

The truth is...we gather on the Third Monday of each month to practice our writing skills. We listen and share in each other's work. We are small in number and our commitment is strictly to produce and foster creativity among our members.

We started in July 1999 and consist of adults that enjoy writing memoirs, commentaries, essays, poems, and/or prose. Our simple method each month is to use a pre-selected word or phrase as the basis of a story, an idea, an opinion, a derivative of, or an implied essence of and write a 1 to 1 ½ page document. We share our stories, comment, and in that way build up our writing skills through practice and presentation. The atmosphere is friendly and supportive, and the feedback is gentle.

Curious? Always wanted to try writing for fun, entertainment, or even profit? Come visit with us at any of our open meetings. Bring a sample of your work. Sit in and see what we do. If you like it, join us every month and become a member.

Original Works by Members of the Pen & Ink Writers' Group
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February 2017 selection – Murder

Conductorless
By J. Smetana

Three kids were in Mariano's grocery store, goofing off. White kids pretending to be black. I can remember when people pretended to be of a higher status than they were. Now it's the other way 'round. If you are middle class why not lead people to believe you were raised by crackheads in the ghetto. These kids were kicking a soccer ball, knocking shit off the shelves. They tried to look like tough punks but the "leader" (not the biggest kid) was the only one who came even close. I told him: If you hit me with that ball I will kill you. I will snap your neck like a piece of spaghetti and drop you on the floor. Your two little friends will be witnesses left to tell the story. Kuumbaya.

###

Murder
By Val Collins

How should this be done? What method would be best? What would finally and efficiently accomplish the task? The topic pertaining to these questions was none other than...murder! This was not about the murder of a creepy crook nor about a scoundrelly scallywag or a venomous villain. This was a plan of attack against an ill-tempered vexatious stepmother and the masterminds of the crime were two young girls ages 10 and 13. They were the stepdaughters indeed and inherited this new mother when their own

tragically died and their father remarried. She was cantankerous and cranky and surely displayed displeasure at these two girls who to her were burdens to endure. She did not want to care for them nor did she care about them. They were thrust upon her as an unwanted weight upon the back. The girls felt this. They knew this. And they wanted out of this whole situation. Their father was good and kind but that simply did not make up for the woman he married and the ill will she brought into the household, which decidedly fouled the family. Was this woman really all that bad or was it in part that the girls, at such a young age, lost a loving mother who simply could not be replaced. There probably was some truth to all of these notions. Nevertheless from their point of view action needed to be taken.

The girls talked long into the night for quite some time about ridding themselves of this unwanted woman in their house. Yes it was their house after all and the stepmother barged in, taking charge, taking over and taking peace away from all who resided within. Their father clearly did not understand the predicament in which they all found themselves, thus the girls had only each other to rely on. This brought them closer to one another than anything else could have. They developed a strong bond as sisters and shall we say partners in crime. For when no other solution seemed possible, the only choice left in their minds was murder. But how should this be done? The girls certainly had no experience in this kind of crime, let alone any crime indeed. They had no access to objects that could be used as weapons. They couldn't even come up with a viable plan but they were fans of the Nancy Drew mystery series so perhaps that could offer options. In the end they decided poison would work the best. Mouse poison they observed their father scatter around? Cleaning chemicals under the sink? Weed killer in the gardening shed? These were all possibilities but in the end too complicated to actually carry out. So instead the girls decided to run away and hide in a large box set aside for moving. That would do for the time being until they could run away in proper and more permanent fashion. It was raining heavily that day and the box provided shelter as well as cover. Here they could think and buy some time. They absolutely did not want to move to the city, which was the plan and indeed did not want to move at all. Oh life seemed so very cruel at this moment. But then there was the dog. How could they abandon their beloved pet, yet in the care of that decidedly uncaring woman? In the end the girls came out of hiding, the family moved to another house in the same town, the stepmother's life was spared and life went on. To this day the sisters, now advanced in their years, remain close and bonded and one might guess in part because of a murder plot long ago that was seriously considered, painstakingly planned but ultimately abandoned.

