
NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2021 | VOL. 11

THE DAMES' DOCKET

A Bimonthly Newsletter from Level Best Books



Editor: Harriette Sackler
Production: Rita Owen

The Dames of Detection
Verena Rose
Harriette Sackler
Shawn Reilly Simmons

GREETINGS FROM THE DAMES



The Dames of Detection acquired Level Best Books in October of 2015 and 2021 marked our sixth year in publishing. Over the course of that time, we have been very fortunate each year to add new and exciting authors to our catalog.

As the Acquisitions Editor I am proud to say that in 2021 we had a banner year adding over 30 new authors to Level Best Books. We also created a new imprint – LEVEL/ELEVATE for YA mysteries and several of the new authors are in that category.

As we begin a new year, I am excited about our upcoming schedule of releases, and while not a resolution, I predict that Level Best Books will continue to grow and have its best year to date.

Verena Rose

WITH PRIDE AND COMMITMENT

When Shawn, Verena, and I decided to undertake the Level Best Books venture, I must admit I felt both excitement and anxiety. The three of us had been good friends for many years, been members of the mystery fiction community, and served on the Malice Domestic Board of Directors for what seemed like forever. I'd retired from my work at a residential treatment center for kids with emotional disabilities and as the vice president of a sanctuary for senior pets, but wasn't ready to lead a life of leisure. What could be better than acquiring a company that published mystery/thriller fiction, my favorite genres? It was also the home of my published short stories. Could we be successful? I truly believed we could.

Now, six years later, I have no regrets. To date, we have signed more than one hundred authors who themselves have identified as the "Level Besties," and who share ideas and support with each other and organize joint publicity opportunities when the opportunity arises. Many of our authors have been nominated for and won major awards. Their books have been reviewed in venues worldwide. We've created three imprints under the Level Best umbrella. And new submissions pour in daily. We're an MWA approved publisher.

And, there's been an unanticipated benefit for me. During the past two years while the pandemic raged, I had little time to let myself be overwhelmed by my self-imposed house arrest or mourn the inability to travel, attend conferences, or gather with friends which has always been an important part of my life.

Level Best needed me. My partners were relying on me. I had an important responsibility to Level Best's authors. There was no time to sit back and mourn life as it was pre-Covid.

So, as we begin a new year, I'm hoping for a return to some sort of normalcy in many respects. Until that happens, I, along with my dear partners, have a lot of work to do!

Happy New Year to all of you!

Harriette

A YEAR OF GROWTH

I always view the new year as a time of renewal and fresh starts. I like to set new goals and challenges for myself, refresh my intentions, and reflect on all of the positive things from the previous year that brought me into this new one.

2021 was challenging in many ways for many of us, but it was also a year of great expansion and growth for LBB, and of forming a unique community in the publishing world. We launched a new imprint for young readers, Level Elevate. We partnered with a company to produce audiobook versions of our books, SideCrow Productions, based in Los Angeles and Vancouver. We built relationships with a number of agents and publicists throughout the year who brought us great projects and helped us bring our books to market in the best way possible. Several of our authors were shortlisted for awards and accolades, and a few even won! We had our first book reviewed in *Publisher's Weekly* (unsolicited), our first starred *Kirkus* review, and one of our books was featured in *Kirkus's* Best of 2021 issue of the printed magazine. Every time we got this kind of news, the feeling of excitement and of being proud of the LBB community was such a joy.

My editing tracker tells me I've edited 22,966,010 words since I installed it on Valentine's Day (my gift to myself). *Publisher's Weekly* reached out and wanted to get to know LBB better, impressed by our growth and the quality of titles we're publishing. Hundreds of people listened to my podcast, Five Compelling Questions, the episodes in 2021 featuring mostly LBB authors. We brought on three new LBB team members to assist with editing and marketing, in addition to our wonderful production editor and very dedicated intern.

All in all, it was a very good year, all things considered. And now we look forward to building on those accomplishments, moving into 2022 with renewed energy and hope for brighter days ahead for us all.

Wishing you all the very best,

Shawn

MY WRITING PROCESS: THE ARTIST'S LIFE

Erica Miner

Erica Miner's writing process might be helpful to other writers as they may contemplate
how to tweak their own writing processes in the New Year.

As a writer, I am not a pantser; quite the opposite, in fact. My writing methodology reflects my approach to honing my craft in my former life as a musician. In practicing music, whether as a soloist or as a violinist in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York, planning was always key. This remains true in my writing life as well.

Writing a novel is much like practicing a concerto or a Wagner opera. Both require a slavish devotion to perfection, with one important distinction. In a concerto, you're perfecting a piece written by someone else. With a novel, you're creating your own personal material, and starting with a blank slate. That means meticulous planning. And it all starts with an outline.

In a mystery novel, plotting is more complicated than in other genres. Like a jigsaw puzzle, if one piece doesn't fit exactly, the entire plot is in danger of falling apart. In addition, two important elements must be determined before you can start writing this type of story: the ending and the identity of the villain or perp. I also think in terms of starting with the ending and working my way backwards to make sure each plot point fits logically with what came before it.

When I write my outline, the broad strokes come first: seven or so large beats, the bones of the story. Then I start to expand the beats into detailed plot points. Eventually, I create an in-depth beat sheet of each scene in the book, from beginning to end, making sure to include the characters' emotional arcs and interactions and relationships with each other as part of every beat.

Once I have a rough draft of my outline, I dissect my plot as I do my music, slowly examining every word as I do every note: as if under a magnifying glass. Without an outline, this would be impossible to accomplish.

