

**Originality in Crime Fiction**  
**An Online Panel Discussion Hosted by Mysterious Matters**  
**February 20, 2010**

Through the marvels of technology, our far-flung panelists gathered virtually on a wintry afternoon in February to discuss originality in crime fiction. Not surprisingly, given the diverse composition of the panel, the conversation ran the gamut as we discussed such age-old questions as “Why are those *Twilight* books so damn popular?” to “Are men inherently boring?” Read on for the details.

**Moderator:**

- Agatho, editor of crime fiction and undercover blogger at Mysterious Matters

**Panelists:**

- Vicki Delany, [www.vickidelany.com](http://www.vickidelany.com)
- Jack Getze, [www.jackgetze.com](http://www.jackgetze.com)
- Libby Fischer Hellmann, [www.libbyhellmann.com](http://www.libbyhellmann.com)
- Wendy Hornsby, [www.wendyhornsby.com](http://www.wendyhornsby.com)
- Earl Staggs
- Nancy Means Wright, [www.nancymeanswright.com](http://www.nancymeanswright.com)

**Agatho**

We're here to discuss the topic of "Originality in Crime Fiction," so I want to begin with a provocative question. Is there a difference between a "mystery" and a novel that is "crime fiction," and do readers have differing expectations of each?

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I look at crime fiction as the umbrella, and mystery as one of its spokes. There's also thriller, suspense, cozy, hard-boiled, and other subgenres as well.

**Vicki Delany**

I think there is a difference. A mystery is about following clues to solve a crime, for both the characters and the readers, whereas a crime novel can be any format.

**Jack Getze**

To me, mystery implies a puzzle--solving a murder. Crime fiction can be anything to me. Suspense, noir...

### **Wendy Hornsby**

I think a mystery is a problem to be solved and crime fiction is a bad guy to be caught. They're different in tone and structure.

### **Vicki Delany**

A crime can be suspense - i.e. the protagonist is not trying to solve a crime, they might just stumble on it and become involved.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

MWA defines its members' books as any novel with a crime at its core. I like that. It's broad enough and inclusive.

### **Earl Staggs**

I've seen them used separately and interchangeably. I see a difference sometimes. A caper story, for instance, could easily be a crime rather than a mystery story.

### **Vicki Delany**

I think the British tend to call it crime fiction, the Americans mystery. Crime is more inclusive.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

I think of crime fiction as something that has happened with a certain person/crime such as *In Cold Blood* (am I wrong?) and mystery as the usual formulaic (ugh) suspenseful crime solving with questions & answers. I like Wendy's definition. On the other hand, I've probably used the terms interchangeably.

### **Vicki Delany**

I dislike the term murder mystery. It implies there must be a murder and there must be clues to follow.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

When you think about it, any good book has a mystery at its core.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Mystery and secrets, methinks.

### **Earl Staggs**

A crime story can be about breaking the law, but there's no question about whodunnit -- just if they'll get away with it.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Absolutely, Wendy. All good fiction. I think of *Crime and Punishment*, et al.

**Vicki Delany**

Sometimes you know whodunit right from the start. There is no mystery but there is suspense - will they get caught?

**Jack Getze**

Wendy's 100% right, I think. Every good story has mysteries in it.

**Agatho**

How does this all tie in with readers' expectations regarding originality? Do you think that a casual reader who picks up a mass-market paperback at the drugstore expects that book to be daring, inventive, original? Or is s/he looking for something not too challenging?

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

The latter, I fear.

**Jack Getze**

And I think the public does understand the difference. They prefer one or the other, or both. But they know.

**Vicki Delany**

Not original doesn't have to mean challenging.

**Jack Getze**

Every reader wants entertainment.

**Wendy Hornsby**

Whatever you call it, there is some situation that needs resolution. Mystery, crime novel, I wonder if there's a difference then between a crime that's personal and one that affects, say a community.

**Vicki Delany**

I think of the books by Louise Penny. They are not original at all, in fact very traditional. But they're excellent books and people love them.

**Jack Getze**

I am entertained by originality. Other readers must be, too.

**Vicki Delany**

I would suspect readers don't usually want anything to original or daring.

**Nancy Means Wright**

To me original means fresh language most of all, and original offbeat characters.

