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### Happy New Year 2010!

Do you believe in omens? Or perhaps just like to notice trends? 2010 is the beginning of a new decade. It started with a "blue moon" (second full moon within one month), a phenomenon which coincides with New Year's Eve only every nineteen years. **Valentine's Day** coincides with **Chinese New Year** - how often does that happen? And according to the Chinese calendar, this is the year of the **Tiger**, which happens to be my favorite. 2010 is also the **Year of Communication**. By whatever reckoning, here we are looking over the horizon at a whole new realm of possibilities!



The major trend over the past two years has been my emergence as a **new voice in Women's Fiction**. You can follow its progression through the short chapters that follow. Join me now as I take you on a journey through the **highlights of 2008 and 2009**. [This letter is longer than usual, so please skip what doesn't intrigue you.] These have been extraordinary years of growth and development, none of which would have been possible without the inspiration of Spirit, the wisdom of mentors, and the fantastic enthusiasm, events participation, and comments from you, my readers. Thank you!

Because I know your time is as precious as mine is, my newsletter is divided into short articles so you can pick and choose just the ones that interest you. If you have comments, of course, feel free to leave them this year! I hope you'll find time to join me on California's Central Coast -- whether physically or virtually, through my books. Remember, **Milford-Haven is the Little Town with Infinite Possibilities**.

### Milford-Haven Novels - Plot Summaries

This is a handy **reference**, strictly for those who've already read the novels! **Don't spoil the fun by reading the summaries in advance!** That'd be kinda like cheating, right? I offer these on my blog because I'm only writing my novels at the rate of one per year, and I'm sure you're reading lots of other things in between.



In case you're new to the world of Milford-Haven (or making a return visit) and would like to know how the novels got started... here's the **Milford-Haven Evolution** story. Enjoy!

And by the way... during the new year, I'll be working with partners to bring the **Milford-Haven Novels into new formats**, so... stay tuned!

### Women's Fiction... What is it?

Funny... I thought I was writing fiction! But, as my marketing team and I have continued to research today's publishing trends, we realized... I'm actually writing **WOMEN'S FICTION!** That sounded interesting... so I wanted to know... what IS Women's Fiction? I came up with my own theory. For those who haven't yet heard me speak about this... here's a short version.



When I tell a story to most of my male friends, there comes a moment when the eyes roll. (You know that look, right?) What's he thinking? It's all too dark. Though he may be too polite to say it, he's thinking, "Yeah, yeah... get to the point!" [This usually gets a good laugh as we all recognize the behavior.] Okay, but if I try to tell a story too quickly to most female friends... she'll stop me and ask, "Wait... where are we? I need details!"

True, this is stereotyping. But it's also a chance to notice our own thought patterns. What this suggests is that women not only notice details, they read details like a code. So if I write about Samantha's silk wrist scarf, Zed's Gucci pants, or Susan's Doc Martens, female readers gather information about economic level, taste, social standing, age, and many other factors. Because my readers and I speak the same "code", I intentionally imbued this information in a way that's clear, and a lot more fun than laborious explanation.

That's just one aspect of this fascinating conversation. Want to join in? Follow Me! Here's a **Women's Fiction Discussion at the Mara Parl Readers Group on Facebook**.

### July '08 - Women's Fiction versus Men's Fiction?

I also thought... if there's **WOMEN'S FICTION** isn't there also **MEN'S FICTION**? According to some brilliant colleagues I had the chance to debate with, the answer is yes! I had the pleasure of doing a panel with **Andrew Klavan** at the **Ventura Book Festival**. What are some aspects of Men's Fiction? Velocity is one. And there's so much more to the discussion, as our audience discovered. The room was PACKED and the organizers had to get the "hook" to get us off the date. We received a tremendous amount of local news coverage. Here's the excellent **Ventura County Star** article. Why were the men and women in the audience so engaged?



