

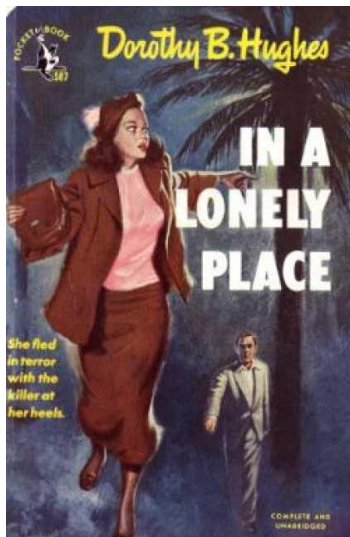
THE MARCH OF CRIME

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER OF MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA

“In A Lonely Place” Kick-Off

By Gary Phillips

As folks will recall, your chapter has initiated a One Book Program, starting with Dorothy B. Hughes neo-classic, IN A LONELY PLACE. The following are some suggested questions arising from the



book, and are intended to stimulate discussions with readers' groups, book clubs and the like. In fact, would those of you who are part of such a group or know of some, provide their contact

info so we can let them know about our One Book project?
Send the contact info to Gary Phillips at: gdogg855@aol.com.

Questions for Discussion:

Why do you think Dorothy Hughes chose to tell the story in third person rather than first person, given she stays with the main character's – Dickson (Dix) Steele's – point-of-view?

In what ways does Hughes give us a sense of place of post war Los Angeles?

How does Hughes reveal the cracks in Steele's psyche as we come to

understand he is an unreliable observer of his own life and actions?

While the reader is only privy to Steele's inner thoughts, how does Hughes use dialogue and reactions to show what the women Steele knows, Laurel Grey and Sylvia Nicolai, think of him?

How does her main character subvert the image of the '50s American male? For instance he's a WWII vet who saw combat, part of the "Greatest Generation," but unlike his fellow vet, LAPD detective Brub Nicolai, feels the world owes him a living.

Hughes crafts a novel about horrible behavior without showing that behavior – though certainly its effects. How does this differ from other such novels? Is it more effective or less?

What distinguishes psychological suspense from other types of mystery and crime novels?

What are the main ingredients of a noir story?

Why do you think Hughes decided to have Steele pretend he was writing a detective novel? Was this more than just a throwaway or deeper commentary?

How are the elements of social commentary woven into the crime story of IN A LONELY PLACE?



PRESIDENT'S Rap Sheet – Naomi Hirahara

SAVE OUR LIBRARIES



As I suspect was the case with many of you, my love for books and reading was incubated and nurtured at my local public library. My neighborhood library was a magical place (and still exists today). Surrounded by cedar trees, Altadena Public Library sits in a residential area close to the base of the San Gabriel Foothills. Many a time I walked across a simple wooden bridge to the doors of the library, my arms full of books and my cheeks flushed with the anticipation of getting some new ones to replace what I was returning.

Doing library visits today as a published writer, is a joy. During the past month and a half, I've done three, and two of them within the Los Angeles Public Library system were bittersweet. For while we were celebrating the book, both branch librarians informed their patrons that the library hours were being cut—in fact, their facilities would face another day of closure. The Little Tokyo branch librarian was hoping Saturday would not be the fated day, as Saturday drew the most users.

While bookstores are struggling with how to attract people to come through its brick-and-mortar doors, the library is more popular than ever. The library has changed over the years, integrating high-technology and computers early in its operation. With our economic recession, the library is attracting the unemployed and underemployed, who use the computers and Internet access to look up job opportunities. Those seeking to save their pennies and nickels come to the library to check out books and DVDs. Public programs, like the ones that I've been participating in, are type of townspeople gatherings, even more important in tough, uncertain times. And any federal employee knows that when it comes to tax, voting or Census forms, the library is one of the best places for information dissemination.

