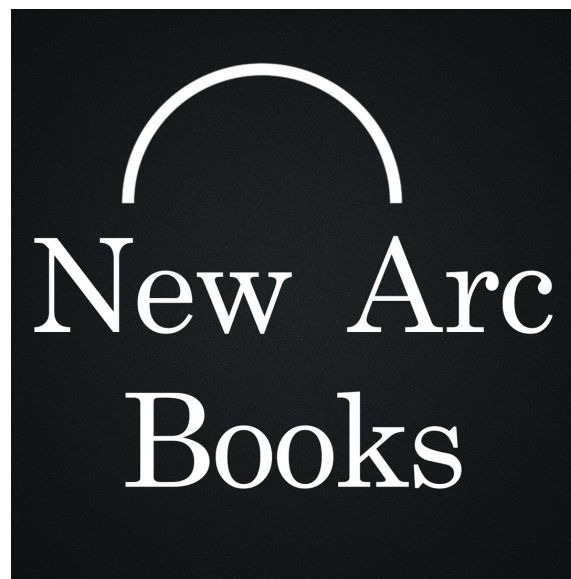
As you may know, the three of us serve on the Malice Domestic Board of Directors, and the convention is a busy time for us. But we always enjoy seeing old friends and new.

This is the first issue of a bi-monthly newsletter we'll be publishing, to keep you informed of what's new and exciting at Level Best. It will include interviews and articles by our authors, company news, and a listing of new releases.

Enjoy!

LEVEL BEST WELCOMES LEE AND DENENE LOFLAND

Level Best Books is proud to announce the launch of New Arc Books, a new imprint in partnership with Lee and Denene Lofland. Those of you who have attended the Writers' Police Academy are well-acquainted with the Loflands, who developed and host this stellar conference. Participants have the opportunity to learn about police procedure and forensic investigation from experts in their fields. Lee, a veteran law enforcement professional, publishes The Graveyard Shift blog and has served as a consultant for a wide variety of venues. Denene, with a Ph.D. from Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine, has enjoyed a career in the sciences. Now, the Loflands would like to publish the kinds of books they love to read and Level Best is so pleased to have them on board. For more information about New Arc Books, please visit [Level Best Books' website](#).



IN CONVERSATION WITH GABRIEL VALJAN

Congratulations on your recent Agatha Award nomination for Best Historical for 2019. Can you tell us a little how they felt, and a bit about the nominated book?

Thank you. I was numb for a week because the nomination was unexpected. Honestly, I had woken up to my phone notifying me that I had received an email. I read subject heading "Announcing the Agatha Award Nominees" and had no idea I would see my name listed. Good thing I was in bed. I can't emphasize enough how grateful I am to be nominated and to share the ballot with Rhys Bowen, Susanna Calkins, L.A. Chandlar, and Edith Maxwell. Just floored.

The nominated book is *The Naming Game*, the second in a series called *The Company Files* with Winter Goose Publishing. 'Company' refers to the CIA and the series is about the early days of the intelligence community. The story takes place in Los Angeles in 1951, as the McCarthy Red Scare escalates, and Hollywood studios have blacklisted writers using pseudonyms. Dalton Trumbo is probably the most famous example of a writer who'd used an alias at the time. A screenwriter is murdered, and Walker, who goes undercover at Warner Brothers, is trying to find out who killed the script doctor and why, as gangsters and the FBI are closing in on him. Real events and people inspired the story. Here is an excerpt that is not in the Amazon Look Inside feature.

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I live in Boston's South End, and I didn't start writing until I was in my early forties. I worked several different jobs that helped shape my outlook on life and informed my writing. Like some writers, I'm introverted and I find it difficult to be around people. As a kid, I enjoyed the retreat books offered me, and I marveled at the way language was used to persuade and manipulate emotions. I enjoy older films, like screwball comedies from the Thirties, because there's more nuance around social issues, and I like to laugh. I can't say I'm drawn to one specific genre. I read voraciously. Foreign literature and diverse perspectives are attractive to me, because I like to read outside my culture and experience. While I do write crime fiction, I've written historical fiction, horror, and some science fiction. Oh, and I'm fond of animals. My cat's name is Munchkin, and she's a rescue.

