

THE ANNUAL AGENT ROUNDUP

WRITER'S DIGEST

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Make Connections in Storytelling

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PROFESSIONAL CONTACTS

10 Reasons to GET AN
AGENT MID-CAREER

Strategies for CRAFTING
BRIDGE CHARACTERS

Writing as a COLLABORATION
WITH READERS

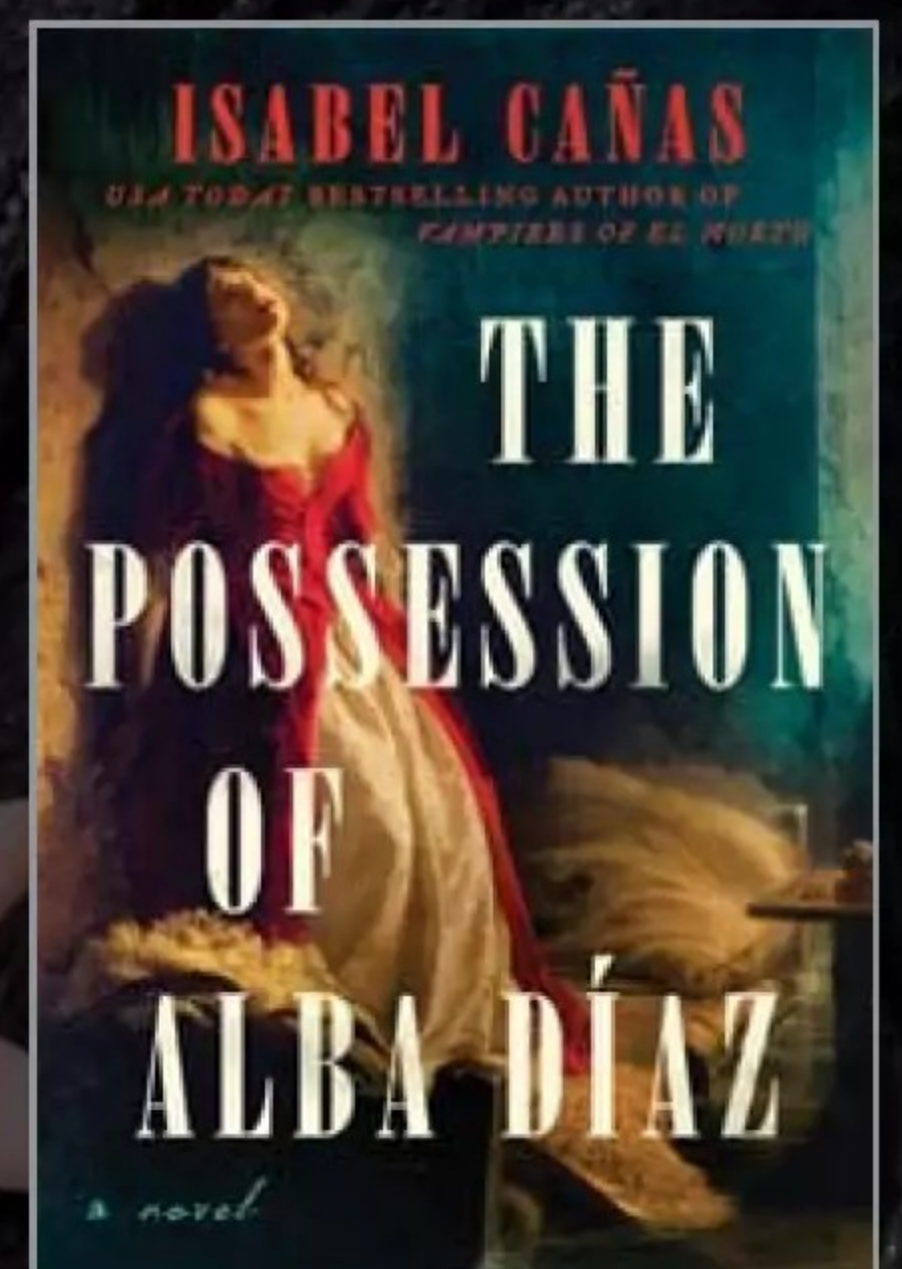
25th Annual WD Short Short
Story Awards Winner:
HANNA BAHEDRY