### **Vicki Delany**

But what about traditional mysteries? Not original, but popular.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

One of the reasons I read crime fiction, and I think many others do as well, is getting at the notion of chaos and order. The world of the crime fiction novel starts out in order, tips into chaos quite soon afterwards, and then it's the job of the sleuth to restore order. In a world where order seems more like a fantasy these days, I think readers enjoy seeing the chaos in a book get resolved into some order at the end.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

I agree with Nancy. Good writing is the measure. And playing fair with the reader about clues.

### **Jack Getze**

I don't care as much about writing as I do about the character and the story. Can't read BAD writing (like *Bridges of Madison County*), but I'm a "It's what you say, not how you say it" guy. Tell me a story!

### **Earl Staggs**

I agree with Libby. We don't always see justice in real life so it's good to see the bad guys get what they deserve in books.

### **Agatho**

Can you give us an example of an original, offbeat character or a book with fresh language?

### **Vicki Delany**

I have just read *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*. Totally original character and voice. An 11-year-old girl in England in the 1950s.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Yes, I think of Kate Atkinson's series with De Jackson Brodie. I especially admire *Case Histories*, in which a reluctant Brodie has to try to solve 3 old murders. The nonlinear plot is told through several POVs and the story jumps in and out of time and the characters' minds. The dead bodies seem less important than the three-dimensional characters who are portrayed with humor, humanity and surprise. I love surprise! She isn't afraid of violence either, but it's so freshly described it works even for me, a more or less cozy writer. There are coincidences --a reviewer might fry the average writer for that, but with Atkinson we sense the Three Fates lurking behind the scenes. I grinned all the way through the book!

### **Agatho**

Let's look at some of the mega-sellers of recent years. Anyone familiar with the *Twilight* series?

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

My daughter inhales the *Twilight* books.

**Agatho**

What do you think she likes about them?

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I think it's the combination of romance, fantasy, otherworldliness, and secrets. Oh... and the misdirection of evil. Persons who we think are evil turn out not to be...and vice versa (this is an added attraction).

**Wendy Hornsby**

I think I'm of the wrong generation. I prefer friends and lovers that are actually living beings.

**Earl Staggs**

Same here, Wendy. I can't get into vampires and such. Nothing wrong with them, just not for me.

**Jack Getze**

I've read two pages of the first book of the *Twilight* series. Couldn't finish because of writing -- no craft at all. But I hear she's getting much better. The movie I saw and enjoyed the story. Teenage love with great conflict.

**Agatho**

In terms of originality though...Do the *Twilight* books really do anything different? I mean, vampire stories have been around for centuries.

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

No. They're not terribly original. At their core, though, is the question of good vs. evil, redemption, danger, and love. It's an irresistible combination.

**Nancy Means Wright**

But you can do good vs. evil with *The Hobbit*.

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

True. But the *Hobbit* isn't much of an erotic fantasy, as are the *Twilight* books.

**Earl Staggs**

I grew up on Bela Lugosi as Dracula. Any other kind of vampire doesn't interest me.

**Jack Getze**

In the *Twilight* books, though, the vampires are good, not evil. At least the boy she loves, his family.

### **Vicki Delany**

That's not original though. In *Buffy*, Angel was a vampire, but not evil.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Good is boring.

### **Agatho**

I think those books are all about sex in an age of confusion about the subject. What makes them so romantic, and so appealing to teenagers, IMHO, is the fact that this dark, romantic character (Edward) loves the girl so much that he won't have sex with her. Isn't that the most romantic thing imaginable?

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

Agree... the sexual tension is what makes them like dynamite to teenage girls.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Not very romantic if he won't have sex.

### **Jack Getze**

Didn't Nancy just wipe out eight different lines of Harlequin books?

### **Wendy Hornsby**

I like a vampire who's the evil one. But I understand the appeal of the books to young folks. And I loved *Buffy*.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Romance is all about forbidden sex. Will they, won't they...?

### **Vicki Delany**

Look at the books by Julia Spencer-Fleming. Will they/won't they, book after book...

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Remember Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane finally getting to the "act"?

### **Nancy Means Wright**

To me the first great sex fiction was *Oedipus the King*.

### **Agatho**

What do you see as the great creative, original works of our genre?

