Deadlines to Dead Bodies
by Jonathon King

I recall the story with a reporter’s clarity. It began as a medical piece I was writing on the open-heart surgery of an infant, a tiny boy born with a defect and no alternative. I met his parents — a cop and an attorney — and they were open and intelligent and held back little. I followed the procedure, the worrisome recovery, the failure, and then months later I witnessed the eventual transplant.

I watched as the heart from one dead child was placed into the chest of one I’d come to know. I filled notebooks with quotes and details and observations. I took my own kids to the boy’s first birthday party. I got close. Then I had to write the boy’s obituary. He died at the age of 20 months.

“You know, Jon. We knew it was coming, but it was so hard,” the mother told me the day her son died in her arms. “He was so innocent of everything he’d been through. The last word he said was ‘Elmo.’”

I used that detail, a child’s last word, Elmo, in the lead paragraph of my obit to capture what that story was all about: Innocence. Not medical technology or ethics or science. It was humanity I was after.

So what does that vignette have to do with journalists making the jump to writing novels? Maybe I should let mystery author Rick Mofina answer that.

“As newspaper reporters, we often have to humanize people facing the worst life can throw at them, so that readers can feel a communion with that experience,” Mofina said. “Our job is to seize a reader’s attention and say this is important and this is why — and you don’t hit them over the head with big words, you stab them in the heart with life’s details.

“Journalese, when done well, is kind of an urban poetry, conveying emotion, empathy, fear, hope, outrage with sparse, plain language while facing an impossible deadline and dealing with your own emotions as you are often the filter of these matters. I think that gives ex-reporters a different dynamic that they bring to crime fiction.”

Mofina’s journalism career spans three decades working as a crime reporter in several newsrooms in Canada. His novels have won wide praise and the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Novel in 2003.

Like Rick, some of my favorite crime mystery authors are former newspaper people: Michael Connelly, Robert Ferrigno, Laura Lippman, T. Jefferson Parker, Denise Hamilton.

It’s a recognized club. We’re like ex-prosecutors, ex-cops, ex-medical examiners, ex-soldiers, sailors, tinkers, spies.

But because we were “writers” in our past lives, we come with a hook: Hey, you guys cheat. You already got paid to know all this shoot’em-up, police procedures, investigatory parameters, mind-of-the-serial-killer stuff. The rest of us had to learn it from scratch on our own time.

Make Your Reservation for Edgar® Week now!

Planning to attend this year’s Edgar® ceremonies? The Grand Hyatt Hotel is offering a heavily discounted room rate of $245/night for the week of April 23-27, 2007. This is almost $100 off the regular room rate.

To qualify for this rate, you MUST book your reservations by March 15, 2007. Call 800-233-1234 or 212-233-1234 and ask for the “MWA” rate.

’twas the season

Submitted by Midwest MWA chapter

It just wouldn’t be a holiday season without holiday parties. The Midwest MWA chapter held theirs at the Oak Park, IL, home of Alex and Allen Matthews. Everyone brought food to share and the chapter provided the main entrees — chicken, beef, and pasta — so there were plenty of appetizers, drinks, and desserts to go around.

We all chatted and ate before we got down to the serious business of having fun. Jim Doherty put a lot of effort into his game of Mystery Jeopardy and we all enjoyed it. Since there were a few non-mystery reading spouses in attendance, Jim made certain that some questions could be answered even by those without an extensive background in the genre. An excellent time was had by all.

Our thanks go out to the Matthews for their gracious hospitality.
Mystery Writers of America’s national board finished a very productive 2006 with a bang, approving several new initiatives, including the hiring of a firm to design and update MWA’s website.

The MWA board voted to contract with The Book Reporter Network to design the new website, which will include a searchable database of pages for individual authors. The $90,000 contract covers creating content (news, contests, lists) for the website as well as maintenance and hosting.

All through 2006, the national board focused on raising MWA’s profile nationwide, and two new partnerships will generate even more publicity.

The board voted to partner with the “America’s Best-Selling Authors” radio show in a cross-promotion effort. No money will change hands, but the radio show wants to feature MWA authors, and the show and MWA will link to each other on their websites.

“America’s Best Selling Authors” is broadcast exclusively on CBS affiliate stations and Crawford Broadcasting in Southern and Northern California, Denver and the Midwest, Dallas, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia every Saturday. The series also broadcasts on digital high definition radio worldwide via the internet.

In another coup of free publicity, MWA will co-sponsor Sara Paretsky’s appearance at the Library of Congress’ Center for the Book in February. The MWA board also is exploring the possibility of co-sponsoring, with St. Martin’s Press, a Best First Mystery Novel Contest (for unpublished manuscripts). Details are still being hammered out, but the contest could begin as soon as 2007.

In other business, the board:

• Authorized MWA:Reads (formerly Kids Love a Mystery) to conduct its second annual Joan Lowery Nixon Award mystery writing contest (see page 9).
• Approved a $1,500 funding request from the Northwest Chapter to help pay for an MWA event at Left Coast Crime 2007 in Seattle.
• Approved the 2007 budget and the 2005 audit report, both of which showed that MWA is in very good financial condition. The board also voted to again retain the firm of Schall & Ashenfarb to do the 2006 audit.
• Approved adding members Kathleen Ernest and Amy Alessio to the MWA:Reads Committee.

