

## From Veteran Journalist to Debut Novelist

By Dorinda Ohnstad

Susan Diamond is a veteran journalist best known as the former *Los Angeles Times* consumer reporter S.J. Diamond. She graduated from Radcliffe College then obtained a master's degree from the University of Iowa as a Writers Workshop fellow. After teaching a few years at Iowa and Brandeis University, she headed to New York, where she freelanced for the *Village Voice*, among others, and became an editor at the *New Yorker*. In 1967, she moved to Los Angeles, where she was a free-lance writer for various publications until she joined *The Los Angeles Times* in 1976, where in 1981 she began writing a weekly consumer complaint column called "For What It's Worth." Although she retired from journalism in 1994, she continues to write the occasional opinion piece.

Susan's retirement from journalism allowed her time to pursue a career in fiction—a passion since childhood. In her debut novel, *What Goes Around* (April 2007), Susan weaves a tale of ultimate revenge by five members of a therapy group made up of professional middle-aged women. When one of them, a socialite by day and by night a clandestine high-priced call girl, is found dead outside an exclusive men's only club the women suspect murder. When the police fail to pursue the three powerful men responsible for Ginger's death the group of friends take justice into their own hands—their arsenal limited to each woman's professional skills. As they exact their revenge they are pleasantly surprised to find themselves resolving the personal issues that brought them to the therapy group in the first place.

When I opened the cover of *What Goes Around* I expected a riveting crime novel. What I didn't expect, but was pleasantly surprised to discover, was a book of female empowerment. Women, just like me, although successful in their professional lives find themselves staring at middle-age and wondering is this all that life holds for me? While the book pits five women against three high-powered businessmen, it is not a tale of women versus men, but more a battle of right triumphing over wrong, and should appeal to both men and women. The book has strong credible characters, a well-paced plot, and is infused with the sum total of Susan's years of journalism experience and knowledge of topics such as horticulture, real estate, medicine, politics, finance, law and tax fraud.

Life is not something that can be learned. It needs to be lived and Susan has plenty of life experiences, both professional and personal, to share with her readers long into the future.

**Q: You aren't new to the writing world. Tell us a bit about your journalism background prior to the release of *What Goes Around*.**

**A:** Although I've spent the most time as a journalist, I've done all kinds of writing. I was about 8 when I decided to be a writer and, seeing that many writers used initials (A.A. Milne, J.M. Barrie, E. Nesbit, E.B. White), began to sign myself S.J. Diamond, which has served me until the present. I wrote my way through school, college, graduate school—

stories, poetry, essays, literary criticism. My first full-time journalism job was editing at *The New Yorker*, where I was a researcher and fact-checker—an excellent grounding in the need for precision and accuracy because if any mistake appeared in the magazine, our heads were the first to roll.

After moving to California, I free-lanced as a magazine reporter for publications ranging from *Architectural Digest* and the *Village Voice* to *Time* and *People* magazines, then joined the *Los Angeles Times*, in a day when newspapers had the time, the space and the money to do both daily news and quasi-magazine articles. I was hired by the business section to write front-page pieces on business for a very general audience— long features on oriental rug auctions, income taxes, synthetic gems, ATM robberies, product manuals, Christmas food catalogues. I was there almost 17 years, also writing a column on consumer affairs and businesses—everything from credit cards to amusement parks-- again for the layman.

**Q: What inspired you to write a novel? Why the switch to fiction and why was this the right time for you to write your debut novel?**

**A:** It was more of a *return* to fiction, which is where I started. After college, I went to the University of Iowa on a fellowship at the Iowa Writers Workshop. I wrote a lot and the writing wasn't half bad, but I was in my early twenties and had nothing much to say, and was soon drawn to a bigger world of different people and widely different experiences.

In several decades as a reporter, one hears a lot of stories, covers a lot of events, investigates a lot of situations, and eventually, I started thinking of fiction again. Then one day, when I was writing about discrimination suits against some exclusive men's clubs, I began to get a little image of a woman's body on a path just outside the fence of a club's mountain retreat. At first, it seemed I had the beginnings of a murder mystery, but when I revealed who'd done it in the first chapter and couldn't wait to get from the crime to the punishment, I realized I was writing a book about the rewards of a good revenge, "good" meaning both justified and well-done.

*What Goes Around* is the story of five women who set out to avenge the death of a friend at the hands of three of the most powerful men in California and in the course of their covert campaign for justice, change their own lives. It is about crime, moral and commercial. It's also a dark-nights, back-roads, car-chasing, wall-climbing caper with its moments of suspense. But with the focus on vengeance at its purest, a private but legitimate form of justice, it's not a "classic" murder mystery. Fortunately, the genre has great flexibility.

**Q: A good agent is a key ingredient in a writer's success. Your agent, Molly Friedrich, is one of the best in the industry. I've been told that she doesn't take on new clients, so what was your secret to getting her to represent you?**

**A:** Actually, that isn't true, according to Friedrich. Like any smart professional, she says she is always glad and in fact, eager to take on good writers.

In my case, I sent her a letter and the manuscript of my book and she liked it. My only advice—and plenty of people say the opposite—is that unless one is a well-known and established author, one should send the whole book, not just a few chapters and an outline.

And I'll add that Molly Friedrich is indeed the best and I'm lucky to have her.

**Q: How do you think having a good agent has impacted your career?**

A: Certainly a good agent kicks off any career. She sold my book, which got it published, which gave me the opportunity to go out and sell it to readers. So while it's definitely thanks to Molly Friedrich that I have a commercial product, published in April, the impact on my continued career as a novelist is still unknown.

