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Partners in Crime



Life Partners/Partners in Crime

I dreamed of being a writer as far back as second grade and I read clear across genres: biography, science fiction, natural history, folk tales, adventure--everything and anything that told a good story and kept me up at night past my bed time. Then I fell in love with Agatha Christie when I was in junior high school. She was my introduction to crime fiction and revealed a whole new world to me. And her books were consistently far more engaging than the dull assigned readings we had in my English classes. Perhaps more than any other writer back then, Christie inspired me to really pursue writing as a career. Nobody was murdered in my stories, yet, but without knowing it I was on my way to eventually launching a mystery series.

My widely-reviewed first collection of short stories in 1990 won a prize and my favorite story in that book, "Remind Me to Smile," featured a couple of life partner academics enmeshed in a bizarre situation: Stefan has secured a job for an ex- in the English department where Stefan is the writer-in-residence. Stefan's partner, Nick, is outraged when he discovers this hiring and even angrier when Stefan invites the ex- to dinner. The story's tone was comic while it focused on the struggles of being a same-sex couple years before marriage equality changed our national landscape in the U.S.

My editor at St. Martin's Press was very taken by the story, but said he wished that the dinner guest had been poisoned. An intriguing idea that I let it simmer without feeling especially motivated at the time. But a few years later, when I was wondering where I should take my career after a novel and a study of Edith Wharton with the same publisher, that editor said "You know, Nick and Stefan could be like Nick and Nora Charles. Put them in a book!"

Now I was truly inspired, and with that story as my foundation, I wrote and wrote and wrote, fueled by Christie's books and many other mysteries I shared with a dear friend who was ended up in the series somewhat disguised.

I decided to age Nick and Stefan in the series, unlike other writers, and I made sure that both of them not only read crime novels and discussed them, while Nick also taught a class in mysteries. They might have been amateurs, but being involved in crime didn't just trigger their idle curiosity. It made them determined to solve the murders that inevitably involved them somehow and plagued their department, a motley crew of malcontents and whiners as poisonous and vengeful as Milady in *The Three Musketeers*.

My partner in mystery writing from the very beginning was my spouse who loved the genre as much as I did—mostly on screen but occasionally in print--and has always given me good editorial advice about building up a scene, adding more clues, and deepening character motivation. We agreed long ago that dialogue was not his forte, but he's been especially insightful when I've needed plot twist ideas if the story seemed to be diverging from the outline I had started with. Over the years of writing a mystery series, it has helped enormously being married to a psychologist who can untangle the mysteries of human behavior. And as they say, or should say, behind every good writer is a good beta reader.

Lev Raphael's most recent mystery is [Department of Death](#), which *Publishers Weekly* called "immensely enjoyable" in a starred review. He has taught creative writing at Michigan State University and Regents College in London, and has been invited to teach at Leipzig University in Germany. Lev currently coaches, mentors, and edits writers at writewithoutborders.com.