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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

Well, haven't July and August been eventful months for all of us! A year ago, who could have imagined that we'd still be suffering through a pandemic that won't go away. So many of us have chosen to postpone travel plans, stay close to home, and live in a virtual world of on-line conferences, Zoom meetings, and promotional events.

Shawn, Verena, and I hope you enjoyed More Than Malice. The three of us have been members of the Malice Board of Directors for so many years and, speaking for myself, I can say that organizing a conference at a hotel is a piece of cake compared to the work involved in putting together a virtual event. Luckily, we have some fantastic Board members who are incredibly tech savvy—and yours truly is not one of them—who spent endless volunteer hours doing their magic.

Now, putting on our Level Best caps, the three of us couldn't be happier or prouder to see so many of our authors nominated for prestigious awards. While, I'd venture to say, this is not the reason writers write, recognition by other authors and fans is a gift.

Congratulations to you all!

On that note, we're dedicating this issue of The Dames' Docket to articles written by nominees, sharing their thoughts of what this recognition has meant to them. Hope you enjoy!

Harriette
for The Dames

AWARDS AS VALIDATION

James Ross

It all begins by someone telling you that you should write. What they really mean, of course, is that they think you tell a good story—which isn't the same as writing. But, encouraged, you take pen to paper and begin the long apprenticeship to the craft of written storytelling. There's a lot of rejection along the way, some of it gentle, much of it not. But for those who stick with it, there can come a day when someone says, "Yes. We'd be delighted to publish your work." That's validation.

Those who keep at it may even get published again. They produce longer, more ambitious work. Some begin to look for an agent. Of course, that begins the cycle of rejection all over again, some of it gentle, most of it not. But for those who persevere there can come a day when some agent says, "Yes. I'm willing to invest my time in promoting your work." That's the next level of validation.

Of course the agent may have suggestions for making your work better. If it's your first book, you try to accommodate them. Maybe the suggestions improve the work and your agent lands a publisher. Maybe they don't and you look for another agent. But with luck and persistence, some publishing company may finally say, "Yes. We'd be delighted to publish your work." More validation.

Of course the publisher will have suggestions for making your work better, and you try your best to incorporate them. Then, after an interminable wait, the book is launched and you've finally become a published author. Yeah! You've made it. Ultimate validation.

Well, not quite. How are sales? Is anyone other than family and friends reading your highly vetted work? And if getting an agent, a publisher, and a book launch hasn't gotten you the audience you'd hoped for, what do you do next?

Some do advertising, interviews, podcasts, and now Zooms. But that's advertising, not validation. Some enter contests, a place at the intersection between the two. From first publication, agent, publisher, and book launch, a series of people have said, "Yes, you're good. I'll take a chance on you." When you win an award, a group of your professional peers has now publicly affirmed, "Not only are you good. In this category, at this moment in time, you're the best!" That's final validation.

It's also not bad advertising. If the resulting publicity helps sales, that feels pretty good, too.

*

James Ross is the author of Coldwater Revenge, published by Level Best Books. At various times, he has been a Peace Corps volunteer in the Congo, a Congressional staffer, and a Wall Street lawyer. His novels and short fiction have won or been shortlisted for a number of awards. The next book in his series is scheduled for publication in April 2022.

ON MY NOMINATIONS

Tina deBellegarde

When I worked at the local library, one of my favorite parts of the job was matching patrons to their next favorite books and authors. I worked in a small library in an intimate town and prided myself in knowing what my patrons liked, and would often put books aside awaiting their next visit. For my mystery-loving patrons, I would pull the books that had been nominated for awards and I felt secure knowing that even if I hadn't read them all, they were probably terrific books. Many of the mystery-reading patrons at my library enjoyed the Agatha-nominated books most of all and would keep coming back for more. And I would keep finding them winners and nominees to read. For many, it was the beginning of a long love affair with certain authors and their series. My patrons kept coming back because they trusted me to find them another book, another author, another series that was as good as the last. And I did that by finding them more Agatha winners and nominees.

This spring when I received a phone call from Cindy Silberblatt of the Malice Domestic Board, I started hyperventilating before she even got to the good news that *Winter Witness* had been nominated. I couldn't believe she was telling me that I was now an Agatha-nominated author. That forever, I could carry that moniker. That my book was beloved enough to share this distinction with so many of my favorite books.

When my book came out, one of the great joys was seeing it on bookstore shelves, but nothing compared to seeing it on the library shelf. The library has always been my haven, my favorite place no matter where I have lived. Now *Winter Witness* will share the shelves with other Agatha-nominated books. This is a dream come true for me.

As if this good fortune weren't enough, *Winter Witness* has just been announced a finalist for a Silver Falchion Award and is long-listed for a Chanticleer Mystery and Mayhem Award. I am so grateful to the readers and judges for making my book a success. And to Verena Rose, Harriette Sackler, and Shawn Riley Simmons for bringing *Winter Witness* to print.