###

A Murder Where No One Dies

by: Susan J Wilfong

This is the story of a murder
That took place in my own backyard.
It got no publicity,
Not even a single guard

My husband had left for work
Very early on that day.
He had a lot to get done
And so he went his way.

My day started off bad.
It started with the alarm clock.
The time, I saw was flashing.
To me, this was a shock.

I usually hear the storms
As they rumble through the night.
The thunder is so noisy
And the lightening is so bright.

What was the real time?
Did I over sleep?
Am I already late for work?
My sanity, I tried to keep.

The guy on the radio announced,
"The time is 6:42".
At least I'm not late for work,
But, now what am I going to do?

I grabbed my bowl of Cheerios
And went to sit on the deck.
Yes, I sat in something.
The seat, I forgot to inspect.

My Cheerios were stale.
The milk had somehow turned bad.
I started to feel defeated
And very, very sad.

I got mad at my bowl of Cheerios,
For not tasting as good as it should.
Is my whole day going to be like this?
I was afraid I thought it would.

I took that bowl of cereal
And tossed it in the yard.
I wasn't even thinking
And did it with little regard.

I went back inside
And started to get ready for work.
I wondered what kind of craziness
In this day did lurk.

After a while
I looked outside.
OMG! It's a "Murder"!
This cannot be denied.

There they were,
Eating my stale Cheerios.
A bunch of big and hungry birds.
There were about twenty crows.

A bunch of crows is called a "Murder".
You see, I didn't lie
When I mentioned my backyard murder
Where no one had to die.

###

Murder in the Museum
By N. Stewart

(Setting - Early on a Sunday morning, two people are studying a picture in the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago when a blood curling scream is heard off stage.)

Jane: (Shaken.) What was that? On my goodness that sounded awful. Should we do something about that? (Runs for cover under a bench and takes out her cell phone, beginning to punch in numbers) Don't just stand there. Move!

Jill: You are such a worry wart. It probably was just some kids fooling around? Come out of there! Put the phone down.

(Enter a man, shirt dripping with blood. Jill freezes.)

Jill: Oh my... (Her words choked off as he grabs her around the neck.)

Man: Stay quiet. Any one else here with you? (Jill shakes her head no.) You are coming with me.

(Jill stamps on his foot and struggles to get away. The man just tightens his grip on her throat.)

Man: That was stupid. Do you want to die right now or live a little longer? Choice is yours.

Jill: (Coughing.) Lon-ger.

(They move off toward an exit)

Jane: (Whispering into the phone) Help. Please. We're at the MMA and a man...I think he murdered someone...we heard screams...he was all bloody...he grabbed my friend...I was hiding under a bench...I should have tried to save her. Come quickly, help us, they're heading for the exit. What? Ok, I will stay on the line and stay hidden, but you have to help. My friend is in trouble...please hurry. If she dies, it will be my fault.

(Drops the phone on the floor, rushes out from cover, grabs a nearby statue, and frantically goes after her friend.)

Jill: (Pleading.) Please let me go. I didn't see anything. I won't tell. You don't have to do this. Please just let me go.

Man: Fat chance of that. Shut up. *(Pulls her closer and brings out a knife that he puts to her chest).*

(Faint sounds of sirens begin to be heard upon nearing the exit.)

(As a car pulls up to the door, Jill begins to again struggle with the man. She kicks her right heel backward, landing it in his groin area. The knife falls as he doubles over, losing his grip on her for a second. Jill uses her body weight to fall forward and attempts to crawl away. Out of nowhere comes Jane with statute in hand, running, screaming like a banshee and smacks the statue into his head. He goes all the way down. The car pulls away. The police arrive, enter, observe, and go into action. The man is cuffed, head wound attended to, and taken away in a police car. Jill is interviewed, then Jane.)