Certain published authors view the library with derision. They see libraries eroding their royalty checks and point to potential book buyers checking out their books for free instead of buying them. However, I think the opposite is true. First of all, libraries are a significant customer base. According to the American Library Association <http://www.ala.org/ala/professionalresources/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet01.cfm>, there are 9,221 public libraries in the United States. Add the close to 100,000 school libraries as well as private, college and governmental libraries and you have a staggering total number of 122,573. Imagine if each of them carried your book—you'd definitely be a bestseller, making you and your publisher extremely happy.

And if you're a debut or unknown writer, the library is the best place for new writers to get a taste of your work. If they like what they read, they will request that their library buy your next, or even better, enthusiastically open their wallet to buy your books.

So news that our libraries are facing drastic cuts to their services, staffs and budgets are definitely not good for us, members of SoCal Mystery Writers of America. How can we stem the tide of reduced library funding? First, you can get informed by going to the web site, www.savethelibrary.org. Library activists are staging read-ins at the Los Angeles mayor's residence and joining other activist groups to protest the budget cuts. Sample letters to be sent to the mayor and city council are available there.

Of course, this crisis extends far beyond the LAPL system—it's touched every community within the United States. I received an e-mail from book guru Carol Fitzgerald, who advises the following:

- + Write your Senators impassioned letters on what libraries have meant and mean to you today. The more personal the note, the more effective.
- + Write an Op-Ed piece or other article for your local paper.
- + Visit your local library and ask how you can support them on a local or state level with letters or rally or meeting appearances.

The Florida chapter of MWA has taken an even more active collective approach. They worked with the Florida Library Association and other writing groups to successfully lobby the state legislature to restore some funding to the Florida library system. If you have some strong opinions about this approach for SoCal MWA, send your comments my way (bachi@naomihirahara.com).

And last of all, I just learned what was the decision regarding LAPL closures. All 72 branches will be closed on Sundays and now Mondays, effective July 18. At least Saturday was preserved, but who knows what will happen next.

WRITE MIND**“The Long View”**

By Dennis Palumbo

I saw a full-page ad in a magazine recently that made my jaw drop. It showed a guy wearing some kind of glitzed-up, New Age headphones, smiling blissfully, above copy announcing a break-through in consciousness-raising technology. The headline read, “You’ll be meditating like a Buddha in 30 minutes!”

In retrospect, I’m surprised I was so surprised. After all, this is the era of the quick fix. Look at our TV ads and infomercials: “Great Abs in Eight Minutes!” “One Month to Financial Security!” “Speak French Like A Frenchman–In One Day!”

Thinking about that magazine ad, it occurred to me that this same kind of quick-fix mentality now pervades the industry that’s grown up around writing in recent years. “How to Write a Best-Seller in One Month!” “Write A Movie in 7 Days!” “Create 10 Great Characters Before Lunch!” Books, tapes and seminars promising a short ride to fame and fortune.

Such fantasies are fueled, too, by the occasional “overnight success”—the spec screenplay that goes for big money, the best-selling crime thriller by some unknown author. What’s their secret? we wonder. What tricks do I need to learn?—and *fast!*

To be fair, many writing workshops can and do offer valuable craft tips, and often provide a much-needed jump-start for struggling writers. But they miss what I call “the long view.”

I’m not talking about writers needing patience (which they do). Or resilience (another crucial ingredient). I’m

not even referring to the steady growth of craft, and a deepening commitment to one’s authentic voice, that come as a natural by-product of a mature writing process.

I’m referring to something more basic. Strange as it may seem in this era of IM’s, Twitter and instant Kindle downloads, I’m suggesting that writers *slow down*.

Let me explain. My problem with the “how-to” books and seminars that promise quick results is not the array of “sure-fire techniques” and “writing rules” they espouse. For one thing, some of these rules are so necessary for narrative cohesion and the creation of relatable characters that it would be foolish not to learn them. Besides, there *is* some wisdom in the notion that you have to learn the rules before you can artfully bend them.

No, it’s not the techniques I object to, but rather the subtextual *message* of such approaches: that of supporting a short-term, goal-oriented, “hitting the bull’s-eye” kind of life for a writer.