*

Tina deBellegarde is the author of the Batavia-on-Hudson Mystery Series published by Level Best Books. She lives in Catskill, New York, with her husband Denis and Shelby the cat.



MURDER IN FIRST POSITION:

An On Pointe Mystery

Lori Robbins

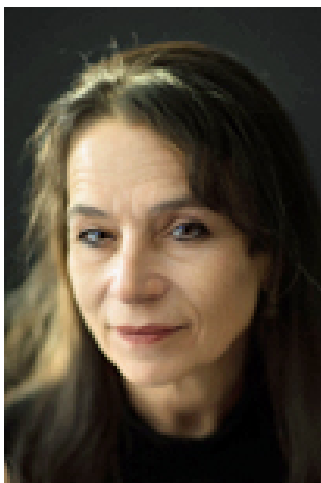
Murder in First Position tied for first place in the Next Generation Indie Book Awards for Best Mystery. It was a finalist for a Silver Falchion and is long listed for the Mystery and Mayhem Book Award. There are few things more satisfying than winning the approval of the writing community, and I'm honored and humbled to have received this kind of recognition. One of the best things about this experience is seeing my book alongside other authors I admire. I'm especially proud that my book appears next to those of so many Level Best Books authors.

The first two reviews *Murder in First Position* received were not positive. They weren't terrible, but they fell far short of enthusiastic. Up to that point, the only feedback I had was from people who knew me well. Doubts are inevitable. Was it possible that the only people who would like the book had the same last name I did? Many authors say they don't read their reviews. This is good advice. I plan to follow it someday.

I don't write in a vacuum. I'm not sure anyone does. The pleasure in receiving an award is all the sweeter for being able to share it with the family, friends, and publisher who supported me.

*

Now a New Jersey English teacher, Lori Robbins began dancing at age 16 and launched her professional dance career three years later. The mother of six, Lori has vast experience with the homicidal tendencies that everyday life inspires.



A LITTLE STARDUST

J. R. Sanders

I was delighted to have my debut novel, *Stardust Trail*, published by Level Best in late March of last year. As luck would have it, the book came out just in time for lock-downs and quarantines to throw all my marketing plans a wicked curve ball. But despite the setback, nearly a year and a half later I've been pleasantly surprised—dumbfounded, honestly—to receive a pair of literary honors for *Stardust Trail*.

This past April I learned I was a Finalist for Best Historical Novel in the Spur Awards, given annually since 1953 by the Western Writers of America. In July I was named a Finalist in Killer Nashville's Silver Falchion Awards for Best Investigator. Both competitions included some amazingly talented fellow authors, so I'm doubly honored to find my cross-genre novel receiving recognition at all, let alone two separate accolades, in two different categories, in two distinct genres.

In classic Western sidekick Smiley Burnette's wise words (which partly inspired my title), "You can't eat stardust." I completely agree, but even though I know awards aren't why any of us do what we do, it's still gratifying to have the work you love acknowledged and valued. And a little stardust can offer a much-needed morale boost during those long, tiring, lonely stretches of staring down our familiar, formidable foe—the blank page.

*

J. R. Sanders is a native Kansan and longtime denizen of the L.A. suburbs. His interest in Old West history dates back to childhood and his interest in crime to his days as a police officer and private investigator. He lives in Southern California with his wife and three rescue dogs. Stardust Trail is the first of the Nate Ross Mysteries.



THAT FINALIST FEELING

Lida Sideris

The morning began with my reading announcements from other writers that they were Killer Nashville finalists. My first thought was, what fabulous news—how wonderful for them! My second thought was, I guess my book's not a finalist. Oh, well. I'd submitted my novels to Killer Nashville before without anyone noticing, so I wasn't surprised, but I was disappointed...for a minute or two. Then I forgot about it; I had a day job to do.

Just before noon, I received this email:

Congratulations!

Your book, [Slightly Murderous Intent](#), is a finalist for the Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award for Best Comedy.

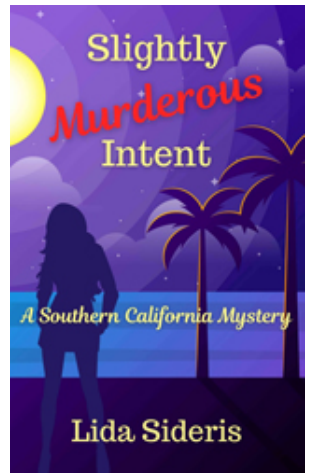
This bit of news took a little longer to register. I re-read the email several times, and, for about fifteen minutes, I truly couldn't believe it. Was this for real? Then it hit me like a rain shower at noon in the Sahara Desert. I won! And that's sincerely how I felt because being a finalist feels a lot like winning.