Jane: *(Collapses on the floor next to Jill.)* That was some kinda kid fooling around all right. When he put that knife to your chest... I was so scared. I'm glad I didn't listen to you and I made that 911 call. From the bottom of my heart, I truly want to thank you for saving my life by saying you were alone.

Jill: Thanks for saving me by hitting him over the head with that statue. I don't think I could've gotten away on my own. When I saw that car pull up I knew it was all over for me. He'd either kill me right then or force me into the car and kill me later. I had to try to get away again. Your timing was excellent and what you did was very brave. I don't know if I could have smashed his head like that. So, I thank you for saving my life.

(A body bag is wheeled out the exit. Both watch, turn toward each other and hug.)

Jane: Let's get outta here.

(Fade to black)

###

Murder and Family **By Sara Schupack**

What is the difference between murder and justice? Is taking another life in retribution any different than the first murder, and how far back do you go to make claims of legitimacy?

I watch the very cheesy *CSI Miami*, with stupid death puns and the lead guy's macho sunglasses - it seems to be a big plot moment when he takes off or puts back on the sunglasses, which he does at the end of every single episode for the first few seasons. I don't like the actor at all, but I do like his character, because as tough as he is, he is also tender, and very protective of and kind to his team, his family. One character sells out to the press, another favors his long lost criminal biological father (he's half Hispanic and half Russian, but then finds out that his father is a disgruntled ex-spy who is a fake Russian, in order to be part of that family- very silly stuff), but through all of this, the hero assumes the best of his team and backs them up no matter what, even with their

faults and indiscretions. And of course, don't we want to be forgiven and loved in spite of the same?

I like the main character's gentleness with children and anyone who is vulnerable. Maybe seeing this sweetness in a world of murder and mayhem is exactly what someone who is hurting or lonely needs – to see that there is a place for warmth and loyalty even in the worst of work or life situations.

If I don't like the violence and don't approve of murder by any name, why do I eat up these shows like candy? Maybe it's about my age and my isolation here in a city without family or very many friends. I'm hunkering down, craving hours on my couch under blankets. My teenage son does whatever he does down in the basement, communicating at most one or two terse text messages. Maybe it's about my job. Any workplace has politics and icky bosses or difficult colleagues. Perhaps it's that my work doesn't suits who I am, and I am being treated with increasing disrespect. When I get home, I'm soul-tired. I have a new understanding of the need for pure and even mindless entertainment. Sometimes you're just too worn out by life to want to think or to encounter realistic, complex, confusing scenes. You have enough of that already lingering as jagged memories that come out to haunt you in nightmares. Maybe the drama of the stark life-or-death situations more extreme than my own struggles yet also clearly fictional, makes me feel better. As well as the fact that the bad guy always gets caught and always suffers.

I have noticed lately an up tick in my random, repeated violent fantasies, like the one of using my bad bosses as punching bags – boing, boing, boing goes the head-- but it's a cartoon image with no blood and no pain even, just the catharsis on my end. Can watching violence be a substitute for, instead of an incitement to, violence?

Through all of the crime shows I watch runs theme of loyalty. The good guys are justified in doing whatever it takes to protect or avenge family. And the teams become a family. They would do anything for one another. They can get through betrayals even, and still stay together. That is comforting for the audience, maybe particularly people who feel lonely, isolated, unsupported at home or at work. Yet I feel a pang when one of them goes vigilante for the team – I want the team safe, but who gets to decide when the ends justify the means? Is it okay to drop the blinds and beat up a known thug to get the whereabouts of the bigger thug? I don't think so.

More broadly, one can feel a part of the human family. There is dignity in each and every life in these shows (well, for the victims at least; the villains are depicted as unhuman). My bad screen bingeing pattern these days includes one session of *Forensic Files*, which shows real-life forensic teams, followed by one or three sessions of *CSI Miami*. In the real show, it is often after 2 years or even 20 years that the bad guy gets caught. In the fictional world, the M.E. is right downstairs, everyone puts a rush on it and does their work to hip, trendy music, and all DNA matches and substance analyses happen in minutes. The crime is solved by the end of the day (the characters are all wearing the same clothes. Maybe the more complex cases take 2 days.) Each dead body is a person who deserves the closure of their murderer being caught.

