

Mystery Book Bloggers: Cyberspace Champions by Eona Calli

If writing mysteries is a labor of love, blogging about these books is equally so. Those who celebrate fiction online have emerged as champions of the imaginary experience. On the individual level, for many debut and low- to mid-list authors who receive little marketing support from their publishers, such book advocates may be career savers. Mystery review websites can direct potential readers to their work, which might otherwise be overlooked in the deluge of monthly releases.

First Draft spoke with four celebrity bloggers and one rising star: Les Blatt (*Classic Mysteries*, since 2007); Lesa Holstine (*Lesa's Book Critiques*, since 2005), Dru Ann Love (*Dru's Book Musings*, since 2008), Kristopher Zgorski (*BOLO Books*, since 2012), and relative newcomer Christine Gentes (*Map Your Mystery*, since 2016). They've kindly provided us with a unique insight into the motivations and mechanics of the blogging world.

Success doesn't come without a cost; all these bloggers spend up to 35 hours per week working on their popular websites—without financial compensation! (Some become Amazon affiliates but earnings are negligible.) They admit such labor, for most carried out in conjunction with a full-time job, can be tiring.

Christine admits, "I have days where I do not want to write anything and it's a struggle even to write a review."

Why such exertions? Dru explains, "In order to keep readers coming to your blog, you need to have fresh content at least three to five days a week." The majority place new material on their websites five or seven days a week; Lesa, who works a full-time and two part-time positions, posts daily.

What's the inspiration for such efforts? Unsurprisingly, all are prolific readers. More unusually, each remembers the first mystery encountered in childhood. Les says, "I was hooked instantly and have never let go."

Now, there are a lot of book lovers in the world (fortunately), but these bloggers are distinguished by an intense desire to introduce others to the delights of reading crime fiction.

To "keep spreading the word," as Dru says, is the motivation universally cited for the creation and continuation of their labor-intensive blogs. Says Kristopher, "Discovering that unexpected gem of a book and then hearing from all the readers who picked it up because of my review. Nothing beats that."

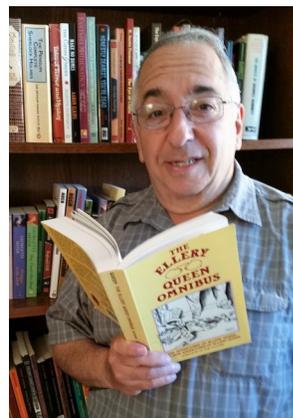
Bloggers' reviews generally contain the usual components—

discussion of plot, characterization, and so forth; what's atypical is the degree to which they try to convey the experience of reading a particular book. Beyond the blogger's thumbs-up, that's the information most likely to persuade her or his followers to examine it. A regular consumer won't purchase a mystery, after all, because a reviewer praises its pacing!

Sometimes, the blogger keeps this experiential critique simple. Christine, for example, shares, "I enjoyed the relationship between Frances and Matt." Les tells his followers, "It's like spending an evening with old friends."

The bloggers can be more evocative in their reviews. Dru divulges in one post, "I held my breath waiting for Katie's decision...I like the feeling I had when I closed the book—[it] put warmth in my heart." Kristopher writes, "There are moments when the average reader will feel their blood boil..." And Lesa promises followers: "The words and atmosphere and truth in this masterfully written mystery seep deep into your soul."

These book advocates (a description used by Dru as her tagline) do more than post effective reviews—they spur interest in mysteries through a variety of techniques. These might include summaries of upcoming releases as well as cover reveals, author guest posts, and book giveaway contests. Interviews with writers, a weekly feature on many blogs, are particularly important in this regard: followers may be drawn to read a book when they connect with its author. Each has developed a unique feature to stand out from other bloggers. Lesa has weekly chats with her followers about what they're reading: "That started because some of the regulars wanted to talk together and contribute about their own experiences," she says.



Les Blatt (*Classic Mysteries*) and his wife, Leslie, are fixtures on the mystery conference circuit and serve on Left Coast Crime's Standing Committee. *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* invited him to select a classic short story and write an introduction in 2015.



