



South Bay
WRITERS

Silicon Valley's Premier Writing Group



January Newsletter

I hope you all had a wonderful holiday season and a chance to spend time and make memories with your families, as well as look forward to what wonderful things you would like to accomplish in the new year.

For myself, I participated with my sisters in an activity called Thirteen Magical Nights. While I'm unsure of the exact origins of the ritual, it appears to be derivative of winter solstice traditions like Raunacht or Twelfthtide. In our version we each wrote down thirteen 'wishes' on pieces of paper. One wish was then burned each night for twelve consecutive nights and 'released' to the world to Manifest. At the end I was left with one remaining wish, this was the one that I would need to drive and manifest myself.

While I don't particularly believe in the concepts of Manifestation, I have warmed to the idea of Intent as I have aged. A strong Intent can drive clarity of purpose which, I feel, often leads to taking action and understanding outcomes that we can use to help refine how we spend our most precious resource, time.

When you write, what traditions do you and your characters hold dear in your hearts? What memories drive you and drive you to enact change in the worlds you build and the world around you? I hope you join me for the rest of the newsletter as our members share some of their memories of this holiday season and seasons past.

Cheers,
Ryan Davis-Marsh



President's Column By Una Daly

This winter holiday was one of the wettest I can recall in a long time with consecutive rainy days and nights, high winds, and temperatures dropping into the low 40s. Although this could have provided me with plenty of time to dig in and write, I took a hiatus from writing and dug in some new bulbs in my garden instead. Everything is thriving in my garden including the ubiquitous oxalis and other weedy volunteers. I need to get out my trusty trowel and clean them up before they flower and set seed but first it's time to reflect on last year's writing accomplishments and set my aspirations for 2026. I hope you'll join me – not in the garden but reflecting and goal setting for the coming writing year.

Critique groups or writing partners were the most effective tools for making progress on writing goals for many of our members. South Bay Writers currently has four critique groups including one focused on Children's Literature and a possible fifth one starting up in 2026 for historical fiction. Contact critiquegroups@southbaywriters.com for more information.

Attending author presentations and enrolling in writing classes were my most effective tools for starting and completing memoir chapters, poems, and short stories. The 15-week

Creative Writing course at West Valley College last spring compelled me to finish pieces for sharing in the classroom and also introduced me to different writing styles. I'm still working on magical realism.

January is a great month for renewing your commitment to that novel, short story, or poem collection and there are plenty of events available to stoke your passion with South Bay Writers and other writing local groups coming up:

- **South Bay Writers' January 24th workshop** with award-winning author/editor Jordan Rosenfeld.
- SF Peninsula Writers' **The Art of Brevity** with Flash Fiction Institute co-founder, Grant Faulkner, Saturday, January 17.
- Join Local Words on January 18th in Los Altos from 2-3:30pm to start your new year of writing! **Register here.**

Of course, writing is not all about accountability to external pressures. It starts and ends as a solo activity and inspiration can help. Hearing from authors who have walked the path before us and achieved successful publication credits can be supportive.

- Take solace from Stephen King, the prolific "King of Horror" author's advice:

"The scariest moment is always just before you start."

- Joyce Carol Oates, prolific author of over 70 books, encourages reading well:

"Most important for a writer to read widely, enthusiastically. Writing is a consequence of reading & writing well is a consequence of reading well."

- Neil Gaiman, award winning author of comic books and novels, shared this tip:

"Start telling the stories that only you can tell — because there will always be better writers than you, there will always be smarter writers than you ... but you are the only you."

- Cheryl Strayed, best-selling author, exhorts us to just do the work:

"You are a writer because you write. Keep writing and quit your bitching. Your book has a birthday. You don't know what it is yet."

Happy New (Writing) Year to All!