Being a writer—with all its successes and failures, raptures and rejections—is a life-long endeavor. Less a career choice than a calling, its rewards are often so private and ambiguous as to be inexpressible. It’s as much a perspective on things, a way of organizing one’s experience, as it is a job.

John Fowles opens his novel *Daniel Martin* with this sentence: “Whole

sight—or all the rest is desolation.” Seeing things whole, having the long view, is the only way to live the writer’s life. It’s committing yourself to a concept of writing as an integral, ongoing part of your life, instead of just a series of external events—good or bad reviews, deals made and lost, great or awful days at the keyboard. It’s seeing your writing life as though it stretched to the horizon—all the up’s and down’s, hills and valleys, smoothed and flattened out from this lengthened perspective. By slowing down, by taking the long view, you’ll be better able to listen to your own instincts. Such as writing urgently when possessed by it, or taking a workshop to jog the machinery into higher gear; but always with a sense of expansiveness, of adding on experiences and skills to the unfolding tapestry of your creative life. Rather than a desperate chase after this year’s hip new writing technique, or bending your talent to this season’s hot topic or genre.

Having the long view is being both energized and relaxed, enthusiastic and patient. It’s knowing in the marrow of your bones this one paradoxical fact: Writing’s been around a long time, and

will probably continue at least as long, and yet it always happens in the here-and-now.

The Shakers had a saying: “Live as though you had ten thousand years, or ten minutes.” That’s about just doing your work, day in and day out, forging your process out of the raw materials of your experience. Keeping your focus in the tension between building craft in the now, and holding hope for the future.

For a writer, that’s keeping the long view.

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), DENNIS PALUMBO is now a licensed psychotherapist specializing in creative issues. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine, The Strand Magazine and elsewhere, and was recently collected in From Crime to Crime (Tallfellow Press.) His first crime novel, Mirror Image, will be out in August from Poisoned Pen Press. For more info, visit www.dennispalumbo.com

ON THE FAST TRACK

by Darrell James

Very few first-time authors arrive on the scene to immediate acclaim. More typically it takes several years and a number of books in the market to begin to build a national following or to garner award recognition. But for two talented SoCal debut authors, Stephen Jay Schwartz and Attica Locke, the wait has been short and sweet.

Stephen Jay Schwartz’s first novel BOULEVARD has achieved recognition right out of the gates, hitting the L.A. Times Best Seller list and drawing acclaim from both readers and reviewers alike. Set in current day Los Angeles, BOULEVARD introduces us to L.A. Homicide Detective, Hayden Glass, who struggles with a haunting past and his own sex addiction, as he investigates a string of heinous crimes, the work of a sadistic sexual predator.>>>

Attica Locke's first novel **BLACK WATER RISING**, garnered a 2010 Edgar Nomination for Best First Novel and was a finalist for the prestigious 2009 Los Angeles Times Book Award. In **BLACK WATER RISING**, Jay Porter is hardly the lawyer he set out to be. His most promising client is a low-rent call girl, and he runs his fledgling law practice out of a dingy strip mall. Houston, Texas, 1981. It's here that Jay believes he can make a fresh start, until the night he impulsively saves a drowning woman's life and opens a Pandora's Box of secrets. But before he can get to the bottom of a tangled mystery that reaches into the upper echelons of Houston's corporate powerbrokers, Jay must confront the demons of his own past.

Stephen and Attica have something in common besides crafting gripping first novels. Both authors have screenwriting backgrounds.

Stephen spent a number of years as Director of Development for the film director Wolfgang Peterson where he worked on such film projects as **Air Force One**, **Outbreak**, **Red Corner**, **Bicentennial Man**, and **Mighty Joe Young**.

Attica has written movie and television scripts for Paramount, Warner Bros, Disney, Twentieth Century Fox, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, HBO, Dreamworks and Silver Pictures.

What's behind the stellar success of these two authors? Is it an innate gift for masterful storytelling? Their experience with feature film? Or is it something more?

