

CRIMINAL INTENT

Featuring: Helen Nelson

Interviewed by: Janet Costello



Helen Nelson is the author of two stories in *The Whole She-Bang*. She is also the President of the Toronto Chapter of Sisters in Crime, and a regular contributor to this newsletter. For seven years she has been our Sister.

Q: You've been a reader all your life. Did your family have an influence in this? How much do you read?

A: I started reading when I was six. My father bought me a book at the end of Grade One and introduced me to the library. How much I read has varied over my life. Generally 2 to 5 books a week. More as a kid. My teachers conspired to limit me to 5 books a week, but I found ways around that! Where? In bed, on the stationary bike, with audio books when I'm shopping or doing housework. OK, why don't I just start with where I don't read? (Wicked grin.) Not at meals if I'm eating with someone else.

Q: The mystery book club you're in has been successful for over 20 years. Tell us about it.

A: Actually, I think it's been running for almost 25 years. I joined about sixteen years ago. It meets the first Tuesday every month, 12 months a year. We move it by a week on holidays. We meet at a pub on Laird. We enjoy our meal and a drink before we discuss the book. It's very informal.

Q: How did you become active in fandom?

A: I know you call it fandom, but I don't consider myself a fan. I'm a reader. I missed the first Bloody Words, but I've been to all the others. For Bouchercon 2004, in Toronto, I volunteered to handle registration, and what seemed like half of everything else (although it wasn't really). After that I had to catch my breath. Then I wanted to do more, so I joined Sisters in Crime. Cathy Dunphy twisted my arm (there went that grin again!) and then I was editing the newsletter. So I talked Janet into helping with it. The rest is history.

Q: You're co-chair of the 2017 Bouchercon that will be in Toronto. Tell us what you enjoy about the Bouchercon conventions.

A: The first one for me was in Toronto, 2004. I'd be hard pressed to say I attended, as I was in the convention office the whole time. As something of a control freak, I enjoyed managing things -- making sure they ran as smoothly as possible. I didn't get to any panels, but I didn't miss out on any of the parties. Over the years I've made many new friends at Bouchercon! In Alaska a few of us shared dinner with Stephen Booth, and as we walked back to the hotel, we encountered a dead body being investigated by

the police! The convention there was smaller, but brilliantly organized. I only hope we can do as well for 2017. We've already lined up some of the Guests of Honour, including Louise Penny as Canadian Guest of Honour, Chris Grabenstein as Bcon4Kids Guest of Honour, and Twist Phelan and Gary Phillips sharing duties as toastmaster. I think organizing this over the next few years will be a lot of fun!

Q: Did your involvement with the mystery community lead to your short story writing?

A: Well, I'd say that maybe it helped me realize that I could write mystery as well as reading it. But overall, no, I was writing stories before I had any mystery community involvement at all. Mostly for individual nieces and nephews. And earlier, as a kid, I would tell ghost stories to cousins and friends -- stories I would make up as I went. I think they were quite gruesome -- involving lots of severed body parts. I don't think any of my ghosts met their end in one piece. At any rate they worked to scare my cousins and got me in a bit of hot water.

Q: I think you'll agree that formatting *The Whole She-Bang* was more difficult than the writing or editing processes. Do you have advice for anyone who is doing their own formatting?

A: Doing the formatting for *The Whole She-Bang* was a huge learning experience. I'd done a Sisters In Crime workshop at Bouchercon in St. Louis, but helpful as that was, it wasn't enough. In addition the guides from Smashwords and Amazon were incredibly helpful, but still not enough! So I learned a lot as I went. One thing about formatting an anthology is that everyone has their own style! For example paragraphs are formatted differently from story to story. But in a book you have to use a uniform method. Errors in formatting paragraphs are going to jump off the page in both print format and electronic! But that's just one example. Next time, I would do a style guide beforehand, and probably some check lists of everything I was looking for. Of course that doesn't mean that another time I wouldn't find even more, but I think a style guide and check list would be a great head start! And take in any workshops you can find and make use of the guides offered by Amazon and Smashwords.

Q: You own thousands of books. Tell us the joys of having such a collection.

A: Well, I'm not sure my husband would see it as purely joyful. But, I'd always have something to read. There's joy in shelving, shuffling, and organizing them. Of

course, there's no choice, because otherwise they are stacking up on the floor. Well, OK, they do that anyway! Books are friends -- the times where I have lost some (in a flood once, and once, when I really needed some cash, I sold some), I've mourned their loss. I still miss some of those books that I lost 30 or 35 years ago! Some I've replaced, but some are simply impossible to replace without going to great expense.

Q: You are President of our chapter of Sisters in Crime. What would you like to see for our group?

A: I would like to see our chapter grow, and attract new members and younger members. We have a strong membership now, but we aren't going to live forever (she said in a light tone!). I'd like to ensure years, even decades, of success. Sisters in Crime is a worthwhile organization, fostering readers and writers. I'd like to see us expand what we're doing now. This last year marked our first anthology -- and I'd like to see us do more anthologies -- but give ourselves a little more time to do it! We have a couple of writer groups, but I'd still like to see us do a writers workshop. And I think we need to be vigilant too that we have lots to offer the readers in the group -- good programming, a strong newsletter and a dynamic and useful website come to mind.

Q: What fiction are you plotting now?

A: Well, there are always plots and ideas milling around in my head. But I've got a lot to learn about being a writer. I think the biggest thing a writer has to do is write. Get it down -- I was going to say on paper. But I guess now it's get that word processor going! There really is no other way. And I haven't found a way to commit myself

like I know I would have to seriously write! That's why I still think of myself as first and foremost a reader. I do plan to retire as chapter president by 2014, and shortly thereafter I'd retire from my day job too. I may write the occasional short story between now and then, but I really doubt I'd get serious about it before I dump the day job!

Q: How has being a Sister in Crime affected you?

A: First, I don't think that we should let ourselves think that as an organization we are no longer important or needed -- that all is fine for women now in the publishing world. Just follow the reviews in the major newspapers or online, or who wins the major awards. It has improved, but it is still predominantly men. The very notable exceptions are the fan awards like the Anthony and Agatha! So it also makes me very glad to be part of an organization that works toward equal treatment of women writers and that makes a difference.

Obviously, it's affected me personally more broadly than I thought it would when I filled out the membership form almost seven years ago! Within months of joining I became (with Janet) the newsletter editor. And then four years ago, I took on the job of chapter President. So, in a big way Sisters in Crime has changed my life. I went from being a book club member and attendee at Bloody Words to being very active in the mystery community! And this is a community! That, sense of community and the work that we are able to do as volunteers is what most inspires me. And because we are a community there is room for everyone to put in what they can -- be it a little time or a lot -- and it all adds up to something pretty special!

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