### **Jack Getze**

*The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (Edgar Allan Poe), *Double Indemnity* (James M. Cain), *The Big Sleep* (Raymond Chandler), the entire Travis McGee series (John D. MacDonald), *A is for Alibi* and the entire Kinsey Millhone series (Sue Grafton), *Red Dragon* (Thomas Harris), *Skin Tight* (Carl Hiaasen).

### **Vicki Delany**

V.I. Warshawski (Sara Paretsky), Sharon McCone (Marcia Muller). In their day those books were groundbreaking. Tough independent women. Now of course there's nothing original about them at all. Which is one thing about originality - it doesn't last for long.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

As far as today is concerned, a couple of authors come to mind: Thomas Cook, because he takes such every day situations and amps the tension unbearably...

### **Earl Staggs**

Chandler's Philip Marlowe, of course, but then came Spillane who added sex and violence to the PI bag of tricks.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Besides the grandfathers of noir, Hammett, Chandler, et al., I think that Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* was a turning point. Also Wambaugh. Lately, I'd put Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* in the pool of really original stuff.

### **Vicki Delany**

I mentioned *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* earlier. Totally original character and voice.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I think the use of the unreliable narrator, e.g., in Lehane's *Shutter Island* is original, if only because it's rarely done. I think he did it well.

### **Earl Staggs**

Recently for me, *Baby Shark*, by Robert Fate.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

For me it's definitely *Oedipus Rex*. He goes forth to disprove the prophecy that he'd kill his father & wed his mother, only to find in the end that he himself is the killer. Of course he gets his comeuppance. After Jocasta hangs herself by her hair (I love that hairy noose), he blinds himself with her gold brooches & is led off to a hell of darkness and torment. I love that chorus of old men who voice our reactions as they comment on the situation. And no use of deus ex machina--just plain old detective work like questioning and interviewing. Until the inexorable end when he has to self-convict. I stole that plot myself in a short story.

### **Vicki Delany**

Another book I read recently with a very original setting is *A Beautiful Place to Die*. South Africa in 1951.

### **Jack Getze**

I blogged about him last May, so I'm not kissing up, Mr. Agatho, but Steve Rigolosi's

*Androgynous Murder House Party* is the most original thing I've read in decades.

**Nancy Means Wright**

Did anyone mention *The Cask of Amontillado* in the villain's voice? Stone by stone Montresor holes up his victim and we don't see it coming till it happens. Brilliant use of suspense with no detectives on the case. And unlike Oedipus Rex, no punishment. I like to see the bad guy win now and then.

**Agatho**

Let's try to take these in more or less chronological order. Do you all think that Oedipus Rex might be more of an influence on the genre than most of us consciously realize?

**Vicki Delany**

I've never thought of it before, but yes I do.

**Earl Staggs**

I won't argue that.

**Jack Getze**

No clue.

**Wendy Hornsby**

Of course. There are only 5 classical plots, right?

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I thought there were only two... plots, that is.

**Agatho**

What are those two, Libby?

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

A person goes on a journey.... and... a stranger comes to town.

**Jack Getze**

I thought man vs. man, man vs. woman, man vs. the gods. man vs. himself.

**Earl Staggs**

I've heard there are anywhere from 7 to 27 basic plots, depending on who you ask. The originality comes in with what you do with them.

**Wendy Hornsby**

The two are Comedy and Tragedy. Three more are variations, e.g. tragi-comedy. The point is, a great story lasts.



**Nancy Means Wright**

Voltaire said the most original writers borrow one from another. So steal that plot, right?

**Wendy Hornsby**

Absolutely.

**Earl Staggs**

I don't steal, but I may, uh, borrow.

**Wendy Hornsby**

Which suggests the big challenge we face, and that is making that plot and our characters seem original.

**Agatho**

So, moving along chronologically, we get to Poe, with *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *Cask of Amontillado*. To me, these are a mixture of mystery and horror...what do we see as Poe's contribution to the genre? Perhaps he is the first of the genre cross-overs that we hear so much about, but that often have a hard time finding readership?

**Jack Getze**

The first detective is Poe's, right?

**Nancy Means Wright**

Of course it's taught in schools. But no, I insist on Oedipus as the first detective.

**Vicki Delany**

Collins was after Poe, but he was the first police detective, I believe. There are detectives and "detectives." Miss Marple was a "detective." Sgt. Cuff was a detective.