For writers, books are like our children. We give birth to the book, nourish and fuss over it, clean the book up when it seems messy, giving it all we've got. Sometimes, the book keeps us up at night, makes us cry, brings us joy or drives us bonkers (that would be me). We try to breathe life into our creations (on the page, of course). It ain't easy pouring pieces of our hearts and souls into our writings. We expose our strengths and weaknesses, setting them loose in the world for all to see.

But when our literary children are discovered by readers who find them a source of escape or adventure, or if they make someone smile, feel excited or inspired...what a spectacular feeling for the author! And when the book-child becomes a finalist as determined by writers, librarians, reviewers—book lovers the author has never met—oh, it's definitely a win.

*

Lida Sideris is the author of A Southern California Mystery series. Working as an entertainment attorney for a movie studio—kind of like her heroine, Correy Locke, except without the homicides—she lives in Southern California with her family, rescue dogs, and a flock of uppity chickens.



AND THE FINALISTS ARE..

Cathi Stoler

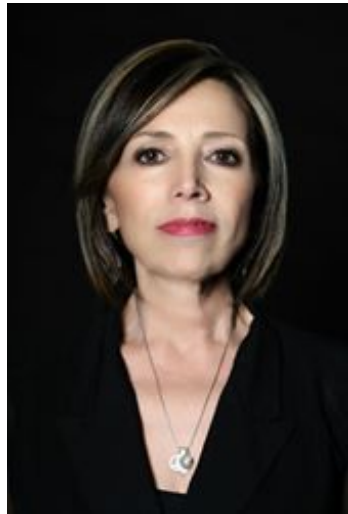
If you've ever watched any of the run-ups to an award show, you know that everyone nominated will say how honored, surprised, and delighted they are just to be nominated. I've always thought that might be a bit disingenuous, that nominees were saying what was expected of them because what else would you say?

But I believe I was wrong. Honored, surprised, and over the moon was how I felt when I received the email telling me *Last Call: A Murder On The Rocks Mystery*, was a finalist for the Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award for Best Suspense Novel. It's a great feeling to have your work acknowledged and appreciated. It feels really good and it's nice to say so.

I honestly didn't expect this to happen, but I'm so excited that it has. And I know my protagonist, Jude Dillane, would buy a round for everyone at The Corner Lounge if the story wins. Cheers!

*

Cathi Stoler, a New York City resident, is the author of the Murder on the Rocks Mystery Series, published by Level Best Books. She is a three-time finalist and winner of the 2015 Derringer Award for Best Short Story.



HOW IT FEELS TO BE NOMINATED

Gabriel Valjan

I was asked to put together some words around what it feels like to be nominated. My short story “Elysian Fields” in the Bouchercon Sacramento anthology was nominated for an Agatha, an Anthony, and a Macavity award. As if this trifecta were not enough, my first in the Shane Cleary series for Level Best Books, *Dirty Old Town*, received nods for the Anthony for Best Original Paperback and Silver Falchion for Best Investigator.

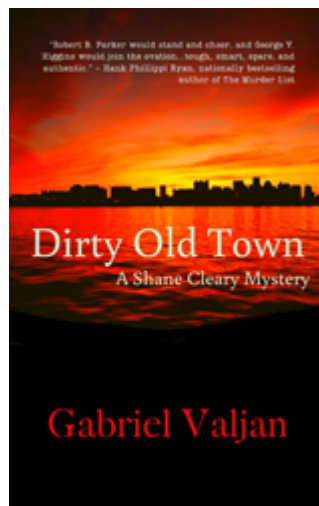
Feelings. The irony is not lost on me that as a writer I’m in the trade of manufacturing emotions on the page for readers. Fiction is fake, fraudulent, and here I am, at a loss for words to convey true emotion. If there is one word, one singular note for how I feel, it is gratitude. I’m grateful to those who voted for me and thankful to those who have read me or who will read me thanks to these nominations. Gratitude is the right word, in the right place, because there are no guarantees for a writer. Jurors vetted the short story. Art Taylor was the editor who sanded and rounded the rough corners of that short story. I’m appreciative. Shawn Reilly Simmons shepherded Shane Cleary through thousands of words, so he can make first impressions count.

These last two years have underscored my feeling of gratitude. Disappointment, with a capital D like a bad grade on an exam, has tested the patience of almost everyone I know in my life, most especially in the writing community. Cancellations. Setbacks. The darkness has almost made any creative endeavor seem superfluous. Almost.

Which is why these recognitions buoyed me when I felt down and full of doubt about whether I am read or heard out there in the vast sea of books, during a time of plague and the endless distractions of everyday life. It’s good to be here and to be in the light. As I said above, gratitude. Thank you.

*

Gabriel Valjan, a Boston resident, is the author of the Shane Cleary mysteries, a five-part series set in 1970's Boston published by Level Best Books. His Roma and Company Files series comes from Winter Goose Publishing. Gabriel's short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies. He has been shortlisted for a number of prestigious awards.



JULY-AUGUST NEW RELEASES