--Steve Brewer

Like many authors, I’m also a promoter and a reader. I enjoy digesting anything that pertains to mysteries, and I pay close attention to what the mystery magazines have to say. I always look forward to my next issue of Mystery Scene. As I read the magazine, I wonder how other authors manage to get their books reviewed. How do they get their names mentioned in this prestigious magazine? Editor Kate Stine and Mystery Scene publisher Brian Skupin will answer these questions and many more on the next Murder Must Air, Tuesday, January 9 at 8 PM Central.

For February’s show, I’m switching gears and will be focusing on how we can get Hollywood to notice our books. My guests will be Director/Producer Rona Edwards and Artistic and Programming Director Monika Skerbelis. Together they co-authored the critically acclaimed book, I Liked It, Didn’t Love It: Screenplay Development from the Inside Out. This show will air on Tuesday, February 13 at 8 PM Central.

To listen to these shows, dial toll-free 866-212-0875 from the USA, or 866-212-7554 from Canada, or 978-964-0049 Direct Global Toll. When prompted, punch in the participant passcode: 7629501#. During the last fifteen minutes of the show, I’ll open all lines so that my guests can receive questions directly from you, the listeners. You can also e-mail questions and suggestions for future guests and topics to ontheair@mysterywriters.org.

Did you miss December’s show, when the Lipstick Chronicle Booktarts discussed blogging? They gave very solid advice about blogging and after listening to them, I can see why their blog is so successful. The MWA website Members Only section has archives of this show and others.

L. C. Hayden’s last mystery What Others Know was a Left Coast Crime Award Nominee. Her newest book, Why Casey Had to Die, was a Dec. 2006 release.
Florida
The Florida Chapter has a full plate for the next four months. On Jan. 20, we hold our monthly meeting at the Westin with many of the authors of the great short story anthology Miami Noir. In February, Barbara Parker gives a before-and-after lecture on point of view and, in March, Kris Montee talks about developing a new series from old characters. From April 19–22, we host SleuthFest on Miami Beach. All MWA members are urged to register before Jan. 15 at www.sleuthfest.com because prices go up after that date.

Mid-Atlantic
The new year brings many changes for the Mid-Atlantic Chapter, and we reluctantly say farewell to Noreen Wald, founder of our Chapter and Chapter President for the past four years. Noreen will be the featured speaker at our Chapter dinner meeting on Tues., Jan. 9. We hope many MWA members will attend and help us say 'thank you' to Noreen for all her hard work and dedication. Although we will miss Noreen, we welcome award-winning author Laura Durham as our new Chapter President.

On Jan. 22, Chapters: A Literary Bookstore will host Patrick Hyde during their monthly mystery brownbag lunch. Patrick will discuss his debut thriller The Only Pure Thing.

February brings best-selling author Linda Fairstein to our Chapter dinner on Feb. 6. We look forward to an exciting evening!

Midwest
We will not be holding a Chapter meeting in January. (We almost got snowed out for the holiday party as it was!) Our Feb. 4 meeting will be held in conjunction with the Love Is Murder conference. However, Indianapolis, will be hosting a satellite meeting in January with Beverle Graves Myers, mystery author and retired psychiatrist, as the speaker. Her presentation, "Mad or Bad? Mental Illness in the Courtroom," will cover criminal responsibility (the insanity defense), competency to stand trial, and other forensic mental health issues of interest to writers. This meeting will be held Jan. 6 at 1:00 pm at the Mystery Company in Carmel, IN.

New England
The New England MWA chapter is planning a three-hour tour of the Norfolk County Sheriff’s Office and Correctional Center, the only jail in the county, and perhaps the world, located on the median of an interstate highway. The Correctional Center was uniquely designed to accommodate the site between the northbound and southbound lanes of Route 128 in Dedham, MA. The crime writers will see the entire facility from the booking area to the cell blocks and the common rooms. At the end of the tour, the group will have the opportunity to listen to a selected group of inmates tell their personal stories of how they landed in jail, and to ask them questions. Those interested in the tour should contact Judy Copek at jcopek@aol.com.

New York
Retired CIA Commander Gary Berntsen and DEA Special Agent in Charge John Gilbride of the NY Field Division spoke at our November dinner meeting about their personal experiences inside governments and terrorist organizations. Their stories spanned the globe from Tora Bora to the jungles of Colombia, reported member Lois Karlin, a freelance writer, who is working on a "rural noir" novel.

Describing how CIA operatives target human sources to provide intelligence, Berntsen said that he conducted many efforts to woo and win informants. "I'd keep asking them questions about things they shouldn't tell us," Berntsen said. "If they crossed the line and compromised themselves, we'd confront them with what they'd done. We didn't trap people." He explained that willing recruits provided quality information, unlike those who felt coerced.

Northern California
The January 2007 Norcal MWA Lunch Meeting and Author Panel will be held Jan. 18, at John's Grill, in San Francisco. The topic: "What do you wish you had known that you didn't know before you were published?"

Publishers writers will talk about getting agents, divorcing agents, contracts, writing series vs. standalone, and working with editors and publishing houses. Also, the unwritten rules about editor etiquette, how to talk nice to a publicist -- and get what you want, changing publishers mid-stream (the do's and don'ts), and smaller houses and big ones -- what's the difference in the publishing world?

