

Professional Etiquette for Mystery Writers: Part II by Eona Calli

Part I outlined how professional etiquette could facilitate writers' relationships with agents and editors. Here, the focus shifts to mystery conventions. They provide a singular opportunity for authors to interact with readers as well as others in our tribe, revel in your mutual passion for the best genre in the world, and, of course, promote your books. The events and their fan-based awards also boost the genre's profile in the publishing industry and thus reap dividends even for those unable to partake in their delights.

But these large-scale gatherings with hundreds in attendance can be nerve-racking, especially if you are unfamiliar with this arena. Fear not: once again etiquette provides a blueprint of dos and don'ts that will help allay any newbie's fears *and* boost your popularity or, at least, ensure you aren't a pariah. We'll begin first, though, with tips on how to gain coveted entry to their author-reader activities.

Getting Through the Gate

The number of interested authors far exceeds the slots available for author-reader activities, especially for highly desired panel participation. *First Draft* spoke with the chairs of three North American mystery book conventions: **Michele Drier**, Bouchercon co-chair in 2020 and Guppy president from 2013 to 2015; **Verena Rose**, Malice Domestic chair for 15 years; and **Lucinda Surber**, Left Coast Crime (LCC) co-chair of 2022 and member of its Standing Committee for the past decade.

Up-to-date information about these conventions, including registration and requirements, can be found on their respective websites. Their chairs offered Guppies additional suggestions on ways to increase the success of their applications.

All emphasize the importance of supplying as much relevant information as you can on the registration form. Michele says "you sell yourself" with these details, including mention of subgenre, publishing history, and any awards or stellar reviews from reputable sources.

Their programming committee members will also examine your online profile as part of their vetting practice, so be sure to update these sites—and make sure they showcase you to your best advantage—before hitting the send button on your form. Bouchercon relies on an author's Amazon page to gather additional information and put together cohesive panels. For similar reasons, LCC reviews an author's website.

The length of your attendance might matter too. Conventions are multiday events, and Lucinda says, "Authors attending the full convention have a much better chance of receiving a panel as-



Becky Clark, left, and Guppy Libby Klein at Left Coast Crime's Speed Dating event.

signment." Her two cohorts echo this statement: it's simply easier for the programming committee to schedule an author available throughout than one able to participate only on a specified day or days.

Does registering early increase your chances? At the very least, Verena says, "it doesn't hurt." The odds may vary according to the activity and convention. At Bouchercon, Michele indicates authors are accepted on a first-come applicant basis for Speed Dating (authors pitch their books and hand out swag to readers, one-on-one). But at LCC, Lucinda says, "Priority is given to authors who haven't Speed Dated before."

Panels and Speed Dating aren't the only scheduled opportunities for authors to mingle with fans: there are casual chats on the convention floor, signing slots, Debut Author breakfasts, and author-hosted tables that allow attendees to dine with an author(s).

Is it acceptable for an author to organize additional get-togethers with their readers? This is a frequent fan wish, according to our book blogger experts (see below). Michele says this isn't a problem at Bouchercon, and authors can also host open meet-and-greets. Verena notes authors are welcome to do so but advises not to schedule a time that conflicts with Malice's schedule. LCC is set apart in their unlimited Author-Reader Connections (author-fan social gatherings). Lucinda says any author can choose to be a host, decide what they'll do, and the number of readers who may sign up; they slate Connections into the program.

Be aware of two serious breaches of convention etiquette. **Do not** lobby the program committee members for panel or other types of participation. And Verena cautions, "It is not professional behavior to solicit the Board to get your book on the [Agatha Award] ballot. Each of the Board members, like all registrants, has one vote and does not influence who appears on the ballot."

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Eona Calli writes mysteries about rough endings and glorious new beginnings. The latest features a Greek protagonist, like her. Eona is also Canadian and has been known to apologize to inanimate objects after bumping into them. Find her Greek-ish desserts and more at <http://eonacalli.com>

Etiquette, continued

An etiquette do? Volunteer. Michele says, “It’s another way to get your name recognized by committee members, and it’s also just a nice thing to do.” These nonprofit conventions are fully organized by a devoted cadre of such helpers. Bouchercon needs over 300, in fact. So, why not lend a hand by stuffing book bags or helping with registration or whatever needs doing for a couple of hours? You might even make a friend!

