

THE DAMES' DOCKET

A Bimonthly Newsletter from Level Best Books



Editor: Harriette Sackler
Production: Shawn Reilly Simmons

The Dames of Detection
Verena Rose
Harriette Sackler
Shawn Reilly Simmons

GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES

“Anyone and everyone taking a writing class knows that the secret of good writing is to cut it back, pare it down, winnow, chop, hack, prune, and trim, remove every superfluous word, compress, compress, compress...” – Nick Hornby

Oh boy! Haven't we all been given this advice in writing classes, how-to books, critique groups, and from pesky editors? Just when we've written the perfect paragraph, an exquisite description of a summer's day, or a beautifully prepared meal, or a fashionably dressed woman we pass on the street, we're told to remove it from our manuscript and file it away.

And why we ask? We've created such masterful prose.

The answer, though it may seem heartless, is really quite simple. That chapter, scene, paragraph, sentence, or word does not move our story forward!

We have a story to tell. A crime to be solved. A perp to be apprehended. Justice to be served. And everything we write is intended to advance the story. Simple, no? Not really. It takes a lot of discipline to cut those jewels we've worked so hard to create. But cut, we must.

Let's take to heart Stephen King's words:

“Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your little egocentric scribbler's heart, kill your darlings.”

For the Dames,
Harriette



ON POINTE WITH LORI ROBBINS

HS: Lori, we're so pleased to have you with Level Best Books. *Murder in First Position*, the first in your On Pointe series, will be published on November 24th and is currently available for preorder. I know you've been dancing since the age of sixteen. How did dance become a passion of yours?

LR: I attended a ballet performance for the first time in my life, when I was sixteen years old, and I fell in love! Rudolf Nureyev and Karen Kain were dancing in *Swan Lake* at the Metropolitan Opera House, and on a whim, I decided to go. It was a transformative experience for me. Of course, I knew it was unlikely I could ever dance professionally, but I was determined to try. The day after seeing *Swan Lake* I enrolled in several adult beginner classes at the Joffrey Ballet. I was lucky enough to sign my first professional contract about three years later and danced professionally for a total of about ten years. And I still take ballet class. It's part of who I am.

HS: I was delighted to learn that you attended Hunter College, my own undergraduate alma mater, majored in British Literature and are now an English teacher. What caused you to make the switch?

LR: I was a passionate reader and aspiring writer long before I ever stepped on stage. I always knew I would eventually do something connected to those earlier, enduring interests. I was in between gigs when I met a very attractive guy, who shared my love of reading, and who thought I might enjoy taking a few college classes. Eventually, I got the degree and married the guy. Both experiences inspired me, not necessarily in that order.

HS: Did the discipline of dance prepare you for the discipline of writing?

LR: Absolutely! Dance requires complete concentration, both mental and physical, and the discipline I learned as a dancer is a definite asset as a writer. I think it's the fascination with the difficult that makes dance so compelling. The same thing holds true for writing. It's challenging, and you have to keep working at it, and some days nothing goes right. But you keep at it, day after day, because you can't let it go. Dancers, and writers, are nothing if not obsessive.

HS: In your book, the competitiveness of professional dance is reflected in the relationship between Leah Siderova and Arianna Bonneville. Can you elaborate?

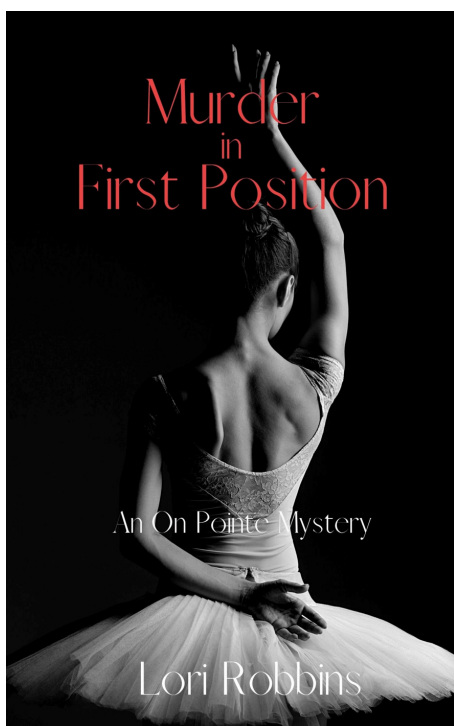
LR: The relationship between Leah and Arianna is complete fiction, but it does have a kernel of truth. Their emotions, which are a function of the fragility of a dancer's life, are very real, and that's what I wanted to explore in this book. For most dancers, their most intense competition is with themselves; they're artists, and they strive, always, for perfection. Sometimes it's easier to project that passion, and that anger, onto another person. At the same time, it's easy for dedication to spill into obsession. And yet, most dancers are extraordinarily kind, generous, and supportive of each other. My best friends are all former dancers!