The panelists will be Rhys Bowen, Mary O'Shaughnessy (co-writer of the Perri O'Shaughnessy novels), Tony Broadbent, and Domenic Stansberry.

Northwest
On Dec. 8, F.X. McCrory's in downtown Seattle was the scene of a festive holiday dinner thrown by the chapter board of MWA-NW. A great time was had by all attendees.

Don't forget that MWA-NW is the host chapter for 2007's Left Coast Crime in Seattle this year. If you're coming to LCC, make sure to check out the chapter's website for details of our Friday night, Feb. 2, MWA-NW-sponsored event. It's free to all MWA members. See our website www.mwanorthwest.org for details.

Rocky Mountain
On Dec. 14 it was hereby charged that on, about, or during the last 150 years the Defendant known as Santa Claus had conspired with other unknown co-conspirators to operate an illegal sweatshop in violation of Title 18, USC Part 1, Chapter 19 #371, and furthermore in violation of Title 18, USC Part 1, Chapter 77 #1589.

In a mock trial presided over by the Honorable Charles Brownman (attorney), the Special Prosecutor, Dewey Goode, Litigator at Law Extraordinaire (R.T. Lawton, retired DEA agent and Chapter President) presented his case against Santa Claus. He called for his witnesses Vixen Reindeer (Christine Goff) and Elmer Elf (Tom Holliday), who—

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Q. Can I legally protect my pen name, or the name of my mystery series? What about my website?

Many novelists use pen names or pseudonyms and many also have a “branded” series of mysteries, usually named after the chief character (e.g., Nora Charles’ “Kate Kennedy South Florida Senior Sleuth” series). What such writers have in common is the need to protect the goodwill and value of their pen name and/or series. To accomplish this, writers must understand both copyright and trademark law.

When filling out a copyright registration form (Form TX), the Copyright Office allows you or your publisher to list either just a pen name or your real name. The difference in protection is that if you use your real name, protection for the work extends for your life plus seventy years; if you use a pseudonym, the term of protection is 95 years from the publication of the work, or 120 years from the creation of the work, whichever period expires first. If, however, after filing the original application in a pen name, the author’s identity is later revealed in the records, the term reverts to the life of the author plus 70 years.

Under U.S. copyright law, however, names, slogans, and titles cannot be copyrighted. This means that copyright will NOT prevent others from using your pen name, or the name of your mystery series. Pen names and series names, however, are entitled to protection under state laws governing unfair competition and under the federal Lanham Act, which prohibits “false designations of origin, false descriptions, and dilution.” These laws give you the right to bring a civil action against someone appropriating your pseudonym or series title.

Further, if a pseudonym or series name becomes identified with the person using the name and/or the books and other products authored under the name, it may be entitled to protection under trademark law, although generally this is limited to the sale of ancillary products. If you think your pen name or series name is entitled to trademark protection, you should consult an intellectual property lawyer; also see my article, “Do You Need A Trademark?” at www.publishlawyer.com/carousel9.htm, which explains these concepts in greater detail.

CAUTION: If your pen name also is the name of a living individual, you must either obtain that person’s consent or file a disclaimer stating that the name is not that of any real person. Pen names also cannot be registered if they are the name of a deceased President of the United States during the life of the President’s widow except with the consent of the President’s widow.

What about your website name? Internet domain names are treated differently under the law. Registration of your domain name by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) is separate from trademark registration. Nevertheless, you may be able to register your domain name as a trademark, provided the name is being used in connection with a site that is offering a service or product.

Daniel Steven is Chairman of the MWA Contracts and Grievances Committee and a publishing and media attorney. This column provides general legal information; consult an attorney for application of the law to your specific circumstances.

Karen Syed, owner of Echelon Press Publishing, author, and former bookseller (Publishers Weekly Bookseller of the Year nominee) is committed to the industry from every angle. She currently sits on the board of directors of the Maryland Writers Association.

What kinds of mysteries do you acquire?

I love a story that’s never been told, the stranger the better. The unusual gets the adrenaline flowing. I hate cookie cutter. I’m not looking for the next Agatha Christie. I’m looking for someone to succeed with their own ideas and talent. Echelon works with Robert Goldsborough, who continued the Nero Wolfe stories. Robert W. Walker, known for his Instinct and Edge series, has a new paranormal thriller. And Luisa Buehler’s extraordinary series has morphed from cutting-edge cozy to traditional.

What are some of the typical mistakes that new and more seasoned authors make?

They stay inside the lines and struggle to replicate stories already written. Worse is not paying attention to the technical aspects. No matter how good the story is, no editor wants to waste time with an author who will not check spelling or punctuation.

What current trends in the mystery business do you find the most interesting/disturbing?

I think this is where the cookie-cutter scenario plays in. Publishers want sure things; it makes them reluctant to buy outside the box. Mass market will suffer; readers are getting tired of re-issues from name authors. Readers aren’t dumb.

Is there anything else you’d like to address?

The publishing industry is about selling books. It’s business. If you’re looking to leave a legacy for your grandkids, self-publish. When you enter a partnership with a publisher, big or small, treat it like a business deal. If you don’t respect that, you’ll fail, dragging the rest of the house down with you.