**Wendy Hornsby**

What about the Baroness Orczy?

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

We could talk Poe for the rest of the hour, but I think his most lasting contribution was mood and tone. As far as I know, he started the "Gothic"...

**Vicki Delany**

Agreed about mood and tone for Poe.

**Nancy Means Wright**

Yes, I recall something about one single impression of horror: setting, plot, characters, tone for Poe.

### **Vicki Delany**

*The Moonstone* by W. Collins is classic mystery - crime happens, police arrives, clues sorted through.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I'll never forget THE TELL TALE HEART. Now, that was original...

### **Jack Getze**

Poe scared the hell out of me. No one else has as much.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

I loved *The Moonstone*. And he used multiple narrators as well, to comment one on the other. It was a real influence on my own mysteries.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Poe wrote scary stuff, but also really smart. How many books have you read that took his plots? *The Purloined Letter* and the clue out in the open where no one would look comes to mind.

### **Agatho**

So let's move on to the great hardboiled folks-- Chandler, Hammett, Cain. In those days, do you think mystery was a "man's" genre? Were those books quintessentially American, playing to the American ideas of what a "man" should be and how he should conduct himself?

### **Vicki Delany**

Yes to the 'man' question. I once heard Sara Paretsky say she wrote V.I. because she was sick of books in which the a slutty female character ALWAYS turned out to be evil as well.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I think hard-boiled WAS a man's purview when it started... but don't forget Patricia Highsmith was writing those creepy thriller stories pretty much at the same time. You couldn't call them hard-boiled, but she was a master of her craft.

### **Vicki Delany**

The women in those hard-boiled books were pretty one-dimensional, fitted into the appropriate category.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

In Vermont our Council on the Arts just had a Big Read: *The Maltese Falcon*. And I gained a real respect for Hammett. (Not to mention Humphrey Bogart). I really love that book and I'm not a noir person--though noir often dips more deeply into character than amateur sleuth. I think of David Goodis, whom I admire. I hate what some of the noir writers do to woman though. The femme fatale. What a bore.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I have conducted several workshops on *The Postman Always Rings Twice...* for its time, it was original as well.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Women couldn't be career PI's and cops, so instead we got Miss Marple and Harriet Vane. Maybe the reading audience wouldn't accept a woman as protagonist who was as tough as Lew Archer. He was a love 'em and leave 'em stinker.

### **Earl Staggs**

I think Chandler created the man other men wanted to be--tough enough to handle the bad guys on the mean streets, but also intelligent and with some class.

### **Vicki Delany**

Isn't noir all about character? I stick to the definition of noir as a book in which there isn't a single good character, there is no one in the book that you would want on your side.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

Again, the tone... cynical, hard-bitten, the bad are always punished, and sometimes the good are too... Cain had a fairly bleak take on human nature, even when the humans tried to do something noble.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

But at least the characters are three-dimensional and interesting.

### **Jack Getze**

I see Cain as special, creating a narrator that was a crook, not a private eye. Hammett's Spade was in the middle, Chandler was the hero. Noir, to me, means Cain. *Double Indemnity*. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Tough guys all, though. I think I'm having trouble quitting smoking because of Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe.

### **Earl Staggs**

With Cain, women became more than pretty playthings. They became cunning enough to make chumps of men.

### **Agatho**

So, then (again moving chronologically), we move to a more "modern" take on men with the novels of John D. MacDonald. How was he original, if at all?

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I love MacDonald. But I see him more as an evolution of the hard-boiled genre, rather than something altogether new and different.

**Jack Getze**

Travis McGee was the first real, who-gives-a-shit wise ass. Travis lived on a boat, didn't really have to work. Not the sort of hardboiled stuff I'd been reading. It was Original FOR ME.

**Nancy Means Wright**

I haven't read him. I've been concentrating on women--modern and historical.

**Wendy Hornsby**

The setting was Florida instead of the mean streets of big cities. There was a sweetness about his detective also: loved kids, animals, and lots of women, whom he respected.

**Nancy Means Wright**

Are there any books by men with really deep honest characterizations of women? Is it possible?

**Wendy Hornsby**

Nancy, can you ask the same question about women writing about men?

**Vicki Delany**

Women are much more likely to write about male protags than vice versa.

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I think that's changing, Vicki.

