



SLEUTH SAYER

SEPTEMBER 2009 Official *Publication of the SW Chapter of MWA*

Deborah LeBanc, President

*

Veva Dianne Lawson, Vice-President

*

Janis Susan May Patterson, Secretary

*

Laura Elvebak, Treasurer

*

At-Large Board Members

Texas-L.C. Hayden

Oklahoma-Bob Avey

Arkansas-Radine Trees Nehring

Louisiana-June Shaw

*

Program Chair - Ann Zeigler

Publicity Chair - Mary Trackwell

*

MWA/SW Online Forum info:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mwasw>

To subscribe, send an e-mail to:

mwasw-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

*

MWA/SW Website

<http://www.mwasw.org>

Sue Trowbridge, Webmaster

*

MWA/SW Newsletter Editor

Laura Elvebak

lelvebak@sbcglobal.net

**Submissions are welcome
and should be**

**sent prior to the 25th of the month
prior to publication**

*

**Mystery Writers of America
National Office**

1140 Broadway, Suite 1507

New York, New York 10001

212-888-8171

Fax 212-888-8107

mwa@mysterywriters.org

Http: www.mysterywriters.org

HOUSTON

Mogey Lovelle, from the Texas State Securities Board, will be MWA Southwest Chapter's September 19, 2009 speaker in Houston. Her topic will be fraud schemes and how to spot them.

A native of Alice, Texas, Mogey Lovelle received her B.A. in Psychology in 2000 from Angelo State University. She received her J.D. degree from Texas Tech University School of Law in 2003 where she was a member of Phi Alpha Delta and was the Class Speaker at Commencement.

Mogey began working as an Enforcement Attorney at the Lubbock Branch Office in May 2004. Mogey now calls the Houston area her home where she has served as the Assistant Director of Enforcement for the Houston Branch Office of the Texas State Securities Board since August 2007.

Ms. Lovelle was a member of the North American Securities Administrators Association (NASAA) Senior Outreach Project Group from 2006 to 2007. In addition, Mogey has served as a Special Prosecutor in West Texas and South Texas courts.

Mogey enjoys her work as a Sunday School Teacher and has volunteered with several organizations benefiting children in the Foster Care System.

The luncheon will be held at the Doubletree Guest Suites Hotel near the Galleria, 5757 Westheimer, on September 19, 2009, starting at noon. The cost is \$25 per person. Call the MWA hotline at 713-797-8464 by noon on Wednesday, September 16, or email Laura Elvebak at lelvebak@sbcglobal.net to make your lunch reservation. Please call ahead if you cannot make it. You can donate your overflow mystery books to our \$1 raffle.

Menu: Tender Beef Fajitas sauteed with onions and bell peppers; Refried Beans and Spanish Rice

REMINDER: If you haven't renewed your membership, this will be your last issue of the Sleuth Sayer. Hope to see you all next month.

Sleuth News and Clues

**HOUSTON WRITERS GUILD
FALL WORKSHOP**

Special guest is renowned mystery writer, **David Liss**, author of *A Conspiracy of Paper*, *The Coffee Trader*, *A Spectacle of Corruption*, *The Ethical Assassin*, and *The Whiskey Rebels* (Ballantine). The workshop will be held at the Holiday Inn Southwest, 11630 Southwest Freeway, on Saturday, Sept 12, 2009. <http://www.houstonwritersguild.org> .

**CRIMINAL PURSUITS presented by
Breakthrough Promotions**

The next Criminal Pursuits workshop which will take place in the Dallas area November 6 – 7, 2009. It's the first one that includes a panel of police officers and detectives from the DFW area that work with Breakthrough Promotion's own Mike Witzgall! So those who attend will not only be assigned to an investigative team and have a chance to work a mock crime scene and test their crime solving skills, but they'll also have a chance to question and learn from officers who do this for a living every day. Want realism in police procedure and investigation in your writing? This is one workshop you won't want to miss! Check it out at www.criminalpursuits.com. And while you're there, stop by Ask a Cop blog and give them a comment!