Pari Noskin Taichert is the author of the Sasha Solomon series from the University of New Mexico Press. Her first two books were each nominated for an Agatha Award. The Socorro Blast will be published in early 2008.

· Note: MWA does not endorse individual publishers.
Continued from page 3

Despite all odds—managed to create reasonable doubt. That is until the Defense Attorney, Dewey Cheater (Mark Haynes, attorney) called Dancer (Alexis Haynes) and Santa (Bob Tinsley) to the stand. The Bailiff (Mario Acevedo, Chapter Vice President) had to enforce order when the Jury (the meeting attendees) found Santa “Guilty.” Then in a surprise twist, two recounts were held and Santa was freed. Vixen and Elmer got pink slips in their stockings, and a great time was had by all.

On Jan. 11, at the Denver Press Club, the Rocky Mountain Chapter will host Terry Jones, acting Aurora police chief during the Aarone Brown disappearance and the murder investigation last year. In that case a little girl disappeared from her Aurora home, and in a macabre twist the family came under suspicion for killing her more than two years previously. Terry received lots of “on camera” time when the case was white hot, and his wife, Lori, will be there to tell her own story of being at home with her kids while watching her husband go from anonymous detective to a CNN Headline News Order when the Jury (the meeting attendees) found Santa “Guilty.” Then in a surprise twist, two recounts were held and Santa was freed. Vixen and Elmer got pink slips in their stockings, and a great time was had by all.

Southeast
February Skill Build is almost here: SEMWA members Charles Todd and Chris Roerden, in conjunction with the SEMWA regional board, are planning a Skill Build for Feb. 3, in Winston-Salem, NC, entitled “Building the Writer’s Skills.” The event will be held at Salem College, the oldest institution of higher education for women in the United States (founded in 1772). Salem College has the only Center for Women Writers in the U.S. and will be co-promoting this event with SEMWA to over 30,000 members on their mailing list. Keep posted to www.semwma.com for updates.

Southern California
It’s been a tough end of the year for MWA Southern California’s award presentations. Joseph Wambaugh, awarded the Chapter’s Marlowe for Lifetime Achievement, was unable to attend the presentation banquet that was subsequently canceled. Barbara Serenella was scheduled to be presented with the Chapter’s first ever (Dennis) Lynds Award for Social Consciousness in Crime Fiction, at the Orange County Sisters in Crime holiday lunch, but couldn’t make it due to health reasons. The Chapter’s annual Holiday Party was, however, well attended and provided a good early kickoff to a year in which SoCal MWA plans to revitalize itself with numerous activities.

Five new Chapter Board members and the new Chapter President, Leslie Klinger, will be sworn in at the end of January, at the first of the year’s regular monthly luncheons, and an intensive planning session of the Board is in the works for shortly thereafter.

Southwest
Two new audio recordings of the October and November meeting speakers have now been posted on the Chapter website at www.mwasw.org for members to listen to on their computers via streaming RealAudio.

The October meeting audio is Katherine Scardino, a criminal defense attorney, speaking about “Defending Capital Murder Cases.” Ms. Scardino’s talk is an interesting counterpoint to Ms. Roe Wilson’s discussion this past January on prosecuting capital murderers. If you didn’t hear that audio when it was posted on the website, copies are still available for purchase.

The November meeting talk, “CPAs with Guns,” featured Jacqueline Collins, Special Agent in Charge, Internal Revenue Service, Criminal Investigation, Houston Field Office. Ms. Collins brought along two other IRS agents who added comments to her talk, making for a lively presentation and discussion with members.

The audios can be found on the website’s “Members Only” page. Both the page and the audios must be accessed by providing the User ID of mwasw and the Password member.
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I heard that comment most recently in Madison, WI, while sipping a beer at Boucheron with some authors who were whining about things like editors who don’t edit, genre bias against women writers, the proliferation of cat mysteries and other such fallacies.

Now, I will admit it. I cheat. I fictionalize past stories I’ve covered as a police reporter. I make up characters based on cops I’ve known. I make up bad guys based on bad guys I’ve known. I poke holes in every episode of CSI Miami, because I know enough after twenty-four years as a reporter to laugh out loud at the lack of reality.

But before anybody sees a career in journalism as a step to writing bestselling mysteries, here is a cheaper and faster way to write a better book.

The first advantage former journalists have is that we have already learned to put our butts in the seat, day after day, and write. If you were a reporter on a daily newspaper, you had a story deadline every day. You wrote, you rewrote, you finished your 500-800 word pieces and turned them in on time, or you were fired. There were no excuses, no extensions, and no contract adjustment. You produced, or you went home. You had an editor who glowered over you near deadline and the pressure was provided. So daily writing became a habit — and it’s a great habit to have when you’re writing novels. Work every day. Yeah, we got that down.

Another advantage in basic journalism you can take to the novel table is that good reporters are taught to note everything. Say you went out on a missing child scene. The good reporters filled their pads with description, the cars and their makes parked around, the homes and their paint jobs, the length of the grass and the general upkeep that will help you describe a neighborhood. You noted the egress in and out, the lake in the back yard that is of particular interest, the nearest convenience store, the nearest playground and school. The 7-11 on the corner leading in. You also watched to see who showed up: K9, divers, detectives, representatives of the Adam Walsh Center.