Dirty Old Town, the first in your Shane Cleary series, has just debuted. What was your inspiration for the series?

If you're writing Boston crime fiction, it's impossible to avoid George V. Higgins, Robert Parker, and Dennis Lehane, which is also why I chose Boston's South End for my primary location. Friends of Eddie Coyle and later Higgins were all over the map (literally). Parker was less so, and Lehane dealt with South Boston in his Kenzie-Gennaro series. The South End, however, is not Southie.

South End Boston was rather dodgy terrain throughout the Seventies, even into the Eighties. It has retained its multicultural identity since Prohibition—the South End was where you went to enjoy jazz musicians of color. The neighborhood's reputation bottomed out by the Seventies, becoming known for crime, drugs, prostitution, and sketchy bars. People are starting to relearn the South End's rich literary history through Emerson College's Literary District initiative. Did you know that Louisa May Alcott had moved here to get away from Concord so she could write the sequel to *Little Women*, and that the neighborhood has been home to Abolitionists, progressive artists, activists and educators? Here is an excerpt from *Dirty Old Town*.

In addition to your novels, you also are an accomplished short story writer. Do you have a preference: writing novels or short stories?

I enjoy writing both. I see short stories the way journalists write against a deadline—a challenge. A writer's style can vary from the minimalism of Jimmy Breslin to the more lyrical Peter Hamill, and I experiment with styles. When I started writing short fiction, I was amazed to learn that Word Count had dwindled from something you could read in one sitting (Poe's definition of a short story) to a maximum of 5,000 words today. The novel is a different creature, more of a marathon that requires pacing and structure. I'd like to think that my past life in engineering and the sciences and writing poetry taught me Structure. I find writing both short stories and novels enjoyable, and I hope I do them both well.

What is one book you've read that you wish you had written?

Tough question. It's a toss-up between William Kent Kreuger's *Ordinary Grace* and Marcie Rendon's *Murder on Red River*. *Ordinary Grace* is a crime story, but so much more; it's a coming of age story, a slice of Americana and seductive nostalgia and, to borrow Anne Sexton's phrase, 'an awful rowing toward God.' Rendon's book introduces readers to Native American culture and 'Cash' Blackbear, who is tough, but likeable and resourceful 19-year old woman, who solves a murder with Sheriff Wheaton. Try them out.

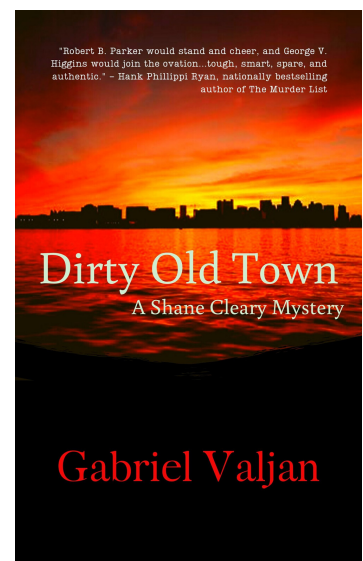
Do you have one piece of advice to offer aspiring writers?

You improve by writing and making writing a habit. You also have to be honest with yourself. Not everything will work, and that's okay, too. Whatever you do write, make it an experience for your reader. Are you enticing your reader deeper into a world of sights and sounds, introducing them to people they'll love or hate? Does the conflict in your story have stakes? Don't write to show off. Keep your ego out of it. A reader is trusting you with their time and their emotions, so respect your reader. A quick word about rejection: it happens. If you receive criticism, decide whether it has merit and whether it can help you become a better writer. Don't give up. Read more, read different, and keep writing.