Your chance to find out is coming on July 17th where I will be talking with both of these acclaimed debut authors at the SoCal MWA luncheon. The event starts at 11:00 a.m. and will held at Tom Bergin's Tavern and Restaurant, 840 S. Fairfax Avenue, Los Angles.

Don't miss out on this opportunity to meet Stephen and Attica and find out what's behind their extraordinary success. Lunch is \$15.00 for members, \$20.00 for non-members. Make your reservation by mail or through PayPal at our website:

<http://www.socalmwa.com/>

CREATIVITY STUDY

Researchers in the Department of Psychology at the University of California Santa Barbara are currently seeking highly creative individuals from a wide variety of fields to participate in a study on the creative process. This study will take a novel approach to creativity research by focusing on the process of creative insight as *it unfolds in daily life*. Using this approach, researchers hope to uncover valuable information about how psychological factors and life circumstances interact to give rise to creative insight.

Participants will be asked to complete a convenient nightly online survey regarding their creative ideas. The survey takes fifteen minutes or less a night and we ask that you complete it for one week (7 days). All participants will be entered into a raffle for a \$100 gift card for Barnes and Noble.

If you'd like to participate, please click [here](#) for more information on the study and a link to the first questionnaire.

If you have any questions regarding the study, please contact Dr. Jonathan Schooler at schoolerlab@gmail.com, or Dr. Shelly Gable at gable@psych.ucsb.edu. We would be most appreciative of your participation and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Conference Calendar

Conferences: See them all! <http://www.newpages.com/writing-conferences/>

Desert Sleuths chapter Sisters in Crime's presents their upcoming conference
Write Now! 2010 – Phoenix, AZ, August 14, 2010 - <http://www.desertsleuths.com/>

Registration for The Muse Online Writers Conference begins! This is a FREE online conference!
Deadline to register is August 15th. After that, there will be a \$5 charge. There are plenty of topics,
panels, and discussion groups to help you with your favorite genre. And it's FREE!
<http://tinyurl.com/28bhydww>

Your Editor Speaks—Jeri Westerson

Writing for a living is pretty tricky. In fact, I'm not there yet. I did quit my part time day job but I think it a temporary aberration more than a permanent condition. Mores the pity,



because the luxury of writing all day is an eye-opener. I'm on a new streamlined approach of getting down ten pages a day on my new medieval mystery series, hoping to get a first draft in my hands in two months rather than the nine I did previously, with a possible third series on my plate as well. But in between writing, I now have to do the laundry and clean the house occasionally, a lot of which I got out of because, hell, I was working two jobs before, at least that was my argument to get out of doing despised housework. Despite having to occasionally dump clothes in the washing machine, I've been getting some short story writing in there, and maybe an article or two for some magazines. Just writing! And speaking of writing, in this month's newsletter, I urge you to read Dennis Palumbo's column on page 3 where he takes a look at the "Long View" of a writer's career. Maybe it's always been tough. Maybe it's tougher now. It's certainly tough during a recession when book sales are down all around. Also, check out Jackie Houchin's column "Snap Shots" on page 11 where she talks about where to get article ideas. I think there's a short story in there somewhere. Email me, if you like, at themarchofcrime@gmail.com.

CRITIQUE GROUP LOOKING FOR MEMBERS

Several of us (members of MWA) have a critique group. We need some new members and would like to recruit YOU. Critique group needs one or two mystery writers. We've been meeting every two weeks for over ten years in the Pasadena area. Our membership consists of both pre-published and published writers, and our genres include mystery, suspense, thrillers and, recently, horror, novels and short stories. Our dates and times are flexible, but we seem to stick to Sunday mornings. Please contact Dorothy at 626-799-2269 if you're interested.