AGENTS, WORKSHOPS GALORE

Register early for the April 10 & 11, **2010 DFW Writers' Conference**, Grapevine Convention Center, Grapevine, Texas. Keynote speaker is best-selling romance author, Jodi Thomas. No less than 8 literary agents. For more information, go to <http://dfwwritersconference.org> .

Top Publications announces the release of Vol 2 of the Tarizon Trilogy, *Tarizon: Civil War* by **William Manchee** on September 1, 2009.

Sally Love ("A Recipe To Die For"), **Laura Elvebak** ("Dying For Chocolate") and **Betty Gordon** ("The Cowboy's Rose") are included in the delicious assortment of short stories in *The Final Twist* anthology, *A BOX OF TEXAS CHOCOLATES*, coming in September. The official launch party will be held at the original Chocolate Bar on Alabama Street in Houston, Texas on Thursday, September 24 from 7-10 p.m.. The authors will also be entertaining in a booth at the Chocolate Festival in Lexington, Texas on October 17. You can get your copy by attending the launch party or ordering on Amazon.com, B&N.com or Fictionwise.com and also available on Kindle.

Rachel Brady will sign her debut mystery *FINAL APPROACH* at her Houston Book Launch at *Murder By The Book* in Houston, Texas, on Saturday, October 10 at 4:30pm.

Janis Susan May Patterson has been very deeply involved with Egyptology through the American Research Center in Egypt, which is arguably the largest association of professional Egyptologists in the world. ARCE has instituted an international electronic newsletter, and chose Susan as their first 'member interview'. She will talk about her involvement with Egyptology, about founding the NT/Newsletter, which during her tenure was the only monthly publication for ARCE in the world as well as about her novels and writing processes. <http://www.arce.org/news/u24> www.JanisSusanMay.com

Susan Fleet, trumpeter, novelist and music historian is happy to announce that her New Orleans crime thriller *ABSOLUTION*, a was one of four books chosen in a statewide search by the Louisiana Book Festival for the best books (fiction and non-fiction) self-published in 2008. <http://www.susanfleet.com>

The Black Swans of Publishing

By L. A. Starks

Do you associate obscure statistical discussions with the vivid suspense of mysteries and thrillers? Thought not. Yet one book, *THE BLACK SWAN* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (Random House, 2007) links the two by its frequent examples from publishing.

Taleb even prefaces his book as if it were a study about fiction: “Metaphors and stories are far more potent than ideas. They are also easier to remember and more fun to read. Ideas come and go, stories stay.” Authors need only think of your own works, or of your favorite lines from Shakespeare.

What’s a “Black Swan?” The term refers to Europeans’ belief that all swans were white, until the sighting of Australian black swans, *Cygnus atratus*, by English naturalist John Latham in 1790. As used by Taleb, a Black Swan represents a large-impact, hard-to-predict event. Present-day Black Swans include the recent housing bust across all US markets simultaneously, the global financial crisis last fall, and the season of fifteen hurricanes in 2005. Other examples Taleb names are computers, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the growth of the internet, and the emergence of specific art genres.

Taleb is given particular credence for predicting, in 2007, the failure of mortgage group Fannie Mae. Fannie Mae required a government rescue to stay solvent in fall 2008.

In its simplest terms, Taleb’s statistical point is many things don’t fit a normal, or bell-shaped, distribution. Phenomena that don’t are rare, unpredictable, and may have massive impact. How are Black Swans meaningful to authors and all of us in book publishing? The clearest example is the out-of-nowhere bestseller.

And what thriller and mystery author would disagree with Taleb’s claim that, “The world is dominated by the extreme, the unknown, and the very improbable.”

To illustrate the concept of scalability used to define Black Swans (p. 27), Taleb compares the work of

authors and dentists. Dentists, or any professionals depending on hourly output, are limited by the number of hours they can work. However, an author does not have to write her or his book again for each new reader; the author’s work is “scalable.”

Taleb styles our two worlds Extremistan and Mediocristan. In Mediocristan, “when the sample is large, no single instance will significantly change the aggregate or the total” (p. 32), whereas Extremistan includes the swing-for-the-fences, game-changing plays. Put mathematically, in Extremistan one event can disproportionately affect the total. Extremistan is a winner-takes-all world.