... because what we're discussing is the nature of how we all think. Nothing could be more fascinating! Join us for the next discussion. And meanwhile, don't miss Andrew's books, one of which is **True Crime**, which Clint Eastwood made into an excellent film. Check out my **review** of his superb book **Empire of Lies**.

### September '08 Women's Fiction vs. Men's Fiction II

The **Santa Barbara Book Festival** is one of my favorite events, in one of my favorite towns. Santa Barbara is where **Neil** my novel series takes place (*John Zed's Alchymy's elegant downhome on Anapamu*, and *Joseph Calvin's scrumptious escape Calera High in the Hills*.) In real life, my dad's best friend and his family lives there, and we visited throughout my childhood. The **spirit** of the California Coast on my psyche is deep. So, back to the Festival (which, sadly, is now on hiatus, pending reorganization) -- I was invited to do another panel on Women's Fiction versus Men's Fictions. This time my partner was the superb writer, **Josh Conroy**. Here's what intrigues me about Josh. On one hand, he co-wrote the story bible, and was Executive Consultant for the **HBO Series Rome**. If you haven't seen it, it's riveting! The depth and detail of ambition and treachery, romance and betrayal, wealth and poverty...it's all there. On the other hand, he writes science fiction novels that take us into a rather terrifying near-future where technology has moved one or two steps ahead of its designers. **Geoff**, Josh has the kind of insight into character and human nature that transcends time. His novel series has two books so far, **Echelon** and **Empire**. Our debate/discussion was again well-attended and the discussion was funny, challenging, surprising, intriguing. No doubt about it -- this discussion is ongoing, and it has universal appeal!



### Service Clubs - Zonta Club & Borders

There are superb community service clubs all over our country, and I've enjoyed speaking for Scriptivists, Exchange, Rotary, and other clubs. In March '08 I was asked to be part of an event jointly sponsored by **Borders Books in Thousand Oaks**, and the **Zonta Club of Conejo Valley**, California. Arranged by Kate Schwab, the event included other outstanding authors: **Tab Hunter** who spoke about his memoirs: **Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star**; **Dora Levy Hemenway** who spoke about her extraordinary books set in Paris and Paris, Courtesan, and **Haven**; **David Lawrence** and his cookbook **Boy Fats World!**; and radio expert **Ron Cutler**. What an event! Our sides ached from laughing and our hands were sore from signing!



### Libraries - Morro Bay

For me, any event in California's Central Coast region is a home-coming, since my novels are set there. The **San Luis Obispo County Library System** is one of the most dynamic library systems in the country, with 16 branches and many wonderful programs, including the **Central Coast Book Festival**, in which I participate annually. At the **Morro Bay Branch Library**, Karen Robert runs programs for readers each Wednesday. The "Fourth Wednesday" program is devoted to local authors, and its happy to be counted in that special group. (Other speakers on this roster include, for example, Catherine Ryan Hyde, author of **Pay It Forward**). In September '08 I presented the first segment of my two-hour program **A Woman and Her Self: Discover the Next Chapter of Your Life**. Largely thanks to an excellent **video** by **Bill Moore** in the **San Luis Obispo Tribune**, we had a room full of well-read and sharp-witted readers who kept me on my toes! **I've been invited back, so if you're in the Central Coast, mark your calendar for Wednesday, September 22nd, 2010. The program includes special gifts, and of course signed books.**



### August '08 Milford-Haven Goes to Tea

I know this is slightly out of order, but I'm working with themes, which I love more than chronology. I also love being invited to participate in book events of all kinds. But I wanted to start creating events of my own... events that would reach my readers in way that was both fun and inspiring. What to do? Well, now that I know I'm writing Women's Fiction, I thought about **creating special events for women**. What kind of event would show up in a mail box (or electronic) and immediately signify "Woman's Tea"? Well, men drink tea too. But here in the U.S., tea is not only a drink, but a culture unto itself. "Going to tea with the girls" means dressing up a little, sipping aside some "me" time, connecting with old friends, meeting new friends, and having some fun. But most of us are WAY too busy to allow ourselves to take time for such an indulgence. So, aside from fun, what would make an event worthwhile? Two things. One, a program with some speakers who really have something to say, and can say it briefly. Two, a way of donating to a local charity. **So, to sum it up, as women we like to learn something, be generous, and have fun while doing it.**