Dru Ann Love (*Dru's Book Musings*) was awarded the MWA Raven in 2017 for outstanding achievement in the field outside of creative writing. Her blog was also nominated for the Anthony Award in 2015 and 2018.



Eona Calli fell in love with village life on childhood visits to Greece. She later obtained a doctorate, specializing in (you guessed it!) villages. A history professor for 14 years, she's now a full-time mystery writer. As she pitches her first edgy cozy series, she's working away on a second one. You can find her book-related Greek(ish) recipes at <http://eonaalli.com>.

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Bloggers, continued

Dru interviews fictional protagonists about their daily lives, further immersing her followers in these books' imaginary worlds. Kristopher provides composite sketches of various members in the "crime fiction tribe," which includes readers.

Les, a former broadcaster, is well-known for his podcasts. Christine categorizes books by locale, directing readers to the option of inexpensive armchair travel through mysteries.

The blogging community

Bloggers additionally act as vehicles through which their readers can participate vicariously at crime fiction events. This is particularly evident in blogger reports on mystery conferences, found routinely on three of these websites. Few fans can afford to attend these expensive get-togethers. Bloggers' willingness to foot the associated non-taxable deduction bills—Les and Dru attend four conferences a year—is more evidence of their exceptional commitment.

Authors also discuss conferences on their own websites, but bloggers' followers want to experience these events through the eyes of another fan. And bloggers know best what will intrigue their online readers. Dru posted photos of the free goodies given to 2018 Malice Domestic participants and reported, "You walk a few steps, see a friend, hug a friend, chat with a friend and then repeat these steps over and over. I LOVE IT!"

Facebook Live is another tool that some bloggers are beginning to employ: livestreaming provides their audiences with an alternate way to feel as if they too are in attendance.

The association between bloggers and followers is a close one. Les says, "I consider many of the people I've met through my blog and social media...as friends." It's this personal relationship that explains bloggers' considerable "marketing" influence: when they recommend a book to a reader, it's from one trusted friend to another.

Online camaraderie is fostered by regular interactions between bloggers and followers, which takes place primarily on social media. Kristopher's situation is normative: "I don't really have an extensive collection of 'comments' on the blog site itself...But many folks do discuss my reviews and thoughts under the Facebook posting of the review." Bloggers may even share details of their private lives, promoting further intimacy. Lesa, for instance, "added occasional pieces about my trips because readers tell me that they enjoy reading about my travels."



Lesa Holstine (Lesa's Book Critiques) will receive the David Thompson Memorial Special Service Award at the upcoming Bouchercon.

The cultural community ethos extends to other bloggers—there's a surprising lack of competition between them, even those covering the same mystery subgenre. Les characterizes their relations as "very supportive" and has formed friendships with his comrades in cyberspace. Kristopher notes they often assist one another.

Many, like Dru, join Facebook groups for bloggers. They also socialize at events; Christine says a personal highlight of Malice Domestic was meeting other bloggers. Cross-promotion of each other's websites is routine. Lesa explains, "I've written guest posts for other blogs, linked to other blogs, and discussed other blogs on mine."

Choosing books to review

How do bloggers decide which books to review?

Christine says simply, "I read what I like." She features cozies, as well as a few traditional mysteries set outside the United States. Les focuses on "traditional plot-driven mysteries, often puzzle-heavy" of the past and present.



Christine Gentes (Map Your Mystery) takes readers around the world through her mystery reviewing site.

The bloggers are adept at finding suitable reading material, but are open to author queries. Before approaching a blogger, make sure that your book is a subgenre featured on her/his blog. Check the website for other preferences. For instance, only Dru reviews self-published books among these five, and Lesa doesn't read ebooks.



Kristopher Zgorski (BOLO Books) shows off his 2018 MWA Raven Award. He was also nominated this year for an Anthony (best online content).

Dru is oriented to cozies during the workweek; on weekends, she highlights "non-cozies," running polls to find out which subgenres most interest her readers. Kristopher's inclinations are to suspense and thrillers. Lesa's an exception to the rule—as a reviewer for the *Library Journal*, some books are assigned, and she cross-publishes variations of these reviews on her blog. Otherwise, she selects traditional mysteries, police procedurals and detective novels.

