Thanks to my Otis Faculty Development Grant, I attended the Santa Barbara Writer’s Conference (SBWC) held at the Hyatt Centric beachfront hotel June 17-22, 2018. It was wonderful being with fellow travelers on the literary road, living, breathing, and speaking the written word, and getting great feedback from manuscript consultants, fellow authors, and workshop participants on *The Idiot’s Lament*, my novel in progress, and *Chinchillas*, my completed novella.

This was the 46th annual SBWC conference, attended by some 200 participants – seasoned writers and emerging writers ranging in age from 17 to 95 writing in all genres. It was a non-stop week of workshops, guest speakers, and panel discussions encompassing a vast literary landscape – from commercial fiction to literary fiction, and a schedule that ran from 8:00 am to the wee hours of the morning.

Even though I write literary fiction, I gravitated toward workshops led by authors who write mystery and crime novels. Mid week I attended crime writer Gar Haywood’s workshop “7 Deadly Sins of Novel Writing,” which Haywood described as follows: “Other workshops focus on the positive – this one is the opposite – the negative – what stands out in your work that annoys the reader.” He said that our job is to turn on editors and agents – that which will turn off readers at Barnes and Noble will turn off editors. Haywood gives it to you straight, yet there is a philosophical, considered approach to his feedback.

I am a planner in all things except when it comes to writing fiction, where I am a *pantser* – which means I write by the seat of my pants. I’d heard the pros and cons, and went to workshops that emphasized the necessity of outlining and workshops that emphasized discovery writing. I liked what writer Lida Sedaris said: “When I found out who the killer was, I was more surprised than anyone!” and guest speaker Dara Horn: “I’m reading the way you’re writing. I want to know what happens next!” Although I had heard similar statements from other authors, these two struck a chord.

Something else Horn said spoke to me: “Story telling is always about defining or defeating death.” This comes right out of Jewish tradition, and Horn, who explores free will in her books, spoke about writing through this lens. She quoted a well-known line from the *Talmud*, “Everything is foreseen but freedom is given” to illustrate the point that “anything can happen on the first page of a novel, but not on page 225.”

*The Idiot’s Lament* is a Jewish story, an Israeli story, one steeped in Jewish history and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It’s about defining death *and* defeating death. Past events are always reverberating with the present, and thinking about the novel in those terms helped me see its inevitable conclusion.
Mystery writer Leonard Tourney began his workshop aptly titled “Mystery Writing” by bringing up Dara Horn – apparently her talk was on everyone’s mind – and picked up on the point she made that “every language has an archeology of belief embedded in it” to discuss dialogue as a means to reveal character: “When you create a character, you have more power than God - you can create the character any way you want, but you have to get the reader to believe it.”

“Tell your manuscript readers what you want them to look for,” Tourney advised. Advice I didn’t take. I wanted them to give it to me straight. Lisa Howe, my manuscript consultant for Chinchillas said, “Chinchillas is funny in a Flannery O’Connor kind of way – sex with no build up, no romance, the main character oblivious to her husband’s casual brutality and the ownership he has over her.” A former literary agent, Howe said if Chinchillas came to her desk, she “would fall over and publish this.” She encouraged me to “ratchet up the menacing behavior,” submit the first chapter of Chinchillas as a short story to Fence Magazine and Story, and to talk to literary fiction agents.

I had read the second chapter of The Idiot’s Lament in Gar Haywood’s workshop, so I came to my manuscript consult with the idea that that I would revise and begin the novel with Chapter Two. This was confirmed when I met with Susan Chiavelli, who helped me see that I didn’t need to delete chapter one, just exchange it with chapter two.

Among the feedback I got in Gar Haywood’s workshop was that The Idiot’s Lament was “sharply funny,” and another from a literature professor specializing in Southern fiction: “I hope you take this as a compliment – It’s like if Faulkner was a Jewish woman.” I did, and this helped ground my novel in ways I hadn’t considered.

The conference fostered an environment for creative growth, and fulfilled its mission of encouraging writers to become more comfortable with their own work and to think critically about the writing that is around them. Monty Shultz encouraged everyone to “seek out kindred spirits and literary confidants,” and underscored what Joan Didion told him at an SBWC conference many years ago: “Remember, doing this is fun!”