The first person I sat down with to discuss all this was my mother. If anyone knows about entertaining, connecting with other women, and donating to charities, it's her. She's an expert. "Well darling," she said, "The tea idea is perfect. If we're going to do one, we might as well do three." I like her thinking! So we chose a local charity -- **The Home Front Care**, and asked a spokesperson to speak. I invited author **Eline Dunley**, whose work with military families matched the interests of the charity. I spoke briefly, mostly about my veteran character Tony Forestello. We served such delicacies as cucumber sandwiches and **Walkers Shortbread**. The house was filled with elegantly dress women (some wearing hats!), each of whom had a great time, learned something, bought books, and gave to a great charity. It worked so well, I decided to start planning special Book & Author Tea events from now on! Here's what the **Spectre** article had to say.

### Christmas '08 Tea in New York...

Imagine how thrilling it was to be invited to do my first Author Tea in New York City! Good friend and international tea expert **Ellen Easton** introduced me to **Lady Herd's** in the **Inn At Irving Place**. This premiere Tea Salon is located in the heart of Manhattan's literary historical district. Guests climbed the high stone steps and entered a Victorian salon with scores of fat candles flickering on ornate mantels, tables elegantly set with delicate china, and Christmas lights twinkling from every corner. Guests were treated to a five-course afternoon tea, plus gifts at each place setting, or array of wonderful books to purchase, and brief talks by four national author-speakers. Ellen Easton treated us all to a brief history of tea, revealing that one of her own ancestors invented the tea bag! Find out more about Ellen and her wonderful **Tea Travels**.



### ... with New York Authors & Friends

In addition to Ellen Easton, the other authors who joined me were **Laurie Wagner Bauer** and **Marya Allen**. These are two wildly impressive women. **Laurie** is a multiple award-winning author of poetry, fiction and memoir, a friend from **Women Writing the West** and from Colorado. This was Laurie's first trip to the Big Apple, and what a joy it was to share with her my former home, and the literary center of our country. Our feet sure hurt, but I showed her as much of the City as we could manage. And we had the pleasure of staying upstairs at the Inn at Irving. Wow, what a romantic spot! Next time we'll bring our husbands. **Marya** is not only an author, but one of the most active humanitarians in New York, the manager of the **Blue-Hill Bookstore**, NY's largest indie bookstore. And with her partner Melvin Van Peebles, she runs **Books For Kids**. This was the charity to which we all donated a percentage of book sales for this event, which was a joy for all of us. Some dear friends attended, as did some new friends. We all look forward to doing another NYC event!



### Christmas '08 Tea in Colorado

Laurie and I flew from New York to Colorado, stepped off the plane into a snowy winterland and into a magical world at the exquisite home of Carmen and Fred Speirs. No one does Christmas more festively than Carmen, who had gorgeous figurines, ornaments, and decorations placed strategically every place we looked. In her glorious kitchen, she served a German Christmas roll that was probably only 1,000 calories per bite, and every bite worth it! She also surprised us with Dickensian-costume-dad carolers who delighted us with holiday music. Laurie's latest book was **Dickensian Costumes**, a riveting memoir-jammed-novel about a trip through the Grand Canyon. **Marya** was **Child Secrets**, where I delve into the childhoods of my characters, and it includes a **breath-taker and exciting underwriter** sequence. This special time of year can also be especially stressful for families, so the charity to which we donated a percentage of sales was **TESSA**, a domestic violence shelter and service center for abused women. (This issue has long been dear to my heart, and I serve on the Advisory Board of **Haven House** - the oldest women's shelter in California. I also write about domestic abuse in my novels, with "Stacey Ovenshok" storyline). The event was cozy, beautiful, and just plain inspiring! Here's the lovely **Cheyenne Edition** article about the event, and here's the wonderful **Spectre** article.