Writing an outline is very labor intensive, but the rewards are great. It's a wonderful feeling when I finally allow myself to write the actual novel. Plus, I have the outline to refer to during the process, adding or deleting, changing, and refining as I go along.

Is it any wonder that I outline meticulously?

*

Formerly a Metropolitan Opera violinist, Seattle-based writer Erica Miner is an award-winning screenwriter, lecturer, and author of the Julia Kogan "Opera Mystery" series, which is due for re-publication with Level Best Books starting in September 2022.

<https://www.ericaminer.com>

SEASONS GRITTINGS!

Kevin Kluesner

Tomorrow is the shortest day of the year, which is another way of saying there's more darkness than light on my half of the planet right now. It's cold. And my debut novel, *The Killer Sermon*, releases at the end of this month. It's really happening. Seems like a good time to look back and take stock of what I've learned over the course of this journey, and what I can commit to going forward.

I don't claim to be an expert now, but when this started I knew nothing about publishing. I spent the past forty years in health care, the last thirty-eight in leadership positions, culminating in the administrator role at an urban safety net hospital. Not for the faint of heart. I have a journalism degree and once had a side gig as the outdoor writer for a daily newspaper; I read a novel a week and I've always thought of myself as a writer. But I didn't know the first thing about the business side of producing a novel.

What I've learned is this: Publishing a successful novel is fifty percent writing the book, fifty percent finding a publisher, and another exhausting fifty percent marketing the damn thing. While my math skills are suspect, I've learned to make up for that with an outsized ability to take rejection and keep moving forward. I watched a great TED talk by Angela Duckworth a while back. The talk and the book behind it are called, *GRIT: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. More than twenty-five million people have watched Angela's TED talk, and her book is a huge best seller (give me a piece of that, you're thinking). After gathering evidence across many fields, she states convincingly that grit, passion, and perseverance are far better predictors of success than talent or IQ level. That's 120% true of successful authors. Math issue again, I know.

The Killer Sermon was twenty years in the writing. The story premise came to me around the turn of the century, and I quickly jotted down an outline. Then I wrote disparate chapters when they came to me, my muse dropping by for a visit every few months or years. Twenty years into this little project and I had written forty-five thousand words, mostly scenes or chapters that had no connection. I was stymied until I picked up Stephen King's memoir, *On Writing*. Besides telling a good tale, he repeated what many other writers have said, but which I was finally ready to listen to. Things like: professional authors write, while amateurs wait for inspiration. Um, guilty. Or this gem: You need to carve out time to write and commit to writing five hundred or one thousand words before you get up. Stop worrying about making it perfect. Just get that first draft written. For me, King's memoir was the book of revelations. I finished my book in four months.

Finding an agent or, the ultimate goal, a publisher was the next hurdle. After tasking some eager friends to provide initial feedback (is it even a story, for instance), I paid a professional editor to help me rework it. Then I anxiously started sending my baby out to literary agents and publishers, each painstakingly researched and queried. I suppose the responses were inevitable. Some agents liked it, but just didn't have the bandwidth to take on another book at the time. Some just didn't feel excited enough to represent it. Many, many enjoyed the book, but it wasn't the right fit for them. Fit is apparently a big thing.

Oh, and I heard crickets. Lots of crickets. Since a variation of this theme happened to the likes of J.K. Rowling and Stephen King, I wasn't dissuaded. The fact that I typically targeted agents who already represented Lee Child, Gregg Hurwitz, Robert Crais, and other luminaries might have set me up for failure. I reasoned they repped my kind of book and were good at what they did. But, I wonder in hindsight how much free time they have or how hungry they are. Care to take on a sixty-three-year-old debut author? Mmmm. Tempting, but no. And then I was rescued by the Dames of Detection and Level Best Books. Hallelujah!

Finally, I arrived at the marketing part. If you are an author with one of the Big Five publishers, maybe this part is mostly done for you. But, even then, I'm doubtful. With any other publisher, marketing the book is a team sport. Setting up author interviews, book signings, podcasts, reviews, and media stories is a whole 'nother stream of work that comes with its own joy and rejection.

As for what's next, I'm going to keep writing thriller novels that can be read at the beach for pure enjoyment. But they will also be about topics that are on the minds of people everywhere. In *The Killer Sermon*, an aging priest in a small town gives an impassioned Christmas homily where he labels abortion as murder and exhorts his flock to stand with him and do something to stop it. Two people begin public and legal acts of civil disobedience, calling for an end to abortion. Another responds to the sermon by targeting reproductive rights physicians for murder. I think this is the point where a number of agents and publishers passed on this novel. Targeting physicians for murder is despicable. But every thriller I've ever enjoyed starts with something despicable that happens or is about to happen that a good person, or people, need to stop. That's the case with my novel, where a pro-life leaning FBI agent and a pro-choice leaning reporter put aside their differences and work together to catch a killer. The only thing about *The Killer Sermon* that's preachy is the title. The only messages beyond what I hope is a good read is that our words matter, and that regardless how big our differences on divisive issues, we need to respect each other. That's not a bad thing.

I think novelists deserve a voice when it comes to the big issues of our day. The world is a better place because fictioneers like Harper Lee (*To Kill A Mockingbird*) and John Grisham (*A Time To Kill*) wrote novels that shed their light on race relations. The philosopher Albert Camus once wrote, "Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth." I think the old Frenchman was on to something. Happy New Year!



NOVEMBER-DECEMBER NEW RELEASES