CHAPTER NEWS & TRANSOM NOTES

Robert S. Levinson has a new short story, "Who Murdered Mama?" scheduled for publication in the next issue of Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, while another, "The Killing of Stacey Janes," has been acquired by Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine...Bob's ninth mystery thriller, A RHUMBA IN WALTZ TIME, is set for 2011 publication, on the heels of his current THE TRAITOR IN US ALL...Also on tap: a "Men of Mystery" panel appearance at the Burbank Public Library Buena Vista branch, Saturday, July 10, 2-3 p.m. ~~~ Launch party for **Sheila Lowe's** LAST WRITES, to be released on July 6. Chapter members are invited to Ventura for the party, which will once again be held at the Wedgewood Banquet Center at Buenaventura Golf Course. RSVPs needed to confirm date: sheila@sheilalowe.com or phone: (805) 658-0109. Sheila's other signings: July 10 - 2:00 Book 'em 1118 Mission St., South Pasadena, CA; July 11 - 1:00 Mystery Ink Goldenwest Plaza 7176 Edinger Ave., Huntington Beach, CA; July 17 - 12:00 Mysteries to Die For 2940 T. O. Blvd., Thousand Oaks, CA; July 24 - 3:00 The Mystery Bookstore 1036-C Broxton Ave., Los Angeles, CA; July 31 - 1:30 Aunt Agatha's Books 213 S. Fourth Ave., Ann Arbor, MI; August 12 - 6:30 Murder by the Book 2342 Bissonnet St., Houston TX; August 13 - 7:00 The Poisoned Pen 4014 N. Goldwater Blvd., Scottsdale AZ; August 14 Sisters in Crime (Conference speaker) Wrigley Mansion 2501 E. Telawa Trail, Phoenix, AZ.~~~**Gregg Hurwitz's**, THEY'RE WATCHING, comes out July 7. He'll be on tour (check out www.gregghurwitz.net for dates) as well as joining a great faculty for the Book Passage Mystery Conference July 23rd.~~~**Jerl Westerson's** second Crispin Guest novel, SERPENT IN THE THORNS, is a finalist for the Macavity, the Sue Feder Historical Mystery Award.~~~**Sunny Kreis Collins'** book KILL THE CLOCK just hit Amazon.com, the first in the Frédérique Bonnaire mystery series. ~~~ To mark the 20th anniversary of his first novel, **Paul Levine** has released TO SPEAK FOR THE DEAD as an e-book with all proceeds to the Four Diamonds Fund at Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital for cancer research and treatment. The novel was the first of the Jake Lassiter series, which continues in 2011, after a 13-year hiatus, with the hardcover publication of LASSITER by Bantam. More information at <http://www.paul-levine.com/content/jake-lassiter.asp>.



Third Annual Minotaur Books/Mystery Writers of America First Crime Novel Competition

The winner will be offered a publishing contract with an advance of \$10,000.

Manuscripts must be postmarked by 11/30/2010.

For guidelines and to request an entry form, visit

<http://www.mysterywriters.org/?q=Contests-Writers>

Mystery Ink Selling Murder Again

By Jeri Westerson

It's an oft told tale. Another independent bookstore is forced to close its doors, these sometimes long-time establishments can't make it in the world of e-books, Amazon, and a recession.

But don't draw a chalk line around independent bookstores just yet.

Mystery Ink is a charming new bookstore



in Huntington Beach, with small beachy gift items displayed on its shelves along side shelves and shelves of mystery books crammed with murder. It opened just this spring. Or should I say, *re*-opened, because what makes this bookstore different is that it was opened once before in 1991 in Laguna Beach. After devastating fires in October of 1993, and the subsequent floods and mudslides, businesses in that area never recovered and a promising bookstore closed its doors.

But owner Debbie Mitsch never lost heart. She stored her stacks of books—right on the bookshelves—in her garage and began selling books for authors and celebrities at events. “I organized over 20 authors to do signings at the (American Library Association) Conferences,” said Mitsch. “Comedian, talk show host, Steve Allen was one of my more memorable authors that I used to set up for events.”