**Nancy Means Wright**

Yes. Are there any novels by woman using male POVs? I write from many POVs in each book and try to be honest, but I don't always succeed.

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

Michael Allen Dymoch. She writes police procedurals with a cop and a male psychiatrist. She does it quite well...

**Nancy Means Wright**

Look at Kate Atkinson writing from a male detective's viewpoint. He's a reluctant kind of fellow, quite androgynous. I think she does a good job.

**Vicki Delany**

Just read a book by Deborah Crombie, and I thought the male detective (who was originally the man character) was far, far less interesting than the female. He was pretty boring.

**Jack Getze**

Men ARE boring.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

Not touching this one with a ten-foot pole.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

P.D. James has Dalgliesh, and Elizabeth George has Lord Lynley.

### **Vicki Delany**

P.D. James said recently she created Dalgliesh because back in the '60s there were no female police detectives. If she was creating a new character now, it would be a woman.

### **Agatho**

Interesting, though, that P.D James DOES have a woman detective - Cordelia Gray - but has chosen to make most of her oeuvre about Dalgliesh

### **Vicki Delany**

They asked James about C. Gray. She said it just wasn't working for her as a continuing series main character.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Why, do you think? To get male readers? Because readers expect a male detective and have more respect? A neighbor told me she won't go to a church where there's a woman minister. As if men are closer to God.

### **Vicki Delany**

Nancy, I know what you mean but I don't think there's much of it any more. 22% of police in Canada are women..

### **Earl Staggs**

One of the best pure writers around now (IMHO) is S.J. Rozan. She writes a female/male PI team and does both very well.

### **Agatho**

This is a good transition to the next phase of originality--the rise of the woman detective, the woman protagonist, the woman mystery writer. We mentioned V.I. Warshawski (Sara Paretsky) and Marcia Muller... What do we see as their contributions?

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

They opened crime fiction to a much wider audience...

### **Vicki Delany**

Strong tough women who could hold their own. It was through V.I. that I came to read mystery fiction.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

A carry over from old Nancy Drew. Toughness, independence, no dependency on a man, all that good stuff.

### **Jack Getze**

I loved Kinsey Millhone from the first book.

### **Vicki Delany**

As Libby, said, I am one of them. When I heard Sara P. being interviewed (what I said above) I thought, "That sounds interesting" - this was long ago. And I read a V.I. book and have read crime ever since.

### **Earl Staggs**

Plus they kick ass, something only males had done before.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Sara and Marcia's detectives were tough and competent, but they were also believably female. They were not loners raised by wolves, like Lew Archer, but had friends and attachments.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

But do men read mysteries by women?

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Statistically, not as often as they read men. But women also tend to buy books by men. Splain that.

### **Jack Getze**

I do. Megan Abbott, for one. Evanovich.

### **Earl Staggs**

I do. I find too many male-penned PI's to be thinly disguised clones of Spenser and such.

### **Vicki Delany**

J.K. Rowling made her main character a boy because boys wouldn't read books with a female protag.

### **Agatho**

This would be interesting to trace, women's reading habits, and how Paretsky/McCone were among the first to really tap into that unmet need...Are they the first feminist mystery writers?

### **Nancy Means Wright**

There was Dorothy Sayers. *Gaudy Night* is a true feminist novel.

### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

They are not the first female crime fiction writers... I mean, Dorothy Sayers is there... and others... but feminist? Yes. I think so.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

First feminist mystery writers? Sayers, yes, but also Margaret Millar, Craig Rice, Charlotte Armstrong, Dell Shannon.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Now I have to sneak in Mary Wollstonecraft, my real-life protag who was an early feminist and called a hyena in petticoats. I worry that men won't want to read the series....

### **Agatho**

Wendy brought up an interesting "first" - the "true crime novel" *IN COLD BLOOD* by Truman Capote. And of course we now have nonfiction true crime all over the best-seller lists.

### **Earl Staggs**

Capote catapulted true crime to best-sellerdom, for sure.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Capote certainly blurred the lines there, didn't he?

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Yes, Capote was androgynous. I love androgynous men, gay or straight or in between.

### **Vicki Delany**

Best-seller lists are now full of memoirs that might once have been disguised as fiction.

### **Agatho**

And, of course, fiction disguised as memoirs....