### Christmas '08 Book Signing in North Carolina

In the charming historic town of Wake Forest is a special little place called **The Storyteller's Bookstore**. Not only do they have a lovely selection of books, they're a gathering place for a charming and special community. Owner Drew Bridges invited me to do a small Christmas tea in the charming setting of his store, and to do a reading from **Christmas Angels**. We gathered a wonderful crowd -- mostly new readers, but also dear friends and family members.



### March '09 Scholarship Event, Santa Clarita

I had the good fortune to meet the Great **Kate Schwab** a couple of years ago. At the time, she was excelling at her twenty-year job at Borders, handling all Southern California events. As Borders downsized, their loss was our gain, because Kate launched her **Great Books Library Services**, which arranges for authors to appear at private events and share a blessing for all of us who've come on her list! She put me and three other authors whose now become colleagues and friends to speak at a wonderful fundraiser -- **Santa Clarita Valley Scholarship Foundation AfterWORDS** luncheon. Our event -- and this group photo -- was chosen by **Publisher's Weekly** as their photo of the day! Be sure to check out **Harley Jane Kozak**, **Selden Edwards**, and **Josh Conroy**.



### March '09 CIPA College in Denver

Second only to **BPA's Publishing University** held annually at Book Expo America (free in New York), CIPA's Colorado Independent Publishing Association) College, held each March, is the largest publishing program put on by any of the BPA Affiliates in the country. **Judith Biles**, a best-selling author, national speaker, and a former CIPA president, agreed to chair the College and created the most outstanding program of the decade. Full details of the event are posted at [www.CIPABooks.com](http://www.CIPABooks.com). My friend and non-fiction writing partner, actress **Erica Gray** and I were invited to speak and we shared the entire process of writing, designing and co-publishing our award-winning **Act Right**. It was a joy to work with Erin, as always! Read more about her career at [www.ErinGray.com](http://www.ErinGray.com). In case you're wondering what all this has to do with Milford-Haven, in the original radio drama, Erin played  **Meredith Jones**, the sister of my character  **Meredith Jones**. To this day, when I write "Meredith," I hear Erin's voice. All the actors in the show helped make me a better writer.



### April '09 Los Angeles Times Festival of Books

The **LA Times Festival of Books** is the largest retail book festival in the country. With 150,000 annual visitors, it's vibrant and beautifully organized, and becomes the heartbeat of Los Angeles every April. For the last few years I's been a key annual event for me, where I connect with so many of my readers! The booth is totally transformed into **Milford-Haven** -- lighthouse and blue ocean-scapes, seashells and the sound of waves... **Step into the booth out of the warm sun, and you'll swear you feel a cool ocean breeze**. This is Milford-Haven...a space for you to find yourself! Join us in 2010! Look for the Haven Books booth. It'll be there all day Saturday, signing books and then for our annual "Tea at Three" we serve tea and I do a short reading. On Sunday, my friend and colleague **Debra Goss** will be the Haven Books guest author. You'll be able to buy all our books on both days. Also throughout the Festival, stop by the **Women Writing the West** booth. I'm serving as VP of marketing this year, and will have a beautiful booth with books on display from many fellow authors.



