

# 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

Well, here we are, moving into a new year. I'm sure you'll agree, it's none too soon. The Dames have been sticking pretty close to home. We sorely miss our monthly breakfast meetings at the Marriott Hotel before joining the Malice Domestic Board of Directors to do our conference planning. We have to rely on emails, phone calls, and the occasional Zoom virtual get together to discuss LBB business. We've missed the opportunity to spend some in-person time with you at conferences and conventions. It certainly will be a treat to get back to normal.

But, I have to say, amidst the anxiety, sadness, and loneliness, there were good things that happened in 2020. Level Best Books grew and we were happy to bring on board some terrific writers. Many of you saw your books published and what a thrill that must have been. Mystery Writers of America recognized Level Best as an approved novel publisher. Our books are distributed worldwide and we have authors on the team, not only from across the U.S., but from Canada, England, and Australia.

Shawn has set up a link on our website to share information with our authors and, thanks to Tina and Mally, the Level Besties is flourishing. The Dames introduced a bi-monthly newsletter and we now have a book club for readers who'd like to read books published by our authors and post reviews. It's so gratifying to see our authors working together to promote their books and share opportunities. And these are just some of the good things happening at Level Best. Shawn, Verena, and I want to thank you all for joining Level Best Books. We wish each and every one of you, good health, peace, and fulfillment in the coming year.

Harriette, for the Dames.



# A GEM OF A SERIES

## MEET MARY STIBAL

Mary, welcome to The Dames' Docket. We're so pleased to be the publishers of your Gemstone Mysteries. The first in your series, *A Widow in Pearls*, is available, and the sequel, *An Ex-Heiress in Emeralds*, will be published in February of 2021.

**How It All Began:** I have long been convinced the buying and selling of gems and jewelry is the world's second oldest profession. Maybe even the first, since women have been the power behind the world for, well, for forever. As a result, I have always been fascinated by the allure of jewelry, since it is such an instantly recognizable symbol of wealth and status. Besides, when the stones are faceted by a master cutter, high-end jewelry pieces are also works of art. Then too, I have long been intrigued by the story of the Duchess of Windsor, aka the infamous Mrs. Simpson, and her superb collection of jewels by Cartier and Harry Winston.

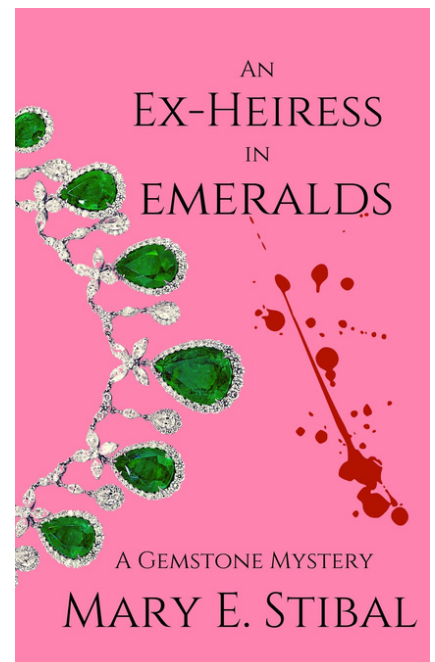
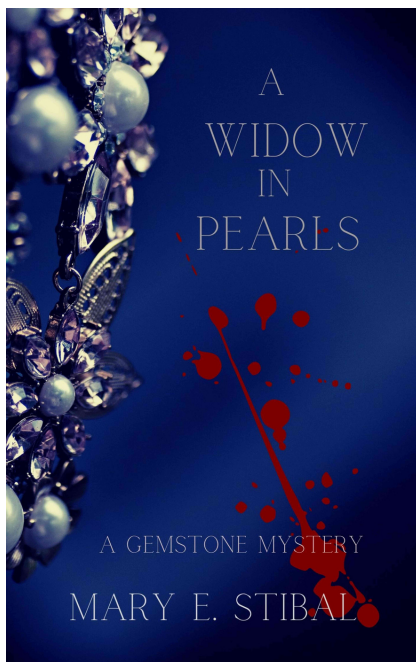
As far as reading, I started with Nancy Drew when I was nine or ten, and I was excited to read about teenagers who lived in a city (I am a farmer's daughter), and about the drama when trouble came strolling in. Over time, it was a natural progression for me to Agatha Christie, although, by then, the stakes were raised, and it was often pure evil that showed up. After I read every one of her books, I tried the usual thrillers, but they didn't thrill. Instead I was drawn to crime, and creaky stairs and the snick of a shovel as a body is buried in an empty field. I went on to read the alphabet murder series and a raft of others, but something was missing. I just didn't find the characters believable.