### **Jack Getze**

It was called New Journalism or something at the time. Like Wolfe's early stuff.

### **Agatho**

This brings us more or less to modern times (thereabouts) with great books like Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, as well as *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* and *Androgynous Murder House Party*. This is a good time to ask you about your work. How "original" do you consider your work? How much of a goal is "originality" when you sit down at the keyboard?

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I don't think of my work in that way. I'm thinking more, what is a compelling story? What do I want to say? Can I live with this story for the next year or so...

**Vicki Delany**

Originality isn't a goal. I think trying to be original would come out pretty forced.

**Jack Getze**

I think my character is original, that is, a real person. But every writer thinks this.

**Vicki Delany**

I do think my character Molly Smith is original, far as I know, being a police officer yet young, somewhat naive, still innocent. Cops are usually either hard-drinking seen-it-all, or the insightful detective.

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I don't have any illusions of being original. I just want to be good.

**Jack Getze**

My guy doesn't solve crimes, he IS the crime.

**Earl Staggs**

In my current novel in print, my protag has experience as an FBI agent, but also has some psychic abilities. Like real-life psychics who aid police in solving crimes, he leads a normal life when not using his gift.

**Libby Fischer Hellmann**

But, as I said, before I like Thomas Cook... and Lehane is always experimenting.

**Vicki Delany**

What's original anyway? You start a new book today, by the time it's published a couple of hundred others might be out there.

**Earl Staggs**

My WIP involves a secret agency that tracks terrorists and exterminates them before they kill innocent people.

**Agatho**

So the question thus becomes - and I'm sure aspiring writers would be interested in your answers to this - How do you hope to get the attention of an agent and/or publisher? Before you got contracts for your first books, did you think about how they'd be positioned in the marketplace?



### **Libby Fischer Hellmann**

I did to the extent that I based Ellie Foreman on a person kind of like me, and the women I was friends with... someone who was a mother, who lived in the suburbs, who had a career they may or may not have put on hold... but who was curious and aware of the world around her, including the dark side. In that respect, Ellie was definitely not original. I hoped she would be likeable, though, and it turned out she was.

### **Jack Getze**

To aspiring writers, I'd say STORY is the most important thing you can have going for yourself.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

Part of originality is creating or using an original character. But you have to find someone who was original in her own right, which is why I chose Wollstonecraft. It's a risk though. She led a life of rebellion and revolution and was herself so inquisitive & daring and outraged at any social injustice that I felt she'd make an intriguing--if reluctant--sleuth. The problem was to work within the genre, but I used different POVs to tell the story, along with bits of her letters and fragments of her backstory.

### **Earl Staggs**

I agree about story being paramount. I like characterization, too, of course, but if the plot is anemic or filled with holes, I'm outta there.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

When I wrote my first book my only goal was finishing. Hadn't thought about launching a series, getting an agent, and so on. The shock is that an agent took it on and sold it. That was my learning book. From then, published by a big house, I was aware what my "slot" was at all times. I imagined a protagonist who traveled the world making pithy films, but was told I was an LA writer and that she would stay near home.

### **Vicki Delany**

I also write a series set in the Klondike Gold Rush and I have been criticized by reviewers for my protagonist being too modern. One reviewer said she was a "single mother." As if women didn't have children before marriage in the past.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

One has to make the character likable. That can be hard! Especially with a tough, original character who has her unlikable moments. But my editor reminds me that the protag should be sympathetic/likable. Not always easy!

### **Agatho**

I want to ask - Have any of you ever tried something daring, different, etc - or THOUGHT about trying something different - but were told by your agent or publisher not to chance it?

### **Vicki Delany**

I did a book for Poisoned Pen Press that they rejected outright. It had the threat of incest and they didn't want to touch that. This was to be my third book with PPP [Poisoned Penn Press], so I wasn't a newbie to them.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Once in a while you need to shake up a series. I opened my last book with the suicide of one of my main characters. Not sorry I did.

### **Earl Staggs**

When I started MEMORY OF A MURDER, I was told publishers would not accept a psychic as the main character. Ruth Cavin rejected me for that reason. So did Michael Seidman.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

I set a book opening in Asia. The editor, former editor, cut it. Sigh.