### May '09 - Best Kept Secrets Book Tea

In May 2009, I collaborated with **Kate Schwab** to create our first **Best Kept Secrets Book Tea** in Santa Barbara. We worked with the owner of the beautiful **Cafe Shell** on State Street, who reconfigured her restaurant, making it into a classic tea room, and served an assortment of tasty teas with scones and dotted scones. We invited fellow authors **Katie Cushman**, **Harley Jane Kozak**, and asked author/columnist **Starchise Rashell** to be our moderator. She came up with riveting questions, which challenged us and our readers. Each of us has our own take on writing Women's Fiction. Katie is Galapagos writer, Harley and I both write contemporary fiction with female protagonists, hers set in Los Angeles, mine set in Santa Barbara and points north. The event was fantastic. We ended on a surprisingly sentimental note, because the latest big Santa Barbara film was suddenly whipped up by fierce winds. While helping a friend evacuate for the rest of the day, I couldn't help but notice a part of me was in "writer mode," taking notes for a future book in my series, "Natural Disaster." Since its writing a California series, I will of course have to deal with fire. It's keeping you posted about future books. Read about this event on [Facebook](http://Facebook).



### May '09 Pride & Prejudice Debate

Not only is this one of my favorite novels, I also happen to love most of the film versions. But when I mentioned to **JASNA** (Jane Austen Society of North America) member **Eileen Healy** how much I loved the most recent version directed by **Joe Wright** and starring Keira Knightly and Matthew MacFadyen, her face (such as Jane Austen character's) betrayed indignity. She put it delicately: "That version is not well thought of." Our mutual friend Dr. Jean Ray is one of the foremost authorities on all matters Austen, a professor of English Literature at UCES (University of Colorado Colorado Springs) and actively wrote the book **Jane Austen for Dummies**. Jane and I agree that the earlier ABC/BBC version starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth was brilliant, but didn't see eye to eye on the newer film. So I challenged Jean to a debate. What was I thinking?? JASNA put on the event, ordered a gorgeous cake decorated in Jane Austen. After Joan's presentation, eyes were darting with wildness in my direction. What could I possibly have to say after Joan's wit, research, insight, and scintillating truth? Well, first I got the audience laughing, and then I shared my perspective on the film -- that it should be viewed as true to sub-text, rather than to text. Ultimately, I made my points, and it was decided Joan and I both "won." The whole thing was so much fun, we were able to have our cake...and eat it too. We're thinking about doing it again! Read about this event on [Facebook](http://Facebook).



### June '09 Book Expo America in New York City

**As Broadway is to theatre, BEA is to publishing**. I may not have a banner with my name written in a size 5,000 font yet, but I did get invited to sign in the beloved Autograph Hall. The good news was, I was next to New York Times columnist Gill Collins. The bad news was, she had at least a hundred readers standing in her line. And how many were in my line? None, zero, nada, no one. Well, first I did a mental checklist: publicity? Check. **Patrice Walters**, the best. Always noticed! Check e-mails, postcards, phone calls, the works. Oh yes, and a good new book! Check! Next, I just went into gratitude mode. How cool was it to actually be here with my peers? How exciting was it that so many people are so excited about reading? As I sat there in my meditation, suddenly a **RUSH of readers -- mostly women -- filled up the space between the two velvet ropes defining my line, and spilled well beyond into the lobby**. After a moment of astonishment, I turned to my first guest and kicked into that unique experience known as FLOW. As you know if you were there -- I spoke with each and every visitor, finding each so interesting! We connected...about ideas, about books, about Milford-Haven, about women and what we read and why. WOW! It was utterly extraordinary. When I looked up, an hour had passed, Gill and her line of readers were gone, and I was still signing books until I ran out. Needless to say, my signing was a great success, with over one hundred readers and fans attending. **Thank you -- every single one of you who joined me. You inspire me no end.**



### July '09 - Ventura Book Festival

This wonderful festival has been gathering momentum and attendees over the past few years. Since I'm now a **Spokeswoman for Women's Fiction**, I was invited to put together a panel, and I decided to open it up to Women's Writing -- both Fiction and Non-Fiction. I turned the tables on **Starchise Rashell**, this time asking her to speak about her non-fiction columns for the **Santa Barbara Independent**. The extraordinary **Lynette Rowland** hails from South Africa and she spoke about her haunting and personal memoir-novel. And **Harley Jane Kozak** spoke about her great series featuring a protagonist named Mary Shelley. What an exciting conversational! The room was packed, the questions were challenging, and the dialogue had continued ever since on [www.Goodreads.com](http://www.Goodreads.com)! As always, kudos to Mary Embree for challenging the Festival and **CLAS -- California Literary Arts Society** -- on whose board I am now privileged to serve. Here the **Ventura County Star** article about the event.