Before bookselling was in her blood, Mitsch was born and raised in Los Angeles, and found herself attending college in Orange, California. Because of her love of reading, she became an English Lit major but later found success in the financial field. It wasn't until about 20 years later that she read about a mystery bookstore in New York and saw the movie, “Crossing Delancy.”

“It gave me the idea to open a mystery bookstore,” she said. She visited other bookstores and talked to one owner of an independent book shop in Huntington Beach, who gave her advice on how to open her own. She then took a business class and set about opening Mystery Ink.

Specializing in mystery books became Mitsch's forte and she began getting her feet wet in murder with a large cache of signed first editions, some 300 of them. She learned of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America through working with authors. And she soon began selling books for authors at outside events as a natural progression from her in-store venues. “The authors would ask me to provide books for them at their other engagements, plus I was getting calls on a regular basis from libraries who were

looking for speakers.” Mitsch continues to reserve engagements for select authors and is looking to expand that business. Even

more so now. “I need to support the store!” she said.

It was a long hiatus of just selling books from her website and at author events. Anxious to get back into a brick and mortar store, Mitsch came across a card and gift shop in Huntington Beach called “California Greetings,” that was in the process of closing its doors. She convinced the owner, Debbie Moussafir, to go into business with her, creating a new store featuring mystery books and Moussafir’s inventory of gift items, all under the Mystery Ink name.

Mitsch has no current plans to offer coffee or scones, but she is looking into

selling e-books from the store and expects to rework her website.

Authors like Jeffrey Deaver, Gregg Hurwitz, and Christopher Rice are some of the first to sign again at Mystery Ink.

Mitsch has big plans to make crime pay.

Mystery Ink is located at Golden West Plaza 7176 Edinger Ave., Huntington Beach, CA 92647 (714) 960-4000
<http://www.mysteryink.com>.

SAVE THE DATE !

SoCal Mystery Writers of America Presents

“ON THE FAST TRACK With Highly Acclaimed Debut Authors”

Stephen Jay Schwartz and Attica Locke

Time: 11:00 a.m. Date: July 17th

Where: Tom Bergins Tavern & Restaurant 840 S. Fairfax Avenue Los Angeles

Cost: Members \$15.00, Non-members \$20.00

Visit <http://www.socalmwa.com/home.htm> to RSVP and pay via PayPal

Topic: What's behind these debut author's instant rise to success? Is it masterful storytelling? Powerful marketing? Or more? Authors Stephen Jay Schwartz and Attica Locke have both had phenomenal success for their first novels. Schwartz with his L.A. Times Best Selling novel BOULEVARD and Locke with BLACK WATER RISING, which was nominated for both a 2010 Edgar and the L.A. Times Book Award.

"Soon-to-be" Debut Author Darrell James will moderate. Together they will go behind the scenes with these two author and discuss their fast track to success.

Stephen Jay Schwartz spent a number of years as Director of Development for the film director Wolfgang Peterson where he worked with writers, producers and studio executives to develop screenplays for production. Among the film projects he helped develop are Air Force One, Outbreak, Red Corner, Bicentennial Man, and Mighty Joe Young. A filmmaker in his own right, Stephen has worked as a screenwriter and freelance script doctor. His writing credits include Inside The Space Station, narrated by Liam Neeson. >>>

His L.A. Times Best selling, **BOULEVARD**, is a very dark crime thriller set in modern day Los Angeles. It is Stephen's first novel, and was sold as part of a two-book deal to Forge Books (an imprint of MacMillan Publishing). He lives in Southern California with his wife and two young boys.

Attica Locke is a writer whose first novel, **BLACK WATER RISING**, was nominated for a 2010 Edgar Award, a 2010 NAACP Image Award, as well as a Los Angeles Times Book Prize and was long-listed for an Orange Prize in the UK. Attica is also a screenwriter who has written movie and television scripts for Paramount, Warner Bros, Disney, Twentieth Century Fox, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, HBO, Dreamworks and Silver Pictures. She was also a fellow at the Sundance Institute's Feature Filmmakers Lab and is a graduate of Northwestern University. A native of Houston, Texas, Attica lives in Los Angeles, California, with her husband and daughter. She is currently at work on her second book.