**The Shift:** By this time, I had a high-stress job in a marketing agency, where 80-hour work weeks were not uncommon, and I thought someday, someday I'll write a murder mystery. And what better backdrop than a high-end jewelry store, with flawed, rich people walking in to buy glittering, beautiful jewelry? And, of course, there would be a murder, or two.

And so, I went on to write such a book, but I didn't understand then that the best murder mysteries follow Aristotle's dramatic structure. Regardless, my first book was based, no surprise, on a true unsolved mystery of the Duchess of Windsor's jewels. So I wrote it, although 'ground it out' is a better description. I had a great plot, but I didn't know what I was doing, nor could I write decent narrative. I basically ended up with a book I couldn't sell. And then I stumbled on Elmore Leonard, a man who writes Nobel-worthy narrative. I started studying his sentences to see how he did it, and then I took a couple of online classes from brilliant author and on-line writing instructor Mary Buckham. By the way, Mary can bring out the author in anyone, because she loves stories, but most of all, she just flat out loves writers.

**Becoming Published: Thank you Level Best Books! In *A Widow in Pearls*, the first of my three-book series, *The Gemstone Mysteries*, Madeline and her business partner Abby co-own a high-end jewelry store in downtown Boston. Madeline's problem is that she is headstrong and can be outspoken, which Abby has to constantly remind her, the rich don't always appreciate. When Madeline's best customer, Brooke, a demanding Boston Brahmin widow is murdered, and shockingly leaves her a valuable collection of pearls, a string of murders follow. When the police investigation stalls, Madeline becomes a suspect, and so she sets off on her own to identify the killer. And has to rely on her wits in a final confrontation with the armed killer. In the second book in the series, *An Ex-Heiress in Emeralds*, Madeline is determined to show Abby that she can handle wealthy customers. She is proud when she brings in billionaire Harley as a brand new customer, (even though he almost walked out. Twice.) He is a private military contractor who buys a \$200,000 emerald necklace for his French wife. Madeline becomes friends with the wife, but when her husband is murdered, the wife becomes the primary suspect. Madeline is convinced the wife is innocent, and she becomes focused on protecting her, which backfires in a spectacular way, and Madeline is almost killed. And yes, there will be a third book, *A Sister in Rubies*. Which, no surprise, has as a backdrop the Duchess of Windsor's collection of jewels. I mean, who could resist. Her jewelry collection was jaw dropping. Trust me. Jaw dropping.**

**Mary Stibal has never considered "less is more" a virtue when it comes to gems. She has also known that beautiful gems are a stone cold motive for any matter of crime. Using her decades long business background, Mary weaves the deadly confluence of Boston's superrich and their iconic jewels with deadly ambition and capital murder.**



## THE ROAD TO PUBLISHING

BY  
PAUL MARTIN

My road to publishing has followed several routes, including institutional publishing, trade publishing, independent publishing, and self-publishing. Working as a staff editor at *National Geographic* for thirty years, I had the luxury of knowing that everything I wrote would be published. I traveled the world on assignment, writing numerous feature articles. I wrote two books and edited or contributed to a dozen others. My connection with the Society also led to an outside publishing deal for a travel memoir.

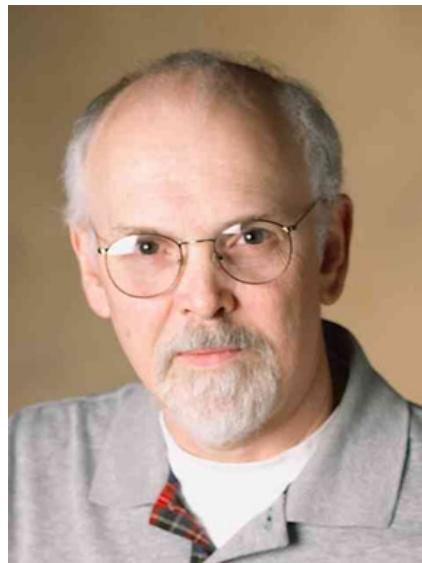
Over the past few years, I've discovered the exhilarating, sobering world of freelance writing. It's daunting to spend months or years on a labor of love while knowing it's possible that no one else in the world may ever read it. That's why I'd offer a piece of advice that's worked for me: Instead of writing about what you know, as most writing gurus suggest, I'd argue that writing about what you want to know is more energizing. If you're fascinated by a new subject, your enthusiasm will likely show in your writing, and your interest will keep you motivated.