Authors live in Extremistan—a few occurrences have huge influence. Using authors and dentists again, Taleb compares the difference between JK Rowling’s sales and those of most authors to the much smaller spread between the earnings of the best and worst dentists.

In Extremistan, history jumps instead of crawling, and it’s hard to predict the future from past information. Sound like the scene you’re writing now? The daily changes in the publishing business?

Some Black Swans, Taleb notes (p. 44), “can come from the slow building up of incremental changes in the same direction, as with books that sell large amounts over years, never showing up on the bestseller lists.” Yeah, baby.

We recognize the long odds, then block the recognition. What some friends and family might call stubbornness—and you and your other friends call believing in your dream—is a helpful trait, Taleb says (p. 98). “Some blindness to the odds or even an obsession with their own positive Black Swans is necessary for entrepreneurs (and others) to function.”

Taleb also clearly identifies one hazard for authors (p. 156-157). Surprises in the work

process are almost invariably negative, leading to delay. “The unexpected has a one-sided effect with projects—always pushing in a single direction—higher costs and a longer time to completion.” The chapter you thought would take two days and instead takes a week? The slower-than-expected distribution of your books to the bookstores on your signing tour?

Another interesting application of Black Swans is from a publisher’s perspective, (p. 207). “In these businesses, you lose small to make big. You have little to lose per book and, for completely unexpected reasons, any given book might take off. The downside is small and easily controlled. The problem with publishers, of course, is that they regularly pay up for books, thus making their upside rather limited and their downside monstrous. (If you pay \$10 million for a book, your Black Swan is it not being a bestseller.)”

He revisits the asymmetry, or harsh lopsidedness of book sales, noting in the US, the 80-20 rule is closer to the 97-20 rule: 97 percent of the books are sold by 20 percent of the authors. Similarly (p. 235), “If I told you two authors sold a total of a million copies of their books, the most likely combination is 993,000 copies sold for one and 7,000 for the other. This is far more like than that each of the books sold 500,000 copies.”

Unless you’re a publisher or a math geek, as I am, skip the next paragraph.

Taleb describes the distribution for some events as not normal (or Gaussian) but Mandelbrotian—from the same mathematician who brought you fractals. In particular (p. 264), Taleb estimates a power law of 1.5 for U.S. books sales of more than 250,000 copies. In a recent year, about 96 books sold more than 250,000 copies. From that one can estimate that about 34 books will sell more than 500,000 copies: $96 \cdot ((500,000 / 250,000)^{-1.5})$ and about eight books will sell more than a million copies: $96 \cdot ((1,000,000 / 250,000)^{-1.5})$. The power is not exact. Also, the range can be wide: rather than precisely eight titles selling over a million copies, the range is two to twenty titles.

A friend of mine who is a twenty-year “overnight success” once noted that a publishing hit seemed about as likely as winning the lottery. Taleb’s calculations bear this out. Yet, the odds cut both ways. Why do new authors get published at all, he asks? “Besides the desire for fresh voices, it is not possible to predict which among them will be the next Black Swans.”

L. A. Starks has an MBA in finance from the University of Chicago and is the author of 13 DAYS: THE PYTHAGORAS CONSPIRACY (Brown Books Publishing Group, 2006) <http://lastarksbooks.com> Of course, she’s working on the next Black Swan.

Create a Fictional World Your Readers Can Believe In
By Kirt Hickman

Jake Scranton shifted in the driver’s seat of the old stagecoach as his team’s fidgeting grew more violent. “Easy girls.”

His partner, Buckshot Bill, gave him an uneasy glance—the company had already lost one coach in this canyon—and cocked both barrels of the shotgun cradled in his arms.

A tendril of dirt and pebbles trickled down the side of the sandstone cliff to their left.

Jake undid the clasp on his holster. He scanned the ridge, but saw nothing more until a rifle shot echoed across the canyon.