Darrell James (Moderator) has had twenty-four short stories published in numerous mystery magazines and book anthologies. He is a 2009 Derringer Awards finalist for his story "The Art of Avarice" and his personal odyssey to publication appears in the *Writer's Digest* book **HOW I GOT PUBLISHED**, along with J.A. Jance, David Morrell, Clive Cussler, and many other notable authors. His first novel in the Del Shannon series of mystery/thrillers is currently under contract with Midnight Ink (an imprint of Llewellyn Worldwide Publishing). Book one is scheduled for release in September 2011. Darrell holds residence in both Pasadena, CA and Tucson, Arizona with his wife and publicist Diana.

Don' t Forget August 22 Meeting

Mike Sayre, LAPD (ret.), spent over 30 years with the Los Angeles Police Department. During his time with the LAPD he worked 12 years in field assignments, 4 years as a field supervisor, 2 years in Internal Affairs, and his last 13 years as a Training Supervisor in various assignments. As a firearms supervisor he conducted training and qualification to over nine thousand officers, developed the Weapons Inspection Program, and the Continuing Education Deployment Plan for firearms training. He was instrumental in the development and supervising of the Department's Shotgun Slug and Urban Police Rifle Program.



2011 Writers in Residence Application Now Available!

Repeatedly writers say they are able to begin, develop, and complete work at Hedgebrook that they would not have done otherwise.

"For long hours of peace, lost in the labyrinth of memory, I sat at the windows of Meadowhouse, surrounded by protective fir trees, and wrote most of *The Horse on Our Balcony*. It would not have been possible to write this had I not been here." - Carolyn Forché (*Meadowhouse*, 2009)

Hedgebrook alums, like Carolyn, often tell us about their experience being a Writer in Residence and how it changed their lives. How did your residency change your life? Help grow the Hedgebrook community by sharing your story—and this opportunity—with a friend. Visit us at www.hedgebrook.org

2197 Millman Road, Langley, WA 98260 - 360-321-4786 | 216 1st Avenue S, Seattle, WA 98104 - 206-325-6773 Hedgebrook is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and all donations are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law.

SNAP SHOTS: Ideas for Articles and Profiles

By Jackie Houchin

I'm not a fiction writer, but I still get asked the question, "Where do you get your ideas?" What they mean is, where do I find interesting people and events to write about. My answer, like yours, is "everywhere."

Editor Assignments

When I first started writing for a local newspaper, the editor sent me out on specific story assignments: a quadriplegic who'd lived 20 years on life support (that actually turned out to be his mom's story), a man who built model airplanes, a sculptress who made marble look sensual, a window muralist, an orchestra conductor, a trailer park scandal, a middle school with security issues, burglaries at a church and a neighborhood market, and my recent 3-part story on Women in the LAPD.

He also assigned profiles on local businesses (including a medical "pot" dispensary) and a variety of ethnic restaurants. Easy, right? Just go where I'm told. Yes, that's true, and I did get some "spin-off" stories from those assignments.

Observation

But what is interesting is that I began to "see" my own stories everywhere. A man in front of me at Starbucks had a crossword puzzle on his T-shirt. I remarked on it and we started talking. I learned he created personalized puzzles for businesses, individuals, and magazines. He and his business made a great story!

Driving from Costco one day I saw a man walking a giant Tortoise along the sidewalk. I slammed on the brakes and pulled to the curb, utterly fascinated. He agreed to an interview and photo shoot, and after spending a delightful morning with the two friends, I wrote "Walking Newman." It was featured in the Daily News newspaper – front page, "above the fold!"

Browsing in the Flintridge Bookstore one morning, I watched their barista make a latte

for a customer. He showed an unusual amount of pride as he handed over the cup. Turns out, he was a "latte artist." He agreed to show me how he did it. I took notes (and photos) on each step of his creative process, including the foam artwork atop the brew. They still have a faded copy of the newspaper story in a frame on their counter.