In my case, I've always loved history and biographies. After I retired from *National Geographic*, those interests provided the spark for three collections of biographical profiles. *Secret Heroes* (William Morrow, 2012) focused on inspiring unsung Americans. *Villains, Scoundrels, and Rogues* (Prometheus Books, 2014) profiled some of the most colorful ne'er-do-wells in American history. *American Trailblazers* (Kindle Direct, 2018) covered individuals who'd performed some unique original feat that's been overlooked. Researching more than a hundred intriguing characters for these books kept me inspired through years of writing.

As I've shifted from nonfiction to fiction, I've tried to educate myself with a stack of books on creative writing, including the insightful guides by John Gardner, Eudora Welty, and Stephen King. I published my first two novels on Kindle. *Lost in Saigon* is loosely based on my experiences as a military journalist. *Far Haven* is a time-travel adventure set in a dystopian America and plague-ridden fourteenth-century England. Both novels deal with love and loss.

My third novel, *Killin' Floor Blues*, was released by Level Best Books on November 3. This was the most enjoyable fiction project I've undertaken, since it combined all of my favorite genres—history, biographies, and mysteries. Set in the Great Depression, the story follows the murders of several of the early blues greats, including Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith. Since the police show little interest in solving the crimes, father and son musicologists John and Alan Lomax investigate the killings, becoming targets themselves.

At times during my career, I've been represented by literary agents. My relationship with my first agent was brief and unproductive. My second agent, a young star at industry giant William Morris Endeavor, sold *Secret Heroes* to HarperCollins for a respectable advance—then promptly lost interest in me as a client. I've handled all of my other post-National Geographic books myself. Finding a congenial home for *Killin' Floor Blues* at Level Best Books has been one of the most satisfying experiences of all. I recently finished *Dance of the Millions*, another "Music & Murder Mystery," set amid the boom-and-bust prosperity of Cuba following World War I.



Paul Martin is a former book and magazine editor with National Geographic Society. In the course of his travels, he has walked the Great Wall of China, explored the tombs and temples of ancient Egypt, and run the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in a wooden dory. The author of ten books of fiction and nonfiction, he has edited or contributed to more than a dozen other books on history, culture, and science. Paul lives near Washington, D.C.

# OKLAHOMA NOIR

## MEET SCOTT HARTSHORN

HS: Scott, congratulations on the publication of *To Live and Die in Deep Deuce*, the first in your Lou Nyland series. Since you became a Level Best author, I've learned that you're quite a Renaissance man, with a number of college degrees and diverse interests. Please, tell our readers about yourself.

SH: I was born and raised along with my two sisters in Iowa, where my father was a teacher and high school football coach. I left my small home town to attend college at the University of Dubuque, where I majored in environmental biology, played football, and was captain of the wrestling team.

After graduation, I worked in Minneapolis in the finance field before moving to Dallas, where I worked as an insurance underwriter. In Texas, I started graduate school at the University of Texas for Political Economics, but before completing the program, I was accepted to law school. My new wife insisted I attend the school that received the smallest amount of snowfall. That brought us to Oklahoma, where I subsequently graduated from law school in 1990. During this time, I clerked for the United States Attorney's Office, the Security and Exchange Office, and as an Assistant District Attorney. After a couple of years working for governmental agencies, I went into private practice concentrating in the fields of criminal defense, estate planning, and guardianships. Five years ago, I went back to college and received an undergraduate degree in history and a masters in early European history. As of January 2020, I am semi-retired after 30 years of practice.