Panel Etiquette, Start to Finish

Appropriate panel behavior may lead to future such opportunities; the converse also holds true. *First Draft* spoke with two popular fixtures on the convention circuit: Guppy **Leslie Budewitz**, Sisters in Crime president, 2015-16, and **Debra H. Goldstein**, Guppy president, 2017-2019. They provide insights into key moderator and panelist protocols.

Leslie says, “If you’re moderating a panel, do try to read each panelist’s latest book. If you’re a panelist, ask your publisher to send the moderator a copy.” Bare minimum, she adds, is to “take a peek at their websites, so you know what they write and can chat about it, even if you haven’t had a chance to read them.”

And if you’re a panelist, when “your moderator asks for possible questions and a bio from you beforehand, give them to her—don’t make her go search your website or the convention program for info about you,” Leslie adds. “I’ve had that happen to me as a moderator and it made me very grumpy!”

Panelists should wait for the moderator to initiate group contact with participants (it’s an etiquette no-no for a panelist to take the lead). Typically, a moderator sends out an email to everyone roughly three weeks before the event. They’ll ask if anyone wants to discuss anything specific and touch on how they envision the panel will proceed. Bouchercon’s Michele suggests if you don’t hear from your moderator in a timely fashion, you may gently nudge them via email, saying something like, “Is there anything I can do to help you with this panel?”

As for the panel discussion, Debra says, “The best etiquette is to remember that it is shared time—don’t hog the time, be polite, and if you are familiar with other authors’ works, think of ways of showcasing yourself and them in your replies. Finally, you don’t have to answer every question. If you don’t have something to add to the conversation, don’t talk simply to hear yourself talk.” She adds, schedule permitting, it’s a nice gesture to read the other panelists’ most recent book to promote conversation.

Leslie further advises, “Be gracious. Smile. The best way to sell



Leslie Budewitz, left, and Debra H. Goldstein at Malice Domestic in 2018.

your book isn’t to constantly talk about it and repeat the title, but to be engaging and interesting, and to show your interest in other panelists’ work and their responses—and the moderator’s too, if she or he is an author. Treat questions respectfully. Stick around to pose for pictures and hand out bookmarks.”

After the session, she says, “A thank you email [to the group] is a must.” Debra also likes to commend the moderator in this personal note. Both note it’s commonplace etiquette to post a panel photo on your social media, promoting your fellow panelists as a further gesture of gratitude. Debra says its caption can be “a comment about how

much fun it was or something simple—not usually a direct thanks, but it can be ‘Appreciate the wonderful time I had on the x panel with y, z, j, and k.’”

Author-Author Etiquette

For newbies, meeting other authors for the first time can be the most intimidating aspect of conventions. And yet these venues offer sublime possibilities to network, learn, and fan-crush on your writing idols. Debra recommends aiming for “politeness—a moderate amount of gushing—and normal conversation and interaction. Remember, a writing novice and a *New York Times* bestseller are human beings who are usually glad to engage in conversation—and pay it forward. Be yourself and enjoy!”

It’s more than OK to introduce yourself. Leslie says, “Greet people warmly, even if you haven’t met them before.” She advises more experienced attendees to be cognizant that “those new to the convention might feel shy or left out. If you can include them in the conversation or suggest they join a group headed to lunch, do. Ask them about their work, what they read, their panel assignments. When someone joins a conversation, make sure everyone knows them.”

Debra concludes, “One point of etiquette is if writers are engaged with fans in a discussion or perhaps signing, don’t monopolize the moments. Writers want to sell books and build their fan base so don’t get in the way of that.”

Author-Reader Etiquette

Your priority at conventions, as Debra underscores, are fans. These attendees are among the most dedicated readers, as evidenced by their considerable sacrifice of money and time. And many of them show their support in other ways, including taking the time to post those critical online book reviews.