The bloggers are adept at finding suitable reading material, but are open to author queries. Before approaching a blogger, make sure that your book is a subgenre featured on her/his blog. Check the website for other preferences. For instance, only Dru reviews

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Bloggers, continued

If it looks like your mystery would be a good fit, email a query to the blogger. Your message should include the book title, number in a series (if applicable), subgenre, and a brief paragraph summarizing the story. If you have a cover image, please send it along. If you're willing to provide an ARC or book, indicate so. Queries should be sent at least four months prior to the release date to stand the best chance of consideration. All the bloggers prefer to review new releases and have a huge stack of books on their TBR pile.

Given the vast number of queries and their considerable workloads, most bloggers will only respond if the book looks like a possibility. They ask that repeated emails not be sent pitching the same book—such behavior results in the author taking her/himself permanently out of the running for reviews of future works. One blogger explains, “It’s my blog. I spend my time on it. I choose not to even bother with pushy people.”

Be aware that a blogger’s request to send along your book won’t necessarily result in a review. Kristopher explains, “Since I only post reviews of books that I enjoy—after all, I am trying to encourage reading—I roughly post reviews of about 60 percent of what I read.”

That’s also the position of most of these bloggers. Lesa reads some books assigned by a journal and so is the exception to this positive review rule, although her criticisms are invariably on the gentle side. Some bloggers will write negative reviews, so have a look at her/his website to tease out this inclination.

How can authors help support hard-working bloggers? “I think it is very important for authors to share the post [on the blog and social media] because that gets more eyes on their book,” Christine says. They also ask authors keep their websites up-to-date with their current book and appearances, as well as providing contact information that makes it easy for bloggers to connect with them.

For those bloggers who run giveaway contests (not all do), you can include an offer to provide a book (and swag, if you wish) with your query. An appreciated extra? Offering to mail the package to the winner, which saves the blogger time and money; this additionally gives you the opportunity to personalize the signature.

Final thoughts

Bloggers are familiar with the considerable publishing hurdles faced by new/wannabe authors. After all, they interact frequently with writers—all say this is one of the pleasures of running their websites. As enthusiastic, supportive members of the crime fiction community, the majority have even joined Mystery Writers of America and/or Sisters in Crime.

Les therefore wanted me to pass on some encouraging words: “I’d just like to point out to the Guppies—and to all of today’s new and hopeful writers—that EVERY established mystery writer was once an unknown, trying to write an entertaining and thrilling story and bring it to the world’s attention. Keep writing. Keep writing.”

Mystery book bloggers

Here are links to our featured bloggers’ sites, as well as a few mystery book blogs recommended by them. Interested in finding more such websites? Have a look at the book bloggers’ sites, which often contain links to others.

Bibliophile Reviews (Bree Heron)
<https://bibliophile.reviews>

BOLO Books (Kristopher Zgorski)
<http://bolobooks.com>

Carstairs Considers (Mark Barker)
carstairsconsiders.blogspot.com

Chatting About Cozies (Lisa Lanford)
chattingaboutcozies.blogspot.com

Cinnamon and Sugar, and a Little Bit of Murder (Kim Davis)
<https://cinnamonsugarandalittlebitofmurder.com>

Classic Mysteries (Les Blatt)
www.classicmysteries.net

Cross-Examining Crime (Kate Jackson)
crossexaminingcrime.wordpress.com

Dru’s Book Musings (Dru Ann Love)
drusbookmusing.com

Escape with Dollycas Into a Good Book (Lori Caswell)
www.escapewithdollycas.com

Kay’s Reading Life
kaysreadinglife.blogspot.com

Kittling: Books (Cathy Cole)
www.kittlingbooks.com

Lesa’s Book Critiques (Lesla Holsine)
lesasbookcritiques.blogspot.com

Lisa Ks Book Reviews
lisaksbookthoughts.blogspot.com

Map Your Mystery (Christine Gentes)
www.mapyourmystery.com

The Passing Tramp (Curtis Evans)
thepassingtramp.blogspot.com

The Rap Sheet (Kingston Pierce)
therapsheet.blogspot.com

The Reading Room (Kathy Reel)
www.readingroom-readmore.com