February Meeting Preview: Graphic novelist Kathleen Founds

By Shari Clare

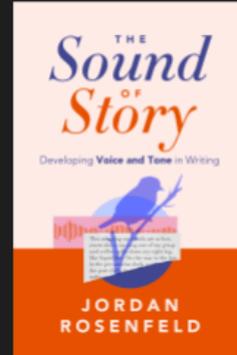
Our February speaker will be Kathleen Founds, who will talk about making decisions regarding when to continue or when to pause a work in progress, in her presentation titled "Holding on and Letting Go: A Timeline for Writing Your Novel." Mark your calendar for Saturday, February 14, when Kathleen will take us on a fascinating journey in which she recounts navigating the dual challenges of writing fiction and wrangling with the American health insurance system.



Important Dates:

CWC South Bay Writers' Workshop

Saturday, Jan 24, 10am - 3pm



Join **Jordan Rosenfeld**, award winning author, editor to learn the Sound of Story. Explore rhythm, energy, attitude. and more to create a unique fingerprint for your characters. ***Sound of Story***, (list : \$22) included in workshop fee.

Empire Firehouse, Kelley Park, San Jose
1650 Senter Rd Parking, \$10, Carpools encouraged
RSVP: amandasenior86@gmail.com for lunch or checks



\$90 CWC Members, \$100 Non-members
Lunch and book included
NO WALK-INS

HOUSE OF WRITERS LIVE READINGS ON LOVE

FEBRUARY 4TH, 6-8PM

SAN JOSE CLUBHOUSE
15480 UNION AVE, SJ, 95124

South Bay Writers Members Welcome, tickets are on sale now:
<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/live-readings-on-love-from-the-house-of-writers-tickets-197775461646>

SBW 2025 Holiday Party By Una Daly

A tall tree with red bows and soft lights greeted us as we arrived at Edie's house for our December holiday celebration. The dining room table was the showcase for many members' culinary skills. The potluck featured green salad, pasta and rice dishes, beef enchiladas, ham and asparagus, coconut chickpea curry, etc – not to mention –

pies, cookies, cake, and chocolates. An opportunity to share musical skills was also available to well-fed guests. Small teams took turns singing the different verses of the *Twelve Days of Christmas* with Alice, our treasurer, accompanying us on the piano and greatly improving the effort.



“ On the first day of Christmas my true love sent to me
A **partridge** in a **pear** tree ...”

The gift exchange was full of surprises as usual, but it seemed there was less stealing than in previous years. Gale, a new member, won the big chocolate basket. I received decorative Christmas bird figurines. Ken went home with a year's supply of varied teas in a tin shaped like a large hardcover book. Hal, our webmaster, went home with hand lotion. One lucky member got two of Dave's graphic novels. And the list went on ...

Perhaps the highlight of the party was the sharing of Christmas memories past and present. Ranging from funny to poignant, families have unique perspectives on how to celebrate the holidays which were often embarrassing or uncomfortable to us as children and even now strike an emotional chord for many of us.

Edie shared how her safety conscious mother used wire strings to keep their tree upright. The tree never fell over but the wires ruined the look for Edie. Tina's father was an electrical contractor, and he insisted on lighting an enormous blue and white star outside their house which embarrassed Tina and her sister. Dan was put in charge of the Xmas lights one year and accidentally blew out the power on his entire block. Luckily no one ever figured out who caused the power outage and Dan wasn't telling. Dave's family served Scandinavian delicacies at the holidays and he still remembers the unpleasant texture of lutefisk, a dried cod that is rehydrated and cured in lye. Valerie shared how her brother lets his children choose a charity to which the family makes a Hanukkah donation. When the charity concept was explained to her four-year-old nephew, he selected his Mom as the recipient.

Like a fair number of our members, my parents were raised overseas and the American concept of Christmas underwent some adjustments in our house. My immigrant father thought buying a Christmas tree that would be thrown away in a few weeks was wasteful so our family waited until right before the holidays when the trees were marked down or free for the taking. All it took was a little tinsel to fill in the bare spots. Jamal and Annie recalled struggling to translate what they learned at school about Christmas with their families but always feeling like there was some confusion. Alice's mother worked in a medical testing lab when Alice was young and the family's holiday decorations included toy lab rats which she still has to this day.