As a reporter, you challenge yourself to recreate where you go, what you see. My rule as a reporter was always: “Take the readers with you, let them see and hear and smell what you do.”

I did this to a fault during my career. I learned to create an image in my head, then go back to the newsroom and tap out that image on a keyboard. Fool, they said. Then I learned to edit myself.

On a normal day as a newspaper reporter, you have 700 words to tell your story. You have to bring that eye for detail to the game, but more importantly, you have to recognize the telling detail and cut the irrelevant away. Hence, Elmo (although an editor did ask if we shouldn’t include an explanatory paragraph for those readers who didn’t know what Elmo was).

“Quit gilding the damned lily, King.” My old editor from the Philadelphia Daily News would grouch and toss my story back across the desk. “Better yet, toss the damned lily out, it doesn’t tell me shit.”

Denise Hamilton, a former reporter for the Los Angeles Times, is now an author whose Eve Diamond suspense series has been shortlisted for the Edgar, Macavity, Anthony and Willa Cather awards.

“When you write every day for a living, often on deadline, you develop a certain facility with words. You know how to string them together. You know how to write a beginning, a middle and an end. Most importantly, you learn that sentences aren’t precious jewels, they’re building blocks and you learn how to pull them apart and put them back together in a different order.

“As a news reporter, you learn how to edit, to mercilessly assess and slash your own prose when your editor tells you that the 35-inch story (about 35 paragraphs) you were assigned in the morning has

More journalists

Mary Jane Clark, a writer and producer at CBS News’ New York City headquarters, brings her experience straight to the pages of her nine novels.

“My third book, Let Me Whisper in Your Ear, came out of my experiences of producing the obituaries of famous people. These obits are often done years before the person dies, so that the minute the person dies, there will be a story ready to put on the air right away.

Clark admits to being called “the Angel of Death” more than once.

“In my case, I think the fact that I worked in television news influenced me the most. I’m used to telling a news story in a minute or two. I have to pick the most important elements of a complicated story and leave out the extraneous matter. Plus I am always taking into account what visual elements I have available.

“So, my fiction writing is concise and to the point. My chapters are short and I try to leave mini-cliffhangers at the end of each one. I think that ratchets up the suspense. Also, I tell my stories in a very visual way. By that I mean, I imagine the scene, try to describe what it looks like and what is happening, only including those images which are integral to the story.”

Denise Hamilton writes the nationally bestselling Eve Diamond crime novels featuring a reporter who solves murders in contemporary multicultural Los Angeles.

“I remember being invited on a brothel raid with an inter-agency task force of FBI, INS, DEA, Sheriffs and local cops. We found three houses in the suburbs filled with imprisoned teenaged prostitutes from Asia. After spending all day on site with the cops and the young women, I went back to the office already writing the lead in my head.

“But when my editor found out that none of the teen prostitutes would talk to me, she told me we didn’t have a story. These young women were too terrified to talk to the cops, much less me, even though we had Chinese and Thai-speaking FBI agents on hand.

“The women were in the U.S. illegally, they believed all police are corrupt and the smugglers had threatened to kill their families if they cooperated with the investigation.

“I was flabbergasted that my editor didn’t want a story. And I remember sitting in her office thinking that the L.A. Times might not have a news story today but somewhere, somehow, someday, I’m going to write about it. And eventually I did, in my first book, The Jasmine Trade.”

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shrank to 15 by afternoon — or the wonderfully crafted lead you wrote doesn’t work anymore because the cops just arrested a suspect at the eleventh hour.’

Lesson learned. But you don’t have to be under the gun of a daily deadline to learn it. Take that lesson to the bank. Use only the telling details. When you’re writing novels and you have 120,000 words to use, it’s no different.

Yeah, but knowing the words to use, you ex-journos still got a handle on all the police procedural stuff!

True for some, like myself and folks like Mike Connelly. But Laura Lippman spent most of her journalist career covering social services and government. Jim Fusilli works as a music critic.

Fusilli is the author of the award-winning Terry Orr series, which includes Hard, Hard City, named Best Novel of 2004 by Mystery Ink Magazine. He has written for the The Wall Street Journal since 1983 and is an occasional contributor to National Public Radio’s All Things Considered.

“For the novel I’m working on now, I’ve spent a lot of time in the South, and that skill of knowing how to listen and observe is so important in helping shape story and characters. Hearing the slightest nuance of language, or seeing the way people carry themselves in certain situations, can open up a world for a novelist, as you well know. I think being journalists really helps us there, and helps us make the experience of reading our work much richer for the reader.”

Fusilli’s insight reminds me of a quote I had taped to my computer in the newsroom for years:


Hard to do? Sure. But you can do it without being a reporter. Just like newspaper folk, if you truly listen — and not just for the juiciest quote with which to lead your story — you learn about truth and you learn about lies and most importantly, how it all becomes grey.

That knowledge — and not every reporter or novelist finds it — keeps you from writing black-and-white fiction, or the Good-vs-Evil fiction of the sort that comic books are made of.

Fusilli also makes the final point of what I think the truly good journalists learn from their craft:

“Probably the most important contribution my experience as a journalist made to my fiction was in writing A Well-Known Secret, which turned out to be the first novel to address the impact of the 9/11 attacks on the people who lived in downtown Manhattan,” Fusilli said.