HS: What have you learned during the publishing process that you can share with other writers?

LR: The process of writing and editing a book is intense. You want everything to be perfect—maybe that’s the dancer in me coming out again!—but the most important element is having an editor who shares your sensibility and has the skills to help you achieve your vision. I feel so lucky to be working with Shawn Simmons and to be part of Level Best Books.

HS: What books can you recommend to readers who would like to know more about the world of professional dance?

LR: *I Was a Dancer*, by Jacques D’Amboise, is a beautiful and very moving memoir. Suzanne Farrell, one of my all-time favorite dancers, wrote *Holding Onto the Air*, another wonderful memoir. For those interested in the history of the Ballet Russes, I recommend *Behind the Scenes at the Ballets Russes: Stories from a Silver Age*, by Michael Meylac. But since dance is a visual art, I’d also like to recommend two documentaries: *First Position*, which follows several talented young dancers as they compete in the Youth America Grand Prix and *A Ballerina’s Tale*, which features the incomparable Misty Copeland, the first Black ballerina to attain the position of principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre.



Brooklyn-born Lori Robbins began dancing at age 16 and launched her professional career three years later. She studied modern dance at the Martha Graham School and ballet at the New York Conservatory of Dance. Robbins performed with a number of regional modern and ballet companies, including Ballet Hispanico, the Des Moines Ballet, and the St. Louis Concert Ballet. After ten very lean years as a dancer she attended Hunter College, graduating summa cum laude with a major in British Literature and a minor in Classics. Her debut mystery, *Lesson Plan for Murder*, won the Silver Falchion Award for Best Cozy Mystery and was a finalist in the Indie Book Awards. *Murder in First Position* is the first book of her new mystery series, set in the world of professional ballet. She is currently working on the second book in both series. Robbins is a vice president of the NYC chapter of Sisters in Crime and an expert in the homicidal impulses everyday life inspires.

Sources of Inspiration for THE BEETHOVEN SEQUENCE

By Gerald Elias

What if? That's how I always start. Let the mind wander, let that question percolate, and then get to work!

No matter what book I'm writing, whether it's a mystery or a thriller or even a children's story, the first challenge I throw at myself is to come up with ideas which on the surface might be fantastically farfetched, but then try to craft them in such a way that they become so convincing that the result seems almost inevitable. At the outset, nothing is too crazy.

So, for instance, the eponymous sleuth in my Daniel Jacobus mystery series is a blind, over-the-hill, curmudgeonly violin teacher. Somehow he manages to be more adept at solving mysteries than the best law enforcement authorities in the land. How likely is that? Highly un-!

And within that series, what's the probability that a unique, demonic three-quarter-sized Stradivarius would be stolen from under the noses of Carnegie Hall security agents? Or that an elevator would be a murder weapon of choice? Really? Why not? All in the interests of entertaining my readers, and somehow I've apparently managed to get it to click, as after six installments I'm optimistic the series will continue for the foreseeable future.

Likewise, in my first thriller, *The Beethoven Sequence*, the basic premise is as implausible as it is chilling.

Let me take a step back. Most, if not all of you, are probably familiar with the Suzuki method of music training, or at least you've heard of it. In a nutshell, the Suzuki method is based upon a rigorously structured plan of instruction centered around group activities, requiring a disciplined and dedicated organization. Students' parents are intricately engaged in their children's music education, which can begin when the child is as young as two- or three-years-old. Founded by Dr. Shinichi Suzuki in the mid-20th century, his method, which is almost as much about community as about music, has become universally popular. There are literally millions of current and former Suzuki students and teachers, including hundreds of local chapters and annual regional conventions which involve teacher training, workshops, masterclasses, and performances.