My wife and I have two children who are now grown and married. My son, Andrew, is an engineer for PBS and is married to Natalia, a Brazilian immigrant IT developer. My daughter Emily is an ICU nurse at Vanderbilt in Nashville and is married to Myles, a financial planner. I currently run a real estate property management company and, along with a partner, grow wheat and raise cattle on my farm in western Oklahoma.

HS: Your book takes us back to 1930s Dust Bowl Oklahoma City. Lou Nyland, your protagonist, is a former baseball player who earns his living as a private investigator. How and why did you create Lou?

SH: Lou is an amalgamation of my paternal grandfather, who was a minor league baseball player and bare knuckle fighter in Texas during the 1920's, and film noir characters in detective novels I enjoyed reading growing up.



HS: Both jazz and baseball play significant roles in your book. Do the music and sport play a significant role in your life?

SH: To be honest I can't sing a lick or play any musical instrument, but I do enjoy music and especially blues and jazz.

I would say that sports have played a significant role in my life. Sports allowed my father's generation to rise up and obtain college educations. The same can be said of me and my cousins as well as my children, who were awarded collegiate athletic scholarships. Other than myself, multiple members of my extended family are now educators.

HS: Racial discrimination and inequality are elements of your book. Tell us about how these social issues played a role in Oklahoma in the 1930s?

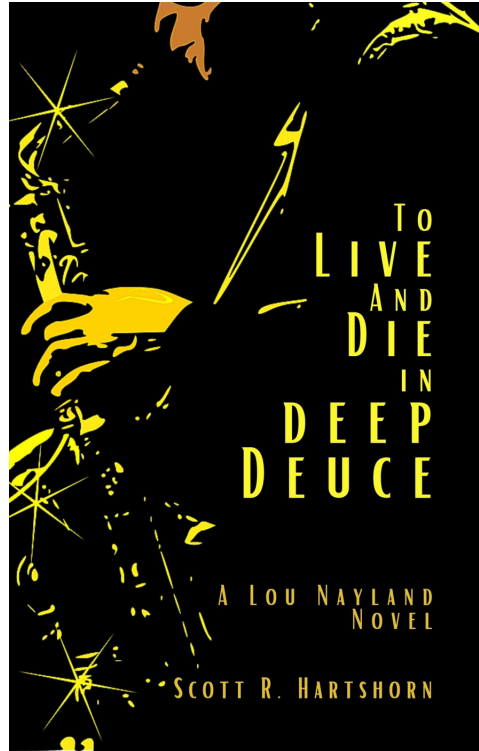
SH: It was my intent to show that Oklahoma was not like other southern states of the time in regards to people's racial attitudes. I would say that is due, in large part, to the fact that Oklahoma was populated mostly by Indians and freed blacks before statehood. Another reason was a subconscious guilt felt by many in this state because of the Tulsa race riots of the early 1920's. The result was that by the mid 1930's, Oklahoma had driven the clan almost totally out of the state. Though there remained some institutional racism mostly maintained by a small group of elitists in local government, the man on the street day-to-day intermingled with other cultures. These underlining facts can also be found in Deep Deuce itself which was a booming black community that was composed of doctors, lawyers, and independent newspaper men like Roscoe Dunjee, and small business owners. Though it's not made clear in my book, there has always been two Oklahomas, the eastern half, more southern in its attitudes, and the western half which has more of a western/cowboy spirit. Finally, I tried to show how much influence Deep Deuce had on jazz and blues music of the time. It was part of the Kansas City, Memphis, and New Orleans musical circuit, and many greats of the time like Count Basie, Charles Christian, and Billy Tipton all originated in Oklahoma City and specifically from within Deep Deuce.

HS: Scott, you are currently working on the second book in your Lou Nayland series. Can you tell us a bit about Lou's next adventure?

SH: The second book takes place six months after the first and involves a female character from the first book hiring Nyland to locate her missing brother, who is a gay man connected to the fairly large underground gay community in Oklahoma City. (I obtained this history from a Ph.D thesis written by a local professor.)

The missing man has connections to several young gay men who are being systematically murdered by an unknown assailant in the 3rd District of the city. Lou must investigate the connections and hopefully find the missing brother before he becomes a victim as well.





Scott Hartshorn and his wife enjoy vacationing around the world, fishing, and spending most weekends at their ranch in southwest Oklahoma.