In spite of the differences between how our families and indeed how we all celebrate the winter holidays today, the warmth of friendship, food, and fun pervaded the evening. Special thanks to Edie Matthews, our PR and Hospitality chair, for hosting us once again at her beautiful and spacious home and creating holiday traditions that celebrate our members and their families.

Holiday Memories

“A Christmas to Remember”

By Lorraine Gabbert

Sometimes it's the simple things that mean the most.

I spent numerous Christmases with my husband Matthew's family from the time we started dating through raising children of our own. As a reform Jew, these experiences provided me with a glimpse into the magic of the holiday, from the personalized stockings hung with care to the twinkling Christmas tree adorned with cherished ornaments.

When Matthew's parents moved to Tucson, Arizona, spending Christmases with them became extra special. Joined by Matthew's brother and wife, it not only gave us a chance to all be together but also introduced us to the vast desert landscape. We learned the names of cacti, saw coyotes and javelinas and scattered bird seeds for quail. We also attended evening service at historic Saint Philip's in the Hills Episcopal Church. Glowing luminarias graced its walls and pathways, offering a welcoming hug on a cold winter's night. Moved by their ethereal beauty, we lingered a moment to appreciate their light before entering the warmth of the church.

Later that evening, in a humble part of town, we traveled through the streets in a horse-drawn wagon to view Christmas lights. Bundled in our coats and hats, we huddled close together, our faces radiant below a sky full of stars.

The presents we exchanged that Christmas morning have been forgotten, for what we shared that evening was the greatest gift of all.

“A Christmas to Remember” By Carolyn Donnell

"My grandchildren live in another state now. Been a while since I was able to be with them for Christmas. This photo was about 20 years ago (how time does fly!) when the family was all still together. They were little and I was much younger too. :-]



Writers Corner

The WAS Cop By Ken Roberge

About seven years ago, I joined the Valley Village Writers Group. We've had eight members on average and now meet once a week on Zoom since COVID. Each member suggests improvements for the author to consider. To streamline meetings, we send our chapters to all members via email a few days in advance. And to reduce nitpicking, we avoid acting as Comma Cops, leaving all punctuation to the author or to editing tools... Or, a flip of the coin.

Some reviewers have a talent for identifying plot holes; a few will tag misplaced modifiers, while others provide an overview. And while they're at it, don't forget to murder your darlings. I'm not a lucrative novelist, but I enjoy the challenge, and the members have taught me much.

When receiving editorial advice, we sit quietly and consider each suggestion respectfully. Zoom meetings make this task easier. But before COVID, when we met in person, we had table-pounding, insult-wielding, page-ripping, chair-throwing, and face-punching sessions, enjoyed by all. Oh, the good ol' days. But I digress.

In my experience with writers' groups, one practice has evolved into one of my best tools to engage my readers. I've learned to avoid "be" verbs. Many of the South Bay Writers staff and members know these skills, but I'm targeting writers who might want to polish up.

Roy Mize, a former member of our review group, objected to statements with "be" verbs. He had written a biography about the many daring accounts of Ruth Law, a pioneer in aviation history, and I must admit, Roy's action-packed paragraphs kept me glued to the pages. When reviewing our work, he continually suggested we replace the "be" verbs with better ones or rephrase the sentence. His engaging prose and passion enticed me to study this further.

Although these verbs include *was*, *is*, *are*, and more. I will focus on the most used "was." So, with Roy gone, I have become The *Was* Cop... A name I derived from the *Comma Cop* term.

Memoirs, history books, and some novels occur within days gone by, and many writers use "was" to express past actions. But employing the word can make sentences *passive* instead of *active*, and it usually creates *telling* versus *showing* statements.

He was hungry. (vs) He ate the whole pot roast.