What's essential about this to *The Beethoven Sequence* is that all Suzuki teachers are trained to follow the same format and progression of repertoire, from Book 1 through Book 10, for violinists; and to teach using the same methods, all the way down to details of how students must uniformly bow at the end of a composition. All students learn the same way. That's key to my book.

Here's the chain of daydreaming "what ifs" I began to ask myself: What if there was a Suzuki-type method on steroids? And what if its leader became a cult-like figure? What if that music program became politicized? Finally, what if that program evolved into the Big Brother of the 21st century, where truth became lies, and freedom became subjugation?

Voila! *The Beethoven Sequence*.

Once I got rolling with that basic premise, the filling-in “what ifs” began to flow: What if this leader was mentally unstable? What if, with his thousands of disciplined, organized zealots, he became President of the United States, though he was a non-ideological political outsider? What if, as he assumed the immense power of the presidency, his perception of reality became corrupted, and he began to eliminate opponents of the rigid orthodoxy of his methods?

It was at that point when I realized I was no longer dealing with a mystery, my go-to genre, but with a thriller.

What’s the difference? From what I’ve gleaned from some of my favorite genre authors, these are my observations: In a mystery—think Donna Leon and Walter Mosley—something baffling happens—a theft, a kidnapping, a murder—and the protagonist, using all the resources at his/her disposal moves toward the action, figuring out how and why the crime occurred. And, of course, who committed it.

In a thriller—think Nelson DeMille and John le Carré—the action flows in the opposite direction. An individual with few resources seeks to evade capture or death by an oppressive, seemingly invincible power. He or she moves away from the action, hoping to prevail against all odds and emerge victorious, if scathed, against a merciless juggernaut.

A thriller can also have an enhanced element of danger, maybe more than in your typical mystery. Assassinations, car chases, death-defying escapes, intimidation ranging from the psychological to the slam-bang. Tom Cruise kind of stuff.

Thus far, I was at a point where I’d determined my genre, and I had my “what ifs.” I then developed my two main characters: Layton Stolz, a mentally unbalanced wannabe orchestra conductor who becomes a) a cult figure, and then b) a psychopathic President of the United States; and Ballard Whitmore, a young acolyte who pays a dear price for daring to question his mentor’s authority.

The glue that tied it all together was the final implausible inspiration—Beethoven! Beethoven? What is that all about?

As a longtime professional musician (very longtime, in fact), I’ve performed all of Beethoven’s great compositions many times over. A remarkable amount of his oeuvre is imbued with themes of freedom and liberty and heroism. Indeed, he was the first composer to represent those lofty ideals in instrumental music, making him a revolutionary in that regard.

Those very qualities were precisely what attracted Layton Stolz—whose life had been the epitome of repressed emotions and ambitions—like a moth to a flame. To the point of obsession, he identified with Beethoven’s real-life personal struggles as a social outlier. So much so, that all who strayed from Stolz’s definition of the straight and narrow of his Beethoven Sequence did so at their own mortal peril.

I won’t delve into the plot. That would give too much away. Suffice it to say that the recent review in *The Boston Musical Intelligencer* hailed *The Beethoven Sequence* as “a quick, gripping, and disruptive read.”

That’s music to anyone’s ears.



Gerald Elias leads a double life as a world class musician and critically acclaimed author.

His award-winning Daniel Jacobus mystery series takes place in the dark corners of the classical music world. Devil's Trill, his debut novel, was a Barnes & Noble Discover: Great New Writers selection. Elias's prize-winning essay, War & Peace. And Music, excerpted from his memoir, Symphonies & Scorpions, was the subject of his TEDxSaltLakeCity2019 presentation. Many of his short stories and essays have appeared in prestigious journals ranging from Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine to The Strad.