### August '09 Book Signing with Linda Seger

Colorado Springs boasts a wonderfully unique place called **Book Links**. **Poor Richards Bookstore**, friend and colleague **Linda Seger** has a new book **Spiritual Steps on the Way to Success**. The sub-title of her book says so much: "Gaining the Goal without Losing Your Soul." How do we do that, anyway? That's what we debated, spiritual and literary issues each of us wrestle with as authors, she though her non-fiction, me through my fiction. Stimulated by some fabulous questions from our guests, we came away enriched as always. Linda is also an internationally-known script consultant, and we sometimes work together on client's scripts, work we both adore. By the way, in the small world department, both Linda and I have been friends for decades with publisher **Richard West**, whose company published some of her books.



### September '09 Women Writing the West Conference at UCLA

This was a WOW conference! Not only was it a joy to attend, but an honor to be one of several speakers. **Women Writing the West** is an awesome group of serious writers, many of them multiple-award winners. We only meet once a year, and do it in style. This year was truly one of the most outstanding ever. It was chaired by one of the beloved mentor-mothers of the organization **Harriet Rachlin**, whose own trilogy on Jews in the West is critically acclaimed, and whose extensive research became part of the UCLA Library system. This conference brought up so many interesting questions, one of the key ones being, "Is California the West?" Of course it is...and yet it has its own identity. I think of California as being both the end, the ultimate goal of the continent, yet also the beginning of the Pacific Rim. We explored these themes by having a standing array of speakers. **Lisa See** was our keynote speaker, and her amazing career speaks for itself. To mention just a few others, we had **Kathie Yoneda**, an outstanding script consultant, and **Hayette Hulien**, professor of English at UCLA. Best-selling author **Wendy Wilkinson** and I were thrilled to work together, and to be invited to present marketing strategies. Be sure to visit the Women Writing the West website if it sounds like a match for your interests.



### October '09 Central Coast Book Festival

There's no place like home -- and California's Central Coast is home territory for the Milford-Haven Novels. So this delightful, outdoor event on the Library Plaza in lovely San Luis Obispo is another key annual event for me. This time not only did I colleague **Bill Berkuts** ("Engineer Bill") and I kick down a table (literally, since it tremendously wobbly!) I was also asked to create a panel. My colleagues and I decided to tackle another interesting question. Do men write Women's Fictions? The answer was a resounding yes, answered by **Serdon Snider**. **Women's Fiction used to be fiction written by women; now it's fiction written for women**. Interesting, isn't it? Women's Fiction issue-drives? **Katie Cushman** answers this with her wonderful novel, whose two key protagonists find themselves on opposite sides of key issues. Again, great questions from the audience and a lively discussion!



### October '09 Mysteries Tea

Just in time for **Halloween**, my partners and I decided to create the second **Best Kept Secrets Book Tea** in Santa Barbara. Because we were featuring fabulous food -- autumn-themed delicacies like miniature pumpkin muffins -- the event became part of Santa Barbara's city-wide **Police Sir's Month**. So **Susan Roberts**, **Starchise Rashell** returned as our brilliant moderator, **Kate Schwab** and **Cafe Shell** as our business partners. This time our focus was **Women's Mysteries** and we featured mystery authors **Loiselle Corley**, Anna Nicholas, and Joan's truly. **Are there differences between Women's and Men's mysteries?** It was a great discussion! And as always, the food was fantastic...