“I spent a lot of time in late September 2001 close to Ground Zero talking and listening to residents and shop owners, and I seemed to be there when their shock and grief turned to defiance and ambition to stay and rebuild their lives. I took what I learned and redefined Terry not as someone stuck in his grief, but as a man committed to remaking his life. Being a journalist and knowing how to stay to the side of the story, and how to listen for what’s really being said, was invaluable.”

Being able to tell human stories is not a skill of all journalists. But it is paramount to a novelist. Here’s a quote from Louis L’Amour I have always cherished:

“Shakespeare’s work has lived as long as it has because he dealt with normal human emotions — envy, ambition, rivalry, love, hate, greed and so on. These are the basic drives among us humans and are with us forever.”

If you didn’t have at least one of those in your newspaper story, it wasn’t a story. It was a report. If you don’t have more than one of those in your novel, it’s on the publisher’s slush pile. You don’t have to have 10 years on the cop beat to know that. Any good novelist.

Jonathon King is a journalist, an Edgar Award winner, and the bestselling author of four Max Freeman novels. His most recent novel is Eye of Vengeance.

Don’t worry, you’ll learn

By Ellen Crosby

It was midnight and I was in a nightgown when the Moscow bureau chief at ABC News offered me the job as their radio correspondent.

“I don’t know anything about radio,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You’ll learn.”

I should admit this was a telephone conversation, and he was still at work, calling from the bureau. In 1990, I lived in the now non-existent Soviet Union, a vast unhappily stitched-together amalgamation of “republics” which made up the largest country in the world and spanned eleven time zones. A 14-hour work day was normal.

Though I’d been looking for a job in print journalism, I signed on with ABC – and I did learn. Working in radio taught me three valuable lessons that helped when I started writing fiction.

First, the importance of writing tight and using precise language. I had 37 seconds — including my signoff — to deliver my report.

“Think of a guy washing his car,” my boss in New York said, “and talk to him.”

Okay, a distracted audience, too. If the story wasn’t compelling, he’d change stations or turn me off. At first I tried to work around the time restriction. It was tough distilling pages of notes in a reporter’s notebook into a few pithy sentences. I didn’t fool the newsroom editors back in the States.

“We can tell you’re a print journalist,” one of them told me. “You’re the only correspondent who doesn’t breathe when you file your piece. Slow down and stop cramming so much into your stories.”

So I worked on keeping that car washer listening to me — by writing sharp, clear prose that would grab his attention. When I moved over to fiction, my goal was to keep a reader up past bedtime.

My second lesson was about deadlines and staying focused. In radio, the news at noon is over in minutes. File late and your story doesn’t get aired. Sometimes there isn’t enough time to pull it together, either. So I learned speed and how not to feel like I’d been shot out of a cannon when New York needed a piece for the next news cycle — and I had 15 minutes to write and voice it. Fortunately, in fiction the deadlines are longer – but I’ve kept that radio urgency about turning in my work on time.

The third lesson involved reading aloud what I’d written – even when it wasn’t for radio. If it’s bad on paper, it sounds worse when you hear it. I never deliver a manuscript to my editor without first mumbling all 85,000 words. If you feel silly, read to a pet. They’re the perfect audience. They already love everything you do.

To me, the difference between journalism and fiction is like working different sets of muscles at the gym — though it’s all exercise. As to how they’re different, I like what John Hersey, the Pulitzer-prize winning journalist-turned-novelist said: “Journalism allows its readers to witness history — fiction gives its readers an opportunity to live it.”

Ellen Crosby has since returned to the United States. Her latest book is The Merlot Murders.
Do Criminals Read?

by James O. Born

Years ago, when I was an agent with the US Drug Enforcement Administration, we marched a line of high-profile prisoners past a bank of news cameras. One of the agents said that he was going to wear a mask so he wouldn’t be recognized and our crusty, experienced boss said, “Mopes don’t watch TV. Show some dignity.” It was an early lesson that stuck with me. I’m not saying that notoriety couldn’t affect an undercover deal, I just think it is very unlikely. So do we, as writers, ever influence crime or give criminals ideas? Let’s think about it.

There have been some cases of criminals copying movie action. In Florida, a few years ago, some numskulls robbed an armored car and set their car on fire to destroy evidence and confuse the cops. They later claimed they’d seen it in the movie Heat. (The clichéd, hokey one with Al Pacino, not the stupid one starring Burt Reynolds.) In the end it made no difference, except to the owner of the destroyed stolen car. But what about novels? Do they influence the bad guys we write about? If I were to guess, based on the average reading level of Americans and extrapolating the generally lower intelligence of criminals, I’d have to say “Hell no.” In the real world, criminals are the donkeys of society -- not pretty enough to be a horse and not smart enough to do anything but make that funny sound and looked pissed off all the time.

In my second novel, I wrote about a guy who loves chaos. He’s a criminal, but not in the sense that he’s in it for money. He breaks the law by blowing things up to enjoy the chaos that ensues. I wanted to use an explosive that wasn’t too common and could be homemade. I called my friends at the local office of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and laid out my problem. My buddy there said that TATP was starting to be used by terrorists. Richard Reid, the infamous “shoe bomber,” had tried to use it to bring down a jetliner. It seemed simple enough -- use the name TATP, because it was somewhat nebulous and I could spell it. Sure, I went online and found the chemical compound: Triacetone triperoxide. I did a little more research but basically took the first explosive someone offered. In Shock Wave the bad guy eventually tries to blow up a aviation fuel tanker in downtown Miami with the TATP.