A former violinist with the Boston Symphony and associate concertmaster of the Utah Symphony, Elias has performed on five continents and has been music director of Salt Lake City's popular Vivaldi by Candlelight chamber orchestra series since 2004. He divides his time between Salt Lake City and West Stockbridge, Massachusetts, maintaining a vibrant concert career while continuing to expand his literary horizons.

Meet Tina deBellegarde

HS: Tina, warm congratulations on the publication of *Winter Witness*, the first in your series. Please tell us about the book and your inspiration for writing it.

TdB: Thank you, Harriette, I would love to!

A few years ago I moved to the Hudson Valley. I immediately got into a daily routine of walking the country roads and paths as Bianca St. Denis does in *Winter Witness*. One day I realized I could use this beautiful location as a place to stage murders. The possibilities were endless - the lake down the path from my house, the hiking trails, the speeding pickups on the curvy roads, the steep waterfalls, the abandoned quarry, the aging resorts, the extreme weather! Then I started to create my fictitious village of Batavia-on-Hudson. It ended up being a conflation of the villages in the area. I simply took my favorite qualities from each and made a place I'd love to spend a great deal of time in. The village materialized quickly for me, so I created a map which Sachi Mulkey brought to life in the opening pages of my book.

I love murder mysteries, and I also love well-developed characters. My experiences with my new neighbors were entirely different from those in my old world. I was jotting down snippets of conversation and finding myself in circumstances that just don't arise in suburbia or the city. These engaging people easily became the source material for my villagers in Batavia-on-Hudson.

HS: Tell us a bit about yourself.

TdB: For eighteen years, I was a middle school foreign language teacher, before that a paralegal, and before that an exporter of heavy machinery to West Africa. The export job was my first position out of college, and it necessitated travel to France and Morocco. I have always used this as an example to my students about how useful learning foreign languages can be. In fact, I am trying to learn a little Japanese, since my son Alessandro lives there. I travel to Kyoto every couple of years to visit him (not this year though...). What a tremendous new turn our lives have taken since he moved there ten years ago. Japanese culture is part of my life now. I read a lot of Japanese literature as a result. I've even tried my hand at some Japanese cooking.

Two of my favorite adventures have been a bicycle trip across the north of Spain on the Camino de Santiago and taking hot-air balloon piloting lessons. There is absolutely nothing like flying in a balloon. It was a childhood obsession after reading *The Twenty-one Balloons*.

Today, my husband Denis, my cat Shelby and I live on a hobby farm. We keep honey bees, grow shiitake mushrooms, and keep a rather large vegetable garden.

HS: As a displaced New Yorker, I have fond memories of the times I vacationed in the Catskills. What impact did “place” have on your writing?

TdB: The village I live in is very similar to the one I created in *Winter Witness*. It is cozy and welcoming. There is a sense of history, but there are secrets as well. Everyone knows everyone and mostly we get along, even if there is plenty of gossip. But we work hard to live in harmony because the intimacy of a small community means that we have to get along. We see each other every day, we get our coffee at the same spots every day, we know generations from the same family. We know too much and too little about each other. It’s an interesting dynamic.

I also love the scenery, the fresh air, the wildlife. It makes its way into my writing because it can’t be ignored. Each window in my home looks out on to something beautiful, and there is plenty of wildlife in my meadow, sometimes all at the same time. Deer, turkeys and rabbits mingle with my free-range chickens. Oh, and the sound of coyotes at night even made it into my book.

HS: As a new author, what insights can you offer to writers seeking publication?

TdB: First, I would say keep writing and submitting. The fears associated with rejection will eventually be dulled by submitting more often and increase your chances of getting noticed. I did this with short fiction. It’s a good way to stretch your writing muscles, and it will improve your novel writing for sure. It also builds your self-esteem and that confidence also comes across in your writing.

Once I finished my final draft of *Winter Witness*, I took a break before submitting it. I wrote my first short stories, loved the process, and was pleasantly surprised to get a couple picked up. In fact, my story “Second Chances” made it into *Seascape: Best New England Crime Stories* edited by my lovely current editors at Level Best Books. Another story, “Tokyo Stranger”, will be in the upcoming MWA anthology, *When a Stranger Comes to Town*, edited by Michael Koryta. It’s been exciting! I tried flash fiction next and had a great time with that and even won a few small competitions with them. (Check my website for a peek)

My second piece of advice is that there is more than one path to publication. Everyone needs to find the path that suits them. I always believed that a small press would be a good fit for me, and I found my community at Level Best Books. It is a very supportive group of writers, and I have editors behind me who are willing to listen to my insecurities and answer all my questions. We are working on my book project together. We are growing together. It suits me.