A SISTERLY COLLABORATION  
MEET CYNTHIA DREW AND JOAN GOLDEN  
WRITING AS DREW GOLDEN

**HS:** Ladies, it's a pleasure to introduce you to readers of *The Dames' Docket*. The editors of *Level Best Books* are happy to have you on board. I'd like to begin by asking you an obvious question. Why did you make the decision to co-write your Wynn Cabot mysteries, and how do you share the writing process?

**DG:** Thank you, Harriette, for having us—it's a pleasure to be part of the team!

**Cynthia:** We'd written together before, so we knew how to deal with the back-and-forth, and with each other's expectations. Mostly we keep the phone lines hot—sometimes multiple calls a day. Joan writes in longhand on a tablet, while I write directly into the computer, so the length of time it takes to create a scene or passage is different for each of us. Often one of us is following a particular character or story line, and wants to continue it.

**Joan:** We like to take road trips, and sometimes we'll see something that needs a backstory. Cynthia will start, I'll add the next bit, and then we bounce back and forth. Other times, one of us will ask a "Did you know?" question, and we're off on hypotheticals and "What if" stories. Cynthia is a pro at dialogue and description and has a definite style. I'm a screen writer, so I bring visualizing the scene into play.

**HS:** *Nouveau Noir*, your debut novel has already been published. Are you pleased with the response you've received?

**DG:** We were very pleased with the response just before release—imagine! The book was featured in a pre-Beaujolais nouveau-release issue of *Wine Spectator* and then picked up by *Marketwatch Magazine* as well. In the months following, *Nouveau Noir* got great reviews. Alas, not long after that COVID-19 hit, and book promotion plans came to a halt. There is always hope that a book makes the *NY Times* best-seller list, or that Hollywood calls, but yes, we feel the response has been gratifying. Not only that people bought the book, but that they liked it.

**HS:** Introduce us to your protagonist, Wynn Cabot.

**DG:** Wynn has a past we're only beginning to reveal, though she's as real to us as a close friend might be. She's a feisty, smart redhead and a former Olympic swimmer. And like other main characters in mystery series, Wynn has something very human to deal with—she's dyslexic. Dyslexics have a different way of solving puzzles than we linear thinkers do, and it's her biggest asset in crime-solving.

**HS: Wine and art are two significant elements of your book. Are they special to the two of you? Will they be central to your forthcoming books?**

**Cynthia: Art always. Wynn Cabot is an agent in the FBI's Art Crimes division. I owned and operated an art gallery on the northern California coast for a number of years and was a painter before I turned to writing. Topics in the Wynn Cabot series, other than an art theme, will differ from book to book.**

**Joan: The premise for Nouveau Noir began over dinner one night with "what if a wine that is mass-produced was poisoned? How would it be withdrawn from the market, and what would the motive be for it having been poisoned in the first place?"**

**HS: Nouveau Noir is set in the Napa Valley wine country of California. Why did you choose this location?**

**Joan: Because we both knew the lay of the land in Napa, we set the book there. It wasn't far from where Cynthia's gallery was located, and I had spent vacations in Napa. We thought many of our readers would know the lay of the land too, while others might appreciate a virtual tour of Napa's lush landscape. It's especially beautiful at grape harvest.**

**HS: Please tell us if your book and those to follow are plot or character driven?**

**DG: Mysteries are plot driven a great deal of the time, but we feel that unless the reader is emotionally involved with the characters, there's less buy-in. So we try to build real characters with wants and problems (and quirks!). Wynn's looks, her murky past, or the way her head is wired are character points that color almost every scene. But to paint each scene is fun, whether Wynn is involved or not. We see the stories visually, and write them that way.**