### **Jack Getze**

I have a thriller in the drawer my agent won't touch. An old lady shaman named Menily saves the planet.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

I wanted to write about young Charlotte Corday (1793) who saw a pamphlet that read "let Marat's head fall & the Republic is saved." So she left her Bible open to the story of Judith and Holofernes, went to Marat's apartment, where he was soaking in the tub & stabbed him. I proposed to start with a short bloody prologue in which she stabs him, then go back and tell WHY. I'd do it in second person, just two characters to the point of the confrontation when she takes pity on his open sores and he on her youthful ideals, and then he tries to seduce her. I'd end the story there. But my then-agent said it wasn't her cup of tea. But I still plan to do it as a short story.

### **Agatho**

When I have a writer who sells well with his/her current formula, I always cringe when s/he wants to move in a different direction. And then I bitch and moan on Mysterious Matters about authors writing the same book a dozen times.

### **Earl Staggs**

They'll keep writing the same book as long as they sell. I remember when Ed McBain wanted to quit the 87th Precinct series. His publisher said, no way.

### **Vicki Delany**

I write two completely different series. So I can do new things and not upset any apple carts.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

I get upset when a series character I thought I knew well becomes actually a different character. Why not just write a new character?

### **Earl Staggs**

But many readers say they want the character to change and grow over the years.

### **Wendy Hornsby**

Grow, yes. But maybe not become, say, a vampire.

### **Vicki Delany**

As a reader, I want them to grow. But I guess it's a fine line - you don't want them to do something out of character.

### **Jack Getze**

Growth is important for my character. He started out as such a childish jerk. I have to make him better.

### **Earl Staggs**

I've heard complaints that Kinsey never changed and that Scarpetta changed for the worse.

### **Vicki Delany**

I haven't read either one of those for a long time. Both just got boring.

### **Earl Staggs**

What's the next big thing going to be in Mystery/Crime fiction?

### **Vicki Delany**

Angels I hear.

### **Nancy Means Wright**

What do you all think about epistolary novels? I happen to love them.

### **Jack Getze**

Those can be fun.

### **Vicki Delany**

*Guernsey Potato Peel Pie and Literary Society* was told all in letters.

### **Agatho**

I think we're going to continue to see success of paranormal/horror + mystery crossovers.

**Jack Getze**

As long as Charlaine's writing them, I'm be reading them.

**Earl Staggs**

A vampire PI?

**Vicki Delany**

Been done. Tanya Huff does a vampire PI.

**Wendy Hornsby**

Psychic cats in love must be next.

**Agatho**

I'll retire before I ever publish a "psychic cats in love" book.

**Earl Staggs**

Gay vampire PI?

**Agatho**

There are certain things I tell my authors NEVER to do. But I wonder if such things could be done, by the right person.

**Wendy Hornsby**

I hope that good writing prevails, and that there are no absolute nevers.

**Earl Staggs**

I believe there's only one real rule in writing -- "Whatever works." If you can write it and make it work, go for it.

**Agatho**

Before we all sign off, let me ask one question for the readers of this forum: This may be the first time they are exposed to you and your work. Which of your books would you recommend for a first-time reader and why?

**Vicki Delany**

In my case it depends on what they like. The Constable Molly Smith books are police procedurals. The series begins with *In the Shadow of the Glacier*. The Klondike Gold Rush books are lighthearted, more of a comedy. The first is *Gold Digger*. *Gold Fever* will be out in April. I have also written standalone suspense, *Scare the Light Away* and *Burden of Memory*, both from Poisoned Penn Pres. Both have a backstory of something that happened during WWII that is affecting events of today.

**Wendy Hornsby**

I would recommend my newest, *In the Guise of Mercy*. It's my current favorite until *The Paramour's Daughter* comes out in September, both from Perseverance. It's also widely available, unlike my backlist.

### Earl Staggs

My *Memory of a Murder* has 12 reviews on Amazon and B&N online -- all five-star. I'm proud of that and recommend it to anyone.

### Jack Getze

I like my second novel, *Big Money*.

### Nancy Means Wright

Since my St. Martin's series is finished, I'll recommend *Midnight Fires*, the first in a new series. I'm now with Perseverance Press and loving the relationship and living in the 18th century with my alter ego, Wollstonecraft. (Never mind what horrible names they called her.... She was an Original.)