In the summer of 2005, during the same week, London was rocked by a series of explosions on the subway and someone tried to blow up a gas tanker as a weapon in Iraq. It turns out the London explosives were TATP. My friend from the ATF called me and said, “Who the hell reads your books?” Of course, there was no connection but it did make me think. Then, after the 2006 plot to blow up planes coming to the US was foiled by the British, Anthony Rainone of January Magazine also mentioned Shock Wave in relation to the TATP that was going to be used by the terrorists. Since only a select few people read that book, I feel comfortable knowing that I never gave anyone any ideas.

But what if Brad Meltzer wrote about some cutting-edge technology, and it was then used in a subsequent crime? Would he be chastised? Would he be culpable in any way? Absolutely not! Not only do we have the freedom to write and express ideas, the concept that criminals need to read about something or see it on TV before they utilize it is ludicrous. Generally it’s the other way around -- a criminal does something interesting, and Law and Order airs it in a tidy hour-long drama.

Criminals and crime are so much a product of circumstance and coincidence, of nerve and desperation, of faulty conscience and childhood abuse that reading material is immaterial. Just because Tess Gerritsen might write about some odd method of death doesn’t mean that a crazed killer is going to adopt it.

There is the case of Dennis Rader, the BTK killer. He claimed he had read John Sandford’s Rules of Prey. That was covered by several news organizations. What the media overlooked was that Rader didn’t really follow the rules laid out in the book. John Sandford books are very good -- but they are not going to push someone to murder. This was just another chance to attempt to link criminals with something other than their own inner demons that pushed them to commit horrible crimes.

Do criminals read? I don’t think so. But maybe it’s a readership we can all develop as publishing professionals.
Do you know a talented young person who’d like to win some cool cash?

MWA:Reads, Mystery Writers of America’s youth literacy program, will hold its second annual Joan Lowery Nixon Award mystery writing contest in February 2007.

Open to students in grades 2 through 10, the contest encourages kids and teens to use their imaginations and language-arts skills to create unique mystery stories. Two budding authors will each win $250.

The contest honors MWA’s own Joan Lowery Nixon, the prolific writer of historical fiction and mysteries for children and young adults.

The founder of MWA:Reads (formerly known as Kids Love A Mystery), Ms. Nixon is the only four-time winner of the Edgar® Award for Best Juvenile Mystery. She passed away in 2003.

Submissions for the Joan Lowery Nixon Award will be accepted in two age categories: Grades 2-5 and Grades 6-10. The winner of each will receive $250.

The contest begins February 3 (Joan Lowery Nixon’s birthday) and ends February 28. Complete rules are found on our web site at www.mysterywriters.org/MWAreads.

Winners will be announced at MWA’s 2007 Edgar® Awards in New York City on April 26, 2007.
So, what's all the fuss about Google Book Search? Many of us in MWA wanted to know, so I attended an online presentation given by a representative of the company. Here's what I learned:

Google Book Search entails two projects. One is the Google Books Partner Program, an online book-marketing program formed by agreement between major publishing houses and Google. Snippets of books are available online, and are linked to booksellers. Individual authors can also make their books available for Book Search. The Partner Program seems to have attracted little attention.

The other arm of Google Book Search is the Google Books Library Project. Google refers to it as an enhanced card catalog of the world's books. The Library Project is drawing the bulk of the media attention — and public criticism.

According to Google, about 5% of the volumes in a given library are covered by the Google Books Partner Program. About 20% are in the public domain, meaning they are free of copyright restrictions. The remaining 75% are in the gray area, meaning they may or may not be copyrighted.

Under the auspices of the Library Project, Google is scanning all books over 12 months old in certain libraries — copyrighted or not — and are posting snippets of those books online, oftentimes providing links for sellers carrying the work.

Google claims to have safeguards in place that would prevent anyone from obtaining usable amounts of a scanned book for free. The company also claims that the Library Project will result in increased revenues for authors, which may be true. Even given that, what concerns many of us in MWA is that Google is copying copyrighted books without permission.

Google claims its scanning of the books is protected by the "fair use" rubric, which is a copyright principle based on the belief that the public is entitled to freely use portions of copyrighted materials for commentary, criticism, etc. I'm not an intellectual property attorney, so I won't attempt to delve into legal analysis here, but I will leave you with a way to circumvent the program.