I'm not implying the word always creates a passive statement. "The man was hit by a pillow" remains passive, but "The man was hitting a pillow" prevails as active by its action. However, "The man punched his fists angrily into a pillow" packs more emotional content.

Also, revising the phrase can bring out more detail. Example: "The President awarded him the Medal of Honor." This reveals more than "He was awarded the Medal of Honor."

Many times, sentences don't need the "be" verb. His brother's car was old and needed fixing. Simpler: His brother's old car needed fixing.

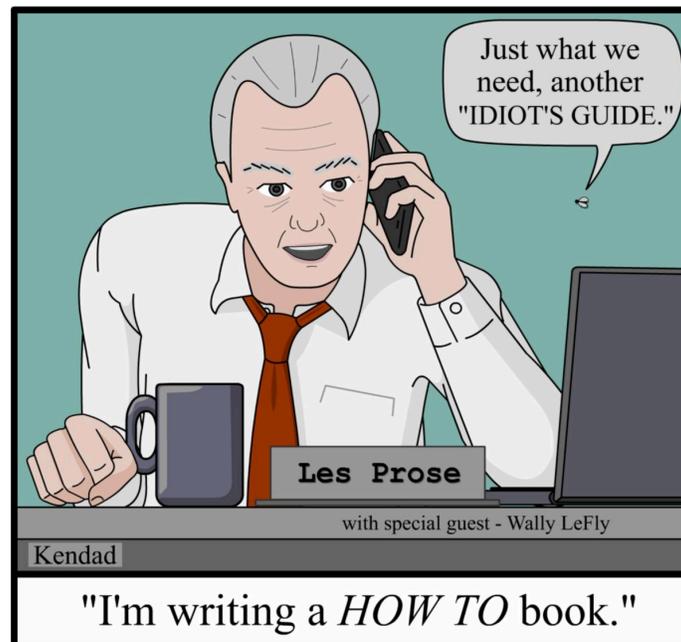
Let me present a "was" overkill: He was running for hours and was hungry. In the café, he was fed too much and was made sick, so he was sent to the hospital and was recovering.

No one would write something so ridiculous, but I want to *emphasize* the story's awkward and boring prose. It took me less than two minutes to churn out the two sentences, which brings me to another aspect of its use... "Be" verbs *are* lazy verbs, easy to remember and use. Avoiding them takes cranial energy, and adding other descriptions and interesting phrases often spawns a stimulating read.

As a practical person, I never say never. The use of "was" within dialogue remains appropriate because humans speak that way. Sometimes one might use the word for effect. At the end of a paragraph, the phrase "Sprawled on the floor, he was drunk" has more punch than "He had collapsed after finishing his twenty-first beer."

Performing a *Find* on the word " was " (with spaces) will highlight the word and reveal its count. When reviewing others, I look for more than two per page, and hope the author chooses to rephrase some sentences and discover the challenge was worth the effort (Oops, a be verb). Oh well, at times a "be" verb has its place. Like, driving slightly over the speed limit will seldom get you a ticket, but driving 100 in a 65-mph zone remains dangerous.

We encourage each author to make the final decision on whose editorial suggestions to accept, but if you join our writers' group, you might find yourself pulled over by "The Was Cop."



Upcoming Contests & Events

- The Masters Review, [Winter Short Story Award for New Writers](#) - Submissions due February 1, 2026
- PEN Women's Mardi Gras Celebrity Lunch Saturday - March 7, 2026

This annual lunch funds "Excellence in the Arts" Grants for high school graduates or college undergraduate women. Proceeds from the luncheon, silent auction, raffle and costume jewelry sale goes to these awards. The deadline for RSVP is February 24, 2026. **Complete this form** to make your reservation now.

- [2026 Indie Author Project Annual Contest](#) - Submissions April 1 thru May 31



South Bay Writers-The Silicon Valley Branch of the California Writers Club | PO Box 3254 | Santa Clara, CA
95055 US

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