

NCPA MONTHLY MEETING Nov. 9, 2017

Agenda:

1. Announcements
2. Introductions
3. Speaker: Michelle Hamilton, on “Making Your Characters Breathe.”
4. Networking

Present: Azevedo, Byers, Darrow, Davis, Grainger, Hourihan, Kando, McGreevy, Ortega, Pacholik, Rigley, Thornton.

1. Announcements: President Sharon Darrow made several announcements:

- We are now accepting applications for next year’s Annual Book Award Competition. Seven entries have been received so far. Check the NCPA website: [www.https://www.norcalpa.org](https://www.norcalpa.org) for details.
- November 30 is the deadline for applying for the IBPA PubU., which will be held in Austin Texas in April 2018. You can apply online at www.publishinguniversity.org/scholarship. The winner receives a \$500 scholarship to attend, and the IBPA picks up the \$200 attendance fee.
- Sharon offered to help members who are having difficulty updating their profiles on our website.
- Sharon’s first audio book is now for sale on audible! It shows up on Audible first, then Amazon and iTunes.
- Our next month’s meeting - December 14 - is the annual meeting where NCPA members can bring their books for display and sale.
- Norma Jean Thornton informed us that, this year, we are not awarding a \$1,000 scholarship to the winner of the competition among local high-school students who aspire to become writers. Instead, the money becomes a donation to 916 Ink, an organization which encourages and promotes youth literacy and writing.

2. Introductions: There were several new members, including Anna Hourihan and Jennifer Grainger. Anna is an author, publisher and editor, and Jennifer is an author, editor and ghostwriter.

3. Speaker: Michelle Hamilton on “Making Your Characters Breathe,” and also on what she is looking for when judging books: Michelle was a judge for our Book Awards Competition for two years. She is a prolific author and editor. She has been an English teacher at Elk Grove High School for over 20 years. She began to write books in 2010, and has published 38 of them so far! At first, she went with agents, but now she operates independently. Her genres include Murder Mysteries, Cozy Mysteries, Epic Fantasies, Contemporary Fantasies, Contemporary Fiction and Recipe Books.

Michelle passed out a convenient hand-out summarizing her talk. First, she told us about some of the things she is looking for when judging books: Strong characters who feel like they are real people. Equally important is the quality of the writing. There has to be “good flow” and a good plot. Michelle also appreciates it when the author takes some chances, tries something new. Unfortunately, books are too often more of the same.

Audio books: First, Michelle didn't much like the idea. However, she does now. She has learned to appreciate the narrator's interpretation, which may differ from that of the author. In other words, it is not necessary for the author to always fully "control" the characters. The market for audio books is huge, and expanding. Many aging people's sight deteriorates, and there are many commuters. One third of Michelle's own sales are audio books.

Michelle's plots are character driven. First, you name your character. The name is essential. Michelle likes to use gender-neutral names. It is good to also use nicknames. In her Murder Mystery "Peyton Brooks" series, the main character's name Peyton Brooks is derived from that of Chicago football legend Walter Payton, who was a favorite of the character's father. The father was a cop who died in the line of duty. Peyton is a tough detective. She is often under-estimated, so Michelle gave her a short stature.

You then specify the character's ethnicity, religion and family background. But you do this before describing her personality.

It's good to give your character(s) a pet. And never kill a pet!

Another central character in Michelle's novels is Marco D'Angelo. He is a police captain and Peyton Brooks' close friend. He is the strong, silent, intimidating type. He comes from a huge Italian family. He also has had an alcohol problem. It's useful to give your character(s) distinctive personality quirks. You can borrow character features from real people whom you know. It can be helpful to find a TV star as a model

For readers, the most important thing is consistency.

As to the setting, Michelle's stories take place mostly in San Francisco, which is the place she is most familiar with. She even looks up specific buildings, draws maps of neighborhoods, measures approximate distances, all so as to be as realistic as possible. The more detail, the better. For example, one of her characters specializes in crazy cocktails, so Michelle researched cocktails extensively on the Internet.

Nowadays, Cozy Mysteries have become a very popular genre. These are crime mysteries without the excessive violence and gore.

Michelle's leading characters are often women. However, they are not "men in drag," in other words they are not women who act as violently as men would.

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During questions and answers, Michelle went on to discuss book launchings, marketing etc.: Published authors should have a newsletter and a mailing list. Their website can feature a prequel to a new book, and a newsletter can be sent out just before a new book release. 5%-6% of her sales are through her newsletter. This is very important, because it helps you to get up in Amazon's top tier selling authors.

Pre-sales are very important, but a book must be totally ready to be sent out by Amazon before you start a pre-sale.

Never start a book without knowing how it will end. The most difficult part to write is the middle. Michelle always plots her novels ahead to the end before writing them. It takes her a couple of months to complete a book.

She no longer uses agents, as they are insufficiently responsive to an author's specific requirements. Although she first published the "traditional" way, through publishers, she now self-publishes. She made the mistake of giving the publisher the first right of refusal. Fortunately, she got out of this.

The best marketing resource is www.Kboards.com. It is a community forum for Kindle users, with sites such as Writers' Café, where you can get/share all sorts of marketing tips.

Having your niche as an author is fine. For example, if you specialize in military novels, you can sell your books at military bases, hospitals, etc. You can acquire a devout following.

Michelle gave an excellent presentation. Her publishing record is impressive.

4. The evening ended with some networking.

November 9, 2017,

Tom Kando, Secretary