The bullet slammed Bill against the back of his seat. He slumped forward and fell from the stage. His shotgun tumbled to the floorboard and fired. The blast splintered the brake lever and Jake’s startled team lunged forward.

Bad Bart and a dozen of his worst men rounded the corner behind them, whooping in anticipation. The thunder of hooves drowned the racket of the stage and its valuable cargo.

Panic coursed through Jake’s blood as he fumbled the reins into his off hand and dialed the sheriff. *Come on. Pick up. Pick up.*

"Forget it," Buckshot said from the seat beside him. "You'll never get a signal way out here."

The approaching bandits rode their animals up to surround the coach. All drew weapons of one sort or another. Bart raised his blaster. "Thou art mine!"

Where did this piece fall apart? When Jake drew a cell phone instead of his six-shooter? When Bill appeared beside him after tumbling from the stage? When the bandits' horses and guns became generic "animals" and "weapons of some sort or another"? Or when Bart raised a blaster and started spouting Shakespearean dialog?

Consistency

This story lost its credibility when you, the reader, detected inconsistencies in the world I created. Though this example is exaggerated, it makes my point clear. Build your world carefully, completely, and with consistency, or your reader won't buy into it.

Regardless of your genre, ask these questions about your world before you write:

1. What are the moral codes? What are the predominant beliefs and values (even prejudices) of the various people who live there?
2. What is the economic state? Are people wealthy? Poor? Divided? How is commerce handled? Through money? Barter? Information? Something else?
3. What is the domestic political structure? Does it work for the people (particularly for your main characters)? Why or why not?
4. What is the world political environment? Is it stable? Are countries at war? Who is the dominant power and why?
5. What is the predominant religion (or religions)? Are people advanced enough to understand the difference between religion, philosophy, natural philosophy, and magic?
6. If there's magic, how does it work?
7. What is the level of scientific achievement? What are the preferred forms of transportation and communication? What is the state of medicine? Does your world have any unique technologies? If so, how do they influence the

lives of your characters?

8. How does day-to-day life differ from that of your reader?

In science-fiction or fantasy writing, you'll largely make this stuff up. For historical writing, or for a piece set in another country or culture, you must do sufficient research to get the details right. Either way, these characteristics must mesh into a coherent whole? Your character, setting, props, and language must be consistent with that whole.

Beware anachronism.

Specificity

Finally, populate your world with specific, concrete details. Not just canyon walls, but sandstone cliffs. Not animals, or even horses, but green-broke mustangs. This is what will capture your reader's imagination. This will make your world real.

Consider the following passage:

Amanda moved away from the dangerous equipment to a safer location near the wall.

Does the word "equipment" invoke an image or emotion? Does it reveal anything about Amanda or the world in which she lives? Does it bring the story to life? No, because it's not specific.

Watch what happens when I replace the equipment and dangers in this scene with specific details:

Liquid helium whistled past the breached valve with the wail of a wounded banshee, 272 degrees below zero, cold enough to freeze human flesh in microseconds. Amanda dove for the far wall, where the stream of evaporating helium dissipated into the heat of the temperature-moderated maintenance chamber. Just beyond the bulkhead, super-heated gasses, the lifeblood of the Venus terraforming project, roared through pipes as big around as a docking collar. An incessant, numbing vibration shook the floor.

A few well-chosen details, molded into the action of your scenes, can transform your world from a mere silhouette into a living, breathing reality.

**OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE
SOUTHWEST CHAPTER OF MWA**

Sleuth Sayer
c/o Laura Elvebak
5837 Village Forest Court
Houston, TX 77092



Get the *Sleuth Sayer* by e-mail

Members are encouraged to get the *Sleuth Sayer* via e-mail. Not only will it cut down on our printing/mailing costs, you'll get your e-mail version about a week before the paper version would arrive in your mailbox and you will see it in color.

To switch, send an e-mail to: lelvebak@sbcglobal.net. You must be able to read .pdf files and have Acrobat Reader version 5.0 or higher.

**GOT NEWS?
ARTICLES?
DON'T BE SHY, WRITERS!**
Send submissions to

Laura Elvebak at lelvebak@sbcglobal.net