HS: Are there authors who've had an impact on you or acted as role models for your writing?

TdB: Definitely! Anne Tyler focuses me on character development. I am so in love with her characters that I don't need a plot in her books to enjoy reading them. I also love Japanese authors. They offer slow burning stories that are very thought provoking. Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* prompted me to write flash fiction and tightened up my writing.

Martha Grimes is my favorite mystery writer. Her Richard Jury series has lovely long sub-plot story arcs, interesting series characters, a sense of community, all with clever mysteries that aren't boiler plates. Her books are thought provoking but warm. I had hoped to achieve a similar feel.

I grew up on women writers like Gail Godwin, Sue Miller, Ann Tyler, Elizabeth Berg, Marilyn French, Alice Adams. These women shaped my writing and my view of the world. They made me feel more and helped me delve deeper. They taught me to believe that a woman's story was worth writing. They focused on their female characters and their internal lives. And they did it with beautiful prose.

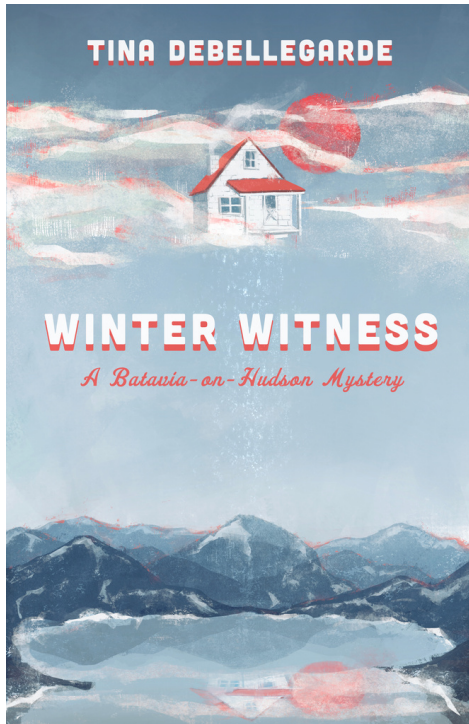
Then there are writing books: *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott, *One Continuous Mistake* by Gail Sher, and *Writing from the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg. I haven't read these in years, but I have internalized certain things from each. Most of all, they gave me courage to write. I'm so impressed with young people who are confident enough to put their words out into the world at a young age. I am mentoring a high school writer now, and I am floored by her confidence.

HS: Can you offer a sneak preview of future books?

TdB: Oh, that's a fun question! I am working on the second book in my series, *Dead Man's Leap*. It's a story about renunciation and moving forward. Expect it next September. Book 3, tentatively entitled *Zen Fall*, will release in 2022. This book has Bianca traveling to Kyoto, Japan. It has to do with our desire to outpace our past. I was supposed to return to Japan this year in preparation for writing this book. I will head out there again as soon as travel returns to normal. Make sure you follow my social media. You can't take a bad picture in that beautiful city.

On the back burner I have a collection of Japanese themed interrelated stories, as well as a novella-in-flash. Hopefully I can get some time to work on those.

By the way, I will be on a virtual book tour in November. You can check my website for the schedule of stops. There will be more interviews, reviews and guest blog posts. And some giveaways!



Tina deBellegarde lives in Catskill, New York with her husband Denis and their cat Shelby. *Winter Witness* is the first book in the Batavia-on-Hudson Mystery Series. Tina also writes short stories and flash fiction. When she isn't writing, she is helping Denis tend their beehives, harvest shiitake mushrooms, and cultivate their vegetable garden. She travels to Japan regularly to visit her son Alessandro. Tina did her graduate studies in history. She is a former exporter, paralegal, teacher, and library clerk.

SEP-OCT NEW RELEASES