**Q: Each of the characters in your book has a unique background, profession or interest that required you to know more than a little bit about such things as exotic plants, tax fraud, medicine, consumer affairs, and real estate development. How did you conduct your background research and how much time did you have to devote to it?**

A: It took over three decades and counting. Being a reporter is all about research in ever-changing areas. Every couple of weeks, a reporter has to develop a surprisingly detailed knowledge of yet another field. I've covered everything in the book at least once, from divorce law to art auctions, and know just where to go for further information. And I knew something about the particular work and expertise of each of the characters, and only one, a very minor figure, is a reporter.

Of the five heroines, Kat runs health clubs, Dinah's a doctor and collects art, Charlotte's an estate lawyer, Justine's a tax assessor who'd prefer a career in horticulture – all fields I've covered. Polly, the fifth woman and really the lead character, lives on her shrewd investments and constantly writes letters of consumer complaint to big corporations, letters based on columns I wrote at the *L A. Times*. And because the women cannot bring the villains to justice for causing their friend Ginger's death, and have to go after them covertly and anonymously, they look instead for some malfeasance in their business or professional lives. In other words, business and business practices run all through this book, as they ran through my reporting, as they run through daily life.

**Q: Rather than one, you have five protagonists in your novel. Why did you choose this approach? What were the challenges you had to overcome in writing from five different points of view and developing five different character arcs?**

A: I have five protagonists because I wanted a *group*, a circle of friends operating out of friendship, solidarity, a bond of loyalty. I also wanted multiple examples of competent successful women confronting mid-life with a sense that they were not exactly where they had hoped to be, but couldn't identify or effect the needed change. Each, as I said

before, was changed by this experience, this crusade for vengeance, but in different ways. Together, they all illustrate my belief that success breeds success, that an achievement in one area of life gives one the strength or confidence or whatever it takes to achieve success in another.

Creating five different characters and points of view was not really a challenge but a joy. These are not professional sleuths but ordinary women very much like women I know – competent, thoughtful, caring, smart and even smart-mouthed—and I had a great deal of fun with their ensemble performance. It was very rewarding to hear from a number of readers that they got irritable as they neared the end of the book because they were enjoying the company of these women and wanted to stick around. As for me, even though I know perfectly well that they're just figments of my own imagination, I miss them a lot.

**Q: Character, Setting, Story. Which is your starting point? Do you outline your plot before you begin? If so, how extensively?**

**A:** I have no set method for starting and the starting point itself is more a spark, and unpredictable. *What Goes Around* started with that image of a body on a path that, as I mulled it over, began to acquire both a back story and a developing story of investigation, discovery and revenge. The novel I'm working on now came out of my random thoughts while watching a rather tacky TV show: Who could plan that?

Whatever gave impetus to the whole invention, the important thing is just to start, which to me means taking that initial idea and plunging into the first of several successive outlines, just as we learned, or should have learned, in junior high school. I start with a pretty bare foundation outline—the major divisions of the book. With *What Goes Around*, I had five divisions--death, discovery, then one, two and three revenges, plus a sense of how much space each needed. Then I lay it out more fully, planning the action and development in each of those parts, chapter by chapter, though the number of chapters may change as I go. In the final outline, each chapter is filled with notes, some involving action, some dialogue, some descriptions, and all pasted onto the pages in order and interspersed with written thoughts. I think a 200-page outline is about right for a 375-400 page book.

**Q: Who are some of your favorite authors? Is there anyone in particular you draw inspiration from? If so, how has that influenced your writing?**

**A:** I like and admire many writers: any favorite author is quickly replaced by a next favorite. It has been that way since I was young and read my way around the fiction room at the public library: when I found someone I liked, I read all of their works, and I do the same today.

Probably the greatest influence on my writing was myths and fairy tales, which juxtapose ordinary life and extra-ordinary developments in what's meant to be an instructive or

revealing way, and which sometimes succeed. Much of fiction, including, sometimes, my own, still tries to do that.

**Q: For a debut novelist, marketing and exposure to the reading public are key to long-term writing success. Tell us what that process has been like for you.**

**A:** Unless one has the marketing gene, and writers usually don't or they wouldn't be sitting in a room all alone writing, the whole process can be difficult, frustrating, and unpredictable. As a long-time reporter and columnist with some years of teaching as well, I'm used to appearing before audiences of many kinds and I enjoy it, whether they're big formal groups, small casual groups, book clubs, dinner or lunch meetings. Being with women's groups is particularly fun because, as with the women in my book, it often becomes not just a presentation but an interesting and entertaining dialogue.

That said, I'm not a gifted salesman. I keep forgetting to tell people there's a table of my books just outside and please buy a bunch. Even when I'm signing books and there's a line, I'm easily drawn into conversations I'd like to continue.

**Q: What advice would you give other aspiring writers?**

**A:** Try just writing, by which I mean don't waste your time doing other things. Most important, don't talk too much about your good idea because you might talk an idea *out*, airing it to the point where you won't need to write it any more.

**Q: What's up next for you? Are you working on another book? If so, tell us a bit about it and when we should expect to see it on bookstore shelves.**

**A:** There are two other novels on my mind right now, and not just on my mind but generating notes and files full of clips and scraps of paper. One I'm already laying out and writing in dribs and drabs, though it's very much like talking to myself and it's probably a couple of years before it goes to bookstore shelves.

As for long-term goals, I can look at those two books ahead as either long-term or short-term, depending on my mood. It's easier just to think of them as my current plan.

For upcoming appearances and more information about Susan Diamond visit her website at [www.susanjdiamond.com](http://www.susanjdiamond.com).