You or your publisher can opt out of the Library Project. According to Google, if your books haven't yet been scanned, they won't be; if they have been scanned, the file will be deleted. Information on how to do this can be found here:

http://books.google.com/googlebooks/author.html

This is a thorny issue, one we're likely to hear much about over the coming years. For more information on copyright and Fair Use issues, visit Stanford Law's Copyright & Fair Use Center here:

http://fairuse.stanford.edu
vitalsigns

January 2007

Books
Megan Abbott, The Song is You, Simon & Schuster
Suzanne Arruda, Stalking Ivory,NAL
Stephen Booth, One Last Breath, Bantam
Lilian Jackson Braun, The Cat Who Had 60 Whiskers, Putnam
Thomas B. Cavanaugh, Head Games, St. Martin’s Minotaur
Thomas H. Cook, The Cloud of Unknowing, Harcourt
Bill Crider, Murder Among the O.W.L.S., St. Martin’s Minotaur
Janet Evanovich, Plum Love, St. Martin’s Press
Linda Fairstein, Bad Blood, Scribner
Karen Harper, The Hooded Hawke, St. Martin’s Minotaur
Frederick Highland, Night Falls On Domascus, St. Martin’s Press
Steve Hockensmith, Holmes on the Range, St. Martin’s Minotaur
India Ink, Glassed and Found, Berkley Prime Crime
Larry Karp, The Ragtime Kid, Poisoned Pen Press
Gary C. King, Stolen In The Night, St. Martin’s Press
Gay Toltl Kinman, Death in a Small Town, Hilliard and Harris
Gay Toltl Kinman, Wolf Castle, Hilliard and Harris
Lawrence Light, Fear & Greed, Dorchester
Stephen Lindley, Kubiak’s Daughter, Avalon
Amanda Matetsky, Murder on a Hot Tin Roof, Berkley Prime Crime.
Hope McIntyre, How to Marry a Ghost, Mysterious Press
Chris Mooney, The Missing, Atria
Catherine O’Connell, Well Bred and Dead, HarperCollins
Perri O’Shaughnessy, Sinister Shorts, Delta
Peter James Quirk, Trail Of Vengeance, Hopewell Publications
Sam Reaves, aka Allen Salter, Homicide 69, Carroll and Graf
June Shaw, Relative Danger, Five Star
Dana Stabenow, A Deeper Sleep, St. Martin’s Minotaur
Dana Stabenow, Powers of Detection: Stories of Mystery & Fantasy, Ace

Short Stories
Gay Toltl Kinman and Jill Cogen, “Spyder’s Plant,” Gone Coastal: A Mystery Anthology, Seven Sisters Press

Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine, January 2007
Peter Lovesey, “The Case of The Dead Wait”
Terence Faherty, “Garbo’s Knees”
James Powell, “Candy Cane Wars”
Edward D. Hoch, “The Theft Of The Five Pound Note”
Doug Allyn, “Stone Cold Christmas”

Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine, January - February 2007
G. Miki Hayden, “A Murder In Marcus Garvey Park”
James Lincoln Warren, “Mother Brimstone”
Eve Fisher, “Not the Type”

AHMM, Jan. - Feb. 2007, continued
Steve Hockensmith, “Humbug”
L.A. Wilson, “Dauphin Island”
I.J. Parker, “Moon Cakes”
Dennis Richard Murphy, “Everything In Its Place”
Richard F. McGonegal, “Takedown”

Mystery Scene Holiday Issue 2006
Kate Stine, At the Scene: “From Florida to Iceland To New Jersey…”
Oline Cogdill, “Greetings From Florida”
Barry Zeman, “Collecting Ellery Queen”
Cheryl Solimini, “Nefarious New Jersey”
Oline Cogdill, “Northern Light”
Marcia Talley, “We Are family: Sisters In Crime”
Brian Skupin, “What’s Happening With Corinne Holt Sawyer”

Fact Crime Books
Donald Bain, Murder He Wrote, Purdue University Press
Robert Mladinich and Michael Benson, Legal Embrace, Kensington

Awards
Larry Beinhart, The Librarian, Grand Prix de Littérature Policière
Brenda Seabrooke, The Haunting Of Swain’s Fancy, 2006 West Virginia Children’s Book Award

Stage Play
Ed Musto, A Bum Rap, based on an AHMM short story of the same title by Marilyn Granbeck Henderson. New Media Repertory Theatre 512 East 80th Street, Dec. 1-5, 2006
Gay Toltl Kinman, The Mystery Writer, produced by the Lizard Theater, Alhambra, CA, Nov. 10 -12, 2006

Movie Option
Joseph Trigoboff, The Bone Orchard and The Shooting Gallery, optioned by award-winning indie producer Shane McCarthy of Blue Engine Pictures

Bookstore List & Library Database Have Been Updated

We’ve made some major updates to both the Bookstore Mailing List and the Library Database, which will be available in mid-January. The Bookstore mailing list has almost tripled in size (from 342 stores to 959).

As such, we will be increasing the cost of the Bookstore list to $20 to cover the cost of the labels and postage.

The price for a printed copy of library database will remain the same – $10.

If you are interested in purchasing these lists, please contact the MWA national office at: mwa@mysterywriters.org
In This Issue
Jonathon King talks about the transition from newspaper reporter to mystery author. Mary Jane Clark, Denise Hamilton, and Ellen Crosby chime in as well. James O. Born wonders if criminals read. And Daniel J. Hale goes a-Googlin’.

photos

Above: Ed Kaufman, owner of M is for Mystery, at the NorCal MWA and Sisters in Crime holiday party.
Right, top: Jim Doherty leads a lively game of “Mystery Jeopardy” at the Midwest MWA holiday party, held at home of Alex and Allen Matthews in Oak Park IL. Also attending (Bottom right, L-R): Alex Matthews, Julie Hyzy (Chapter VP), and Katy Doherty.
Center: Mike Black at the Midwest MWA holiday party.