**HS: Side Hustle, the second in your series, will be available shortly. Can you give us a sneak peek?**

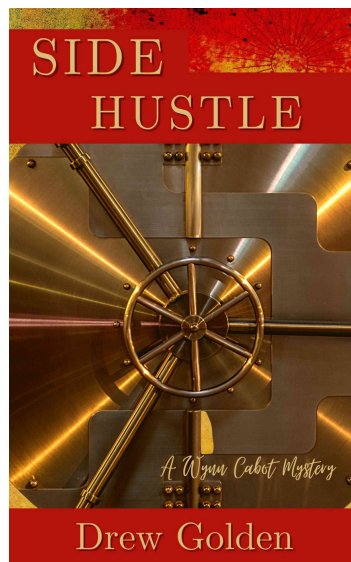
**DG: Side Hustle is set in literally the most-surveilled square block of Washington D.C.—the most surveilled city in the world. In that block, there's a vacant lot, where we decided to locate our fictional bank. The bank's iconic solid silver and gold mobile sculpture has gone missing just before the Fourth of July, and, of course, Wynn gets the case. Soon, she finds herself caught in a web of private banking, D.C. politics, and side hustles. And behind them all, a murderer.**

**HS: Any words of advice you can give to new writers?**

**Cynthia: Since I also teach writing, I could go on at length here. Michael Connelly tells new writers to write for fifteen minutes a day. That’s a trick, of course, because if you sit down to write at all, you’ll find you spend more than just a quarter of an hour with your manuscript. The most important thing is that you must write—derriere in the chair. Write the first sentence, and then the second. And then cross out that first sentence, because, inevitably, the second sentence is a better first sentence. And then you’re on your way.**

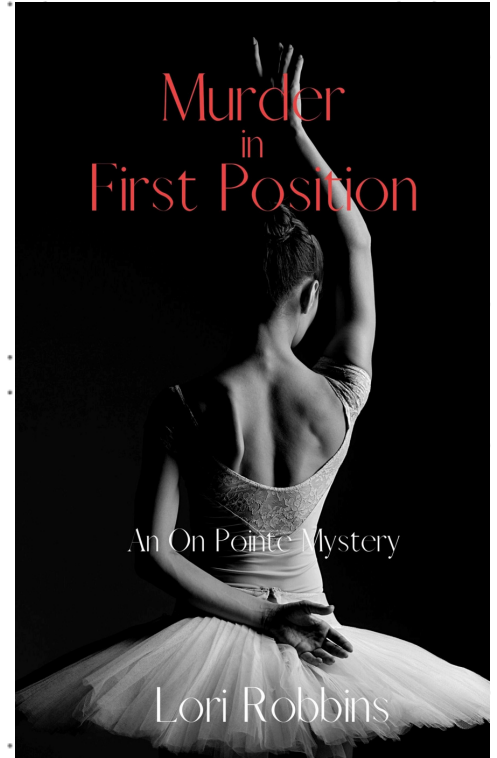
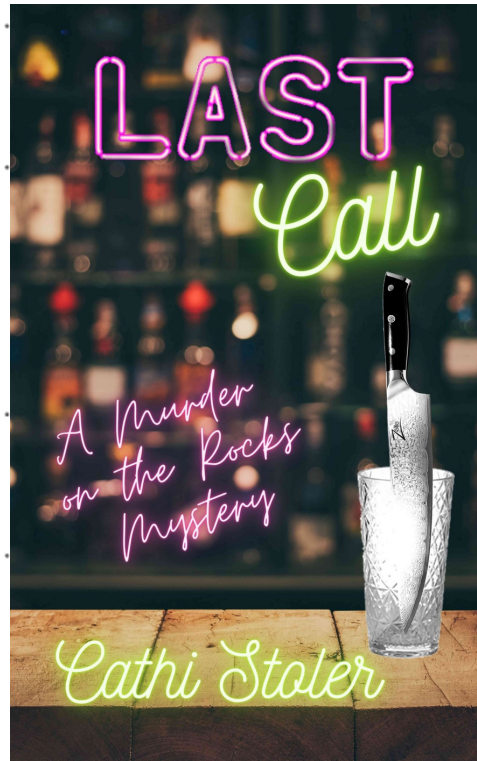
**Joan: Give me a good story I haven’t heard before, and make me care about the characters.**

**Drew Golden is the sister writing duo of Cynthia Drew and Joan Golden. Asheville, North Carolina resident, Cynthia Drew, is recipient of the 2017 INDIE Gold Award and operated an art gallery in the heart of California wine country for a number of years. Joan Golden is an Albuquerque, New Mexico resident and award-winning screenwriter.**





# NOV-DEC NEW RELEASES



FINALLY,  
FOREVER FREE



TAMMY THIES

FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
OF THE WILDCAT SANCTUARY