The real life detectives and crime scene experts persevere through many more years and obstacles. They are as determined and respectful as the fictional ones. *Forensic Files* is quite dated, sometimes showing crimes from long ago in small towns where "this kind of thing never happens", and you'd expect some racism, homophobia, unpleasant

attitudes, but the way the detectives and scientists talk, each and every victim matters and matters the same amount, and what matters most of all is the truth. Besides human decency prevailing, so does human ingenuity with the newest science and gadgets. As slick and fancy and impressive as the equipment is, it is only as effective as the smart people using it. That is another reassuring feature, that no matter how daunting a problem is, there are intelligent, dedicated people who can solve it. Opposing the chaos of hate and murder are the cool calm of science and solutions. For both shows, it is clear and simple; there is just one truth. In the real life show, justice is about finding the truth, not killing the murderer. I don't think I need the revenge story arc to make it a good, entertaining show. I prefer not to experience double murders.

Today's world is a blurry one, where fake facts are touted as important and opinions more important. I don't know what to read or whom to trust, in the public sphere or at work. The betrayals in real time hurt too much and I can't always find a way to forgive, so these shows with such brutality that manage to maintain humanity, intelligence, and loyalty to the clan, soothe. The characters become my family and I miss them when the show ends.

###

“Just One More Thing” By Elvira K. Castillo

I'm sure you know who always said, “Just one more thing,” annoying and driving his suspects, and sometimes audiences, crazy. So much so, that I think his suspects broke down and confessed just to get rid of this aggravating pest in the rumpled trench coat, with messed up hair, and usually carrying a stinky cigar. You guessed it, the irritating overly inquisitive, but great murder detective is “Columbo.”

Columbo was played by Peter Falk in the starring role, even though Bing Crosby was their first choice. The first telecast of the show was on September 15, 1971, 46 years ago. The television show began as a rotating mystery series together with “McMillan and Wife” and “McCloud.” “Columbo” was so popular that eventually they decided to make it a separate program. Co-incidentally, the last broadcast of the show was 24 years ago, the same day as today on February 20, 1993. I honestly don't believe anyone could have played the character as obnoxiously perfect as Peter Falk.

He was always called “Columbo,” with no first name. He drove a beat up old car and occasionally had a partner/companion, a Basset Hound whom he referred to as “Dog.” He often spoke of his wife, but she never appeared on the show.

The program was unique in that it disclosed the murder being committed at the beginning of the show. The criminals, carefully and cleverly, made sure there were no clues left tying them to the crime. But, little did they know that a shrewd detective would come along disguised as an incompetent bumbler, who would find some little thread connecting them to the murder.

One of my favorite shows was where a “lapel flower” was the clue to convict the criminal to the murder of his extra-marital-affair lover. The murderer was an orchestra conductor, whose wealthy wife always pinned a flower in his lapel for each concert.

Columbo found a flower at the scene of the murdered lover, and later noticed in a photo that the orchestra conductor's flower was missing during the concert.

To me it seemed like Columbo secretly suspected immediately the identity of the murderer. He then ingeniously and meticulously, step by step, gathered clues, while going back time and time again drilling the suspect with the inevitable "Just one more thing" question. Putting together his small clues and breaking down the criminal psychologically, he then solved the murder mystery, and the suspect was caught in his own trap.

The "Columbo" program had many super co-stars playing the villains, such as Roddy McDowall, Robert Culp and John Cassavetes. I mention these three as they were in some of my favorite shows. The expressions on their faces alone were enough -- They didn't have to say how truly annoyed they were with Columbo's investigation tactics.

Reruns of the show are still seen today, but unfortunately we lost this once unique and ingenious detective star. Peter Falk suffered from dementia before his death on June 23, 2011, at age 83.

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