Bio

Gabriel Valjan lives in Boston's South End where he enjoys the local restaurants. When he isn't appeasing Munchkin, his cat, with tuna, he documents the #dogsofsouthendboston on Instagram. His short stories have appeared online, in journals, and in several anthologies. Gabriel is the author of two series, Roma and Company Files, with Winter Goose Publishing. He was nominated for the Agatha Award for Best Historical Mystery for Company Files: 2. The Naming Game. Gabriel has been a finalist for the Fish Prize, shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, and received an Honorable Mention for the Nero Wolfe Black Orchid Novella Contest in 2018. Dirty Old Town, the first in the Shane Cleary series, was published in 2020 by Level Best Books. Gabriel attends crime fiction conferences, such as Bouchercon, Malice Domestic, and New England Crime Bake. He is a lifetime member of Sisters in Crime.

Twitter: @GValjan
Instagram: gabrielvaljan



A New Author's Viewpoint

Love Thy Editors

by Lynn–Steven Johanson

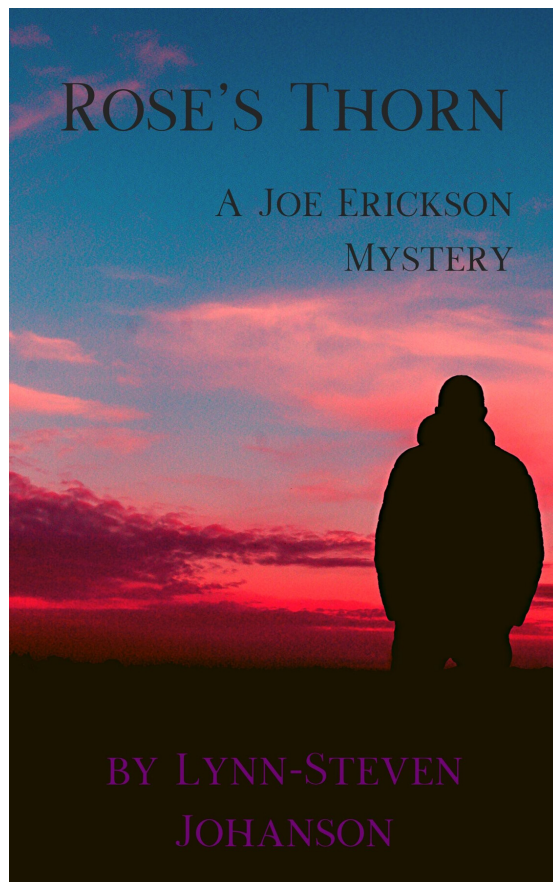
You spend the better part of a year writing a novel, sweating over the thousands of words you have put on the page. And then, to your shock and dismay, the first edit appears from your publisher, and some nasty editor has excised over a thousand of your precious babies from your story. Oh, the horror! Well, I have learned you cannot think like that.

As a playwright, I began employing a script doctor years ago to point out problems and suggest revisions. At first, I was hesitant to accept some of his suggestions. But I knew he had been in the business a lot longer than me as he was a senior editor for a large publishing company. So, I chose to trust his insight. And my plays were better for it. However, dramaturgy in theatre is a completely different animal than novel editing. A script doctor or dramaturg suggests, makes observations, and gives ideas for the playwright to consider. As a budding novelist, I was going to be in for a surprise.

I have never thought of my written words as precious. But what I did not anticipate was my editors pruning my text the way they did. Ouch! But in looking at the reasons, they made complete sense. I realized I still had a lot to learn as a newbie writer. In experiencing the process of launching a novel for the first time, I came to recognize that an editor is a writer's best friend because an she can make you look like a better writer than you actually are. And as a result, your book will benefit. Editors have a critical eye that writers do not have or do not need. As a writer, my focus should be on creating. My editor's focus is on refining what I have created. And like my script doctor, I have come to trust and appreciate those nasty editors that excised over a thousand words from my book. Besides, I have always believed in an old cliché, and it is probably true in my case: "Less is more."



Lynn-Steven Johanson is the author of the Joe Erickson mysteries. *Rose's Thorn*, the first in the series, will be released on March 17, 2020 by Level Best Books.



JANUARY- FEBRUARY
RELEASES FROM LEVEL BEST BOOKS