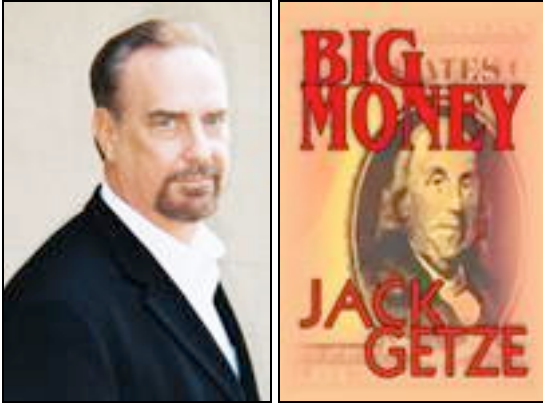
[Editor's Note: Libby Fischer Hellmann had a previous engagement and was thus unable to be online for the last part of our discussion. Her most recent novel, *Doubleback*, was published in 2009 by Bleak House.]

## About the Panelists



**VICKI DELANY's** newest Constable Molly Smith novel, *WINTER OF SECRETS*, received a starred review from Publishers Weekly, which said, "she uses...artistry as sturdy and restrained as a Shaker chair." Vicki writes everything from standalone novels of suspense (*BURDEN OF MEMORY*), to the traditional village/police procedural Molly Smith series, to a light-hearted historical series (*GOLD DIGGER*) set in the heyday of the Klondike Gold Rush. Vicki lives in rural Prince Edward County, Ontario. You can visit Vicki on the Web at [www.vickidelany.com](http://www.vickidelany.com).

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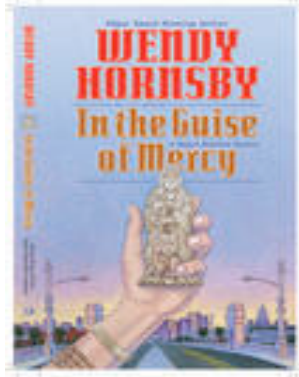


**JACK GETZE** edits short fiction for *Spinetinger* Magazine, and spent nine years as a news and feature writer for the Los Angeles Times. His suspense novels, *BIG NUMBERS* and *BIG MONEY*, feature screwball stockbroker Austin Carr, and "have that same feel and style of writers such as John D. MacDonald," says Bloodstained Book Reviews. You can visit Jack on the Web at [www.jackgetze.com](http://www.jackgetze.com).



**LIBBY FISCHER HELLMANN** is the author of *DOUBLEBACK*, the second Georgia Davis PI novel (October, 2009, Bleak House). In it Davis is paired with video producer and single mother Ellie Foreman, the protagonist of Libby's other 4-book series. Libby also writes short stories and edited the acclaimed *CHICAGO BLUES*. She lives in the Chicago area.

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**WENDY HORNSBY** is the author of eight mystery novels, six of them in the Maggie MacGowen series, and many short stories. She has received the Edgar Allan Poe Award (the “Edgar”); its French equivalent, le Grand Prix de Littérature Policière, and The American Mystery Award from Mystery Scene Magazine. Critics have describes her mysteries as “refreshing, real, and raunchy” (NY Times) and “unusually poignant” (LA Times). Wendy and her husband live in Southern California, where she is Professor of History at Long Beach City College.

Derringer Award-winning author **EARL STAGGS** has seen many of his short stories published in magazines and anthologies. He served as Managing Editor of Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine and as President of the Short Mystery Fiction Society. His column “Write Tight” appears in Apollo’s Lyre at <http://apollos-lyre.tripod.com/> and he is a member of Make Mine Mystery at <http://makeminemystery.blogspot.com/>. He is the author of MEMORY OF A MURDER.



**NANCY MEANS WRIGHT** has published 15 books of fiction, nonfiction, and poems, including 5 mystery novels (St. Martin’s Press), a mystery novella (Worldwide), and now MIDNIGHT FIRES (Perseverance Press), based on the life of 18<sup>th</sup> century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Her children’s mysteries received an ’06 Agatha Award for Best Children’s/YA Novel, and an ’08 Agatha nomination. A longtime teacher and Bread Loaf Scholar for her first novel, Wright lives with her spouse and two Maine Coon cats in the environs of Middlebury, Vermont. You can visit her on the Web at [www.nancymeanswright.com](http://www.nancymeanswright.com).

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