While pumping gas one afternoon, I noticed a small faded sign across the boulevard that read "Adventure in Postcards." I investigated, and found a little shop crammed with antique and collectible postcards, thousands of them all categorized and labeled in shoeboxes on shelves. The reclusive woman gave me a fascinating interview and photo for my story.

Friends & Family Referrals

Friends are also great resources for story ideas. From their suggestions, I wrote a series on a local Toastmasters chapter; two stories on a Pet Detective who uses her bloodhounds to find lost pets; an exciting account of a young swimmer's experience in the "Escape from Alcatraz" competition; and an elderly couple's 75 years together (with several pithy observations on marriage).

Collectors & Hobbyists

"Crafty" people always make good subjects. I discovered a woman who made sweater-coats for dogs and vintage (1920's) dresses for women. Another collected almost 2,000 Santa Claus ornaments.

My hubby is a hot-rod enthusiast. His contacts netted me stories about car clubs (one donates generously to the City of Hope, another collects toys for kids at Christmas). A man stopped by to admire our flashy-red Roadster and began talking about the vintage airplanes he restores. I got some terrific photos and a story about his current plane (and the ones he's crashed).

Unusual Occupations

A local Alpaca rancher, a magician who encourages kids to read books, a man who drives a cesspool pumper truck (Oh the things they find in those portable potties!), and a team of hunky lifeguards with life/death rescue stories were all great subjects.

A family-owned Art Glass company promised to be an interesting profile, but the grandfather's tale of how he'd earned his apprenticeship restoring the ancient glass in England's Canterbury Cathedral after WW II made a better story.

My horseshoer and veterinarian were fodder for interesting equine stories. The artsy photo I took of the shoer ended up in Country Magazine, the equine dentistry shots on the good doctor's website. (Note: it helps to be able to "shoot" your subjects.)

Event notices

Pay attention to the signs and banners announcing upcoming events. An official "flag-burning" ceremony hosted by the American legion, a holiday musical at an elementary school, and a horse trail dedication (with local politicians present) got ink too.

I also scope local newspapers and newsletters for upcoming events that sound interesting. An announcement about an FBI Agent speaking on Identity Theft resulted in one story, a local newsletter on pets (and two brief interviews) resulted in "Pet Scanners" and "Protecting Pets in Hot Weather."

These are only some of the places you can find story ideas. Use your natural curiosity, your observation skills, your contacts, and various announcements/notices. Soon you will have more articles than you have time to write.

Jackie Houchin is a freelance writer, book reviewer, and theatre critic. She's a member of MWA, SinC, and CWC.

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NEXT MEETING

ON THE FAST TRACK With Highly Acclaimed Debut Authors

Stephen Jay Schwartz and Attica Locke

Saturday, July 17, 11:00 a.m.
 Tom Bergins Tavern & Restaurant
 840 S. Fairfax Avenue, LA
 Cost: Members \$15.00,
 Non-members \$20.00

Visit <http://www.socalmwa.com/home.htm> to RSVP and pay via PayPal

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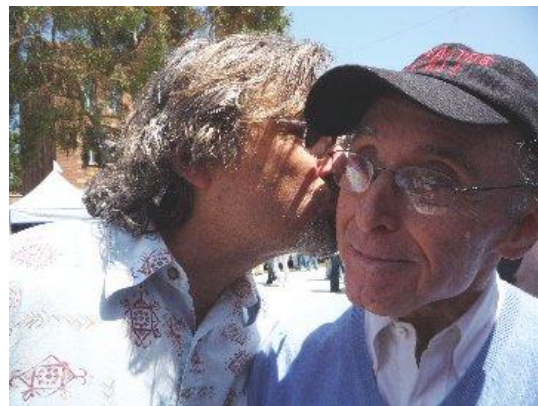
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LAST WORD



Traditional greeting of MWA-Los Angeles past presidents illustrated by Nathan Walpow (left) and Robert S. Levinson during the LATimes book fest.