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Etiquette, continued

To get an insider's perspective on what fans like and dislike about their author interactions, *First Draft* spoke with three award-winning mystery book bloggers: **Lesla Holstine** (Lesla's Book Critiques, since 2005); **Dru Ann Love** (Dru's Book Musings, since 2008); and **Kristopher Zgorski** (BOLO Books, since 2012). All routinely attend most or all conventions, where they socialize with their own followers and hear their unfiltered opinions. We also asked them for ideas on how authors might improve fans' experiences.

Dru Ann says, "They [fans] like authors who are honest and want to be there talking with them."

To which Kristopher adds, "Readers love that most authors approach them as equals. There is no sense that they are 'just' readers being graced with attention; they feel authors want to get to know them just as much as the reader wants to interact with the author."

Bloggers stress the importance of maintaining a warm and welcoming demeanor toward fans, who may be intimidated to meet their idol—that's you! Dru Ann says, "Remember the reader approaching an author does not know what to expect, so be gentle if they want to have a conversation or have the author sign their book. Be respectful of their time and nervousness."

Lesla agrees: "Most fans do not expect a great deal of time from authors; in fact, they are so in awe of their favorite authors that they're afraid to talk to them. So, please be kind when a fan approaches. Thank them when they gush. Ask them where they're from. Smile at them. That's sometimes all they'll need to rave afterward about their good experience with the author."

To help achieve this happy outcome, Dru Ann suggests, "When you see a reader or if one approaches you, try to read their badge and say hello by using their name. You will have made their day." She adds, "Don't ignore an approaching reader, listen to what they have to say. It's only five to ten minutes out of your day. Remember, if the reader liked what you said, they will go to the bookroom and purchase your book."

And yes, it's OK to pitch your book, but a decorous soft sell approach may be more to a reader's liking. Kristopher notes, "Conventions bring in many different types of readers, so never assume that your book is going to be to an attendee's liking. Certainly pitch your book, but don't pressure. Readers know what they can and can't handle and/or enjoy." He also says, "never compare your books to another's by saying yours are better (I see that happen more often than you would think.) It puts the reader on edge because you have insulted their taste if they are



Dru Ann Love, left, Lesla Holstine, and Kristopher Zgorski, seated, at Bouchercon 2018.

a fan of that author."

If it's your first convention, keep in mind that fans register for these pricey events with the expectation of obtaining authors' signatures (and these days, selfies). Kristopher says, "I have seen a few authors turn readers away when requested autographs during a time that is not the designated signing time. This is never a good idea and in my interactions with those readers, this is something they remember. Sometimes these readers don't know the 'rules,' can't make the official signing due to a conflict, or for whatever reasons are asking right now. Be gracious and sign the

book, within reason, of course."

Lesla further cautions, "If you're on the floor at a conference, you're on 'stage,' and you need to be on at all times. [A reader] may never acknowledge that they know who you are, but they do. A wave or smile goes a long way." She adds, "When you're on a panel, and a fan asks a question, there might be a humorous moment, but take that question seriously," noting that failure to do so can read as rudeness to the audience and have negative repercussions.

These gatherings are hectic; still, it's important not to unintentionally slight fans in another way during conversations or at signings. Dru Ann says, "Give the reader your attention—have eyes on them, not the room."

Lesla mentions two authors with exemplary manners, consequently beloved by their fans: "[The late] Sue Grafton was always kind, grateful to her readers. She always took time when meeting a reader to ask their name, to spell it correctly. When posing a picture, both Sue Grafton and Karin Slaughter asked the fan to check the photo to make sure it was OK, and they'd pose again if necessary. They made the fan feel important."

How else can an author show their appreciation to fans? Dru Ann suggests, "If you've been connecting with the reader via social media and you know they are attending the conference, seek them out. They've invested so much, and it would be nice to have a face-to-face, a one-on-one, or even a group setting. Invite one of your fans to coffee, tea, or a beverage."

It turns out, winning readers' hearts requires more than handing out fun swag, although don't forget these fan favorites! Instead, manners matter. Lesla sums up a mystery writer's best convention etiquette: "An author needs to be kind. Smile. Remember you're always on stage. And introduce yourself to strangers."