+ MODERN ROMANCE
AUTHORS ON
WRITING SOCIAL
JUSTICE
NARRATIVES

WD INTERVIEW

Isabel Cañas

THE BESTSELLING HISTORICAL
HORROR AUTHOR DISCUSSES
THE GENRE TRIANGLE OF HER
WORK AND HER NEWEST NOVEL



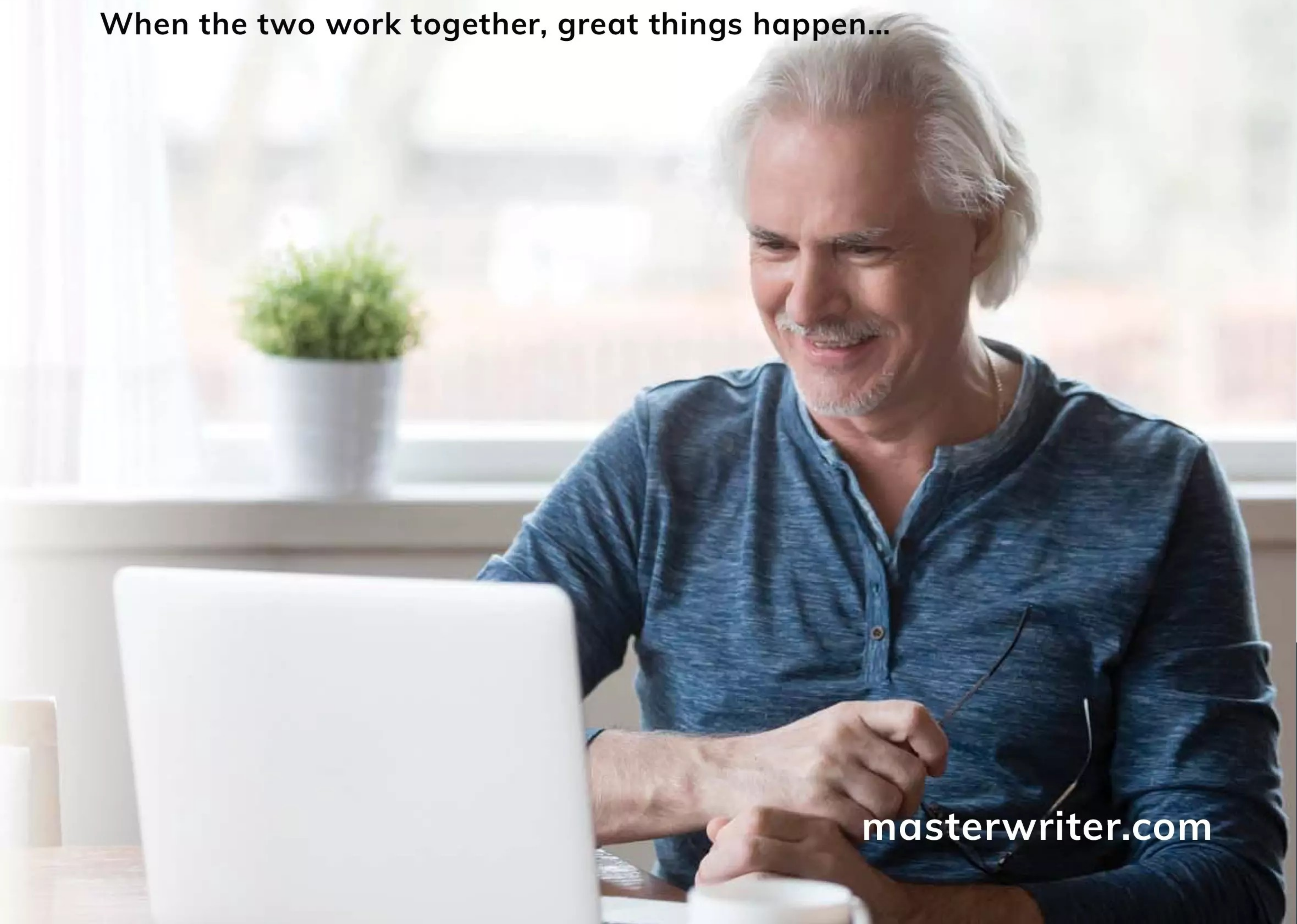


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Isabel Cañas

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Designers peel back the layers of their book covers.

BY PATRICK KANG

Designing the Cover of *Only the Dead*

Only the Dead is the sixth book in Jack Carr's series, preceded by *Terminal List*, *True Believer*, *Savage Son*, *Devil's Hand*, and *In the Blood*. I designed the mass-market editions of all five of those books. The main character in the series is James Reese, a Navy SEAL leader who, after a sabotaged mission leads to the death of his squad and his family, seeks revenge on those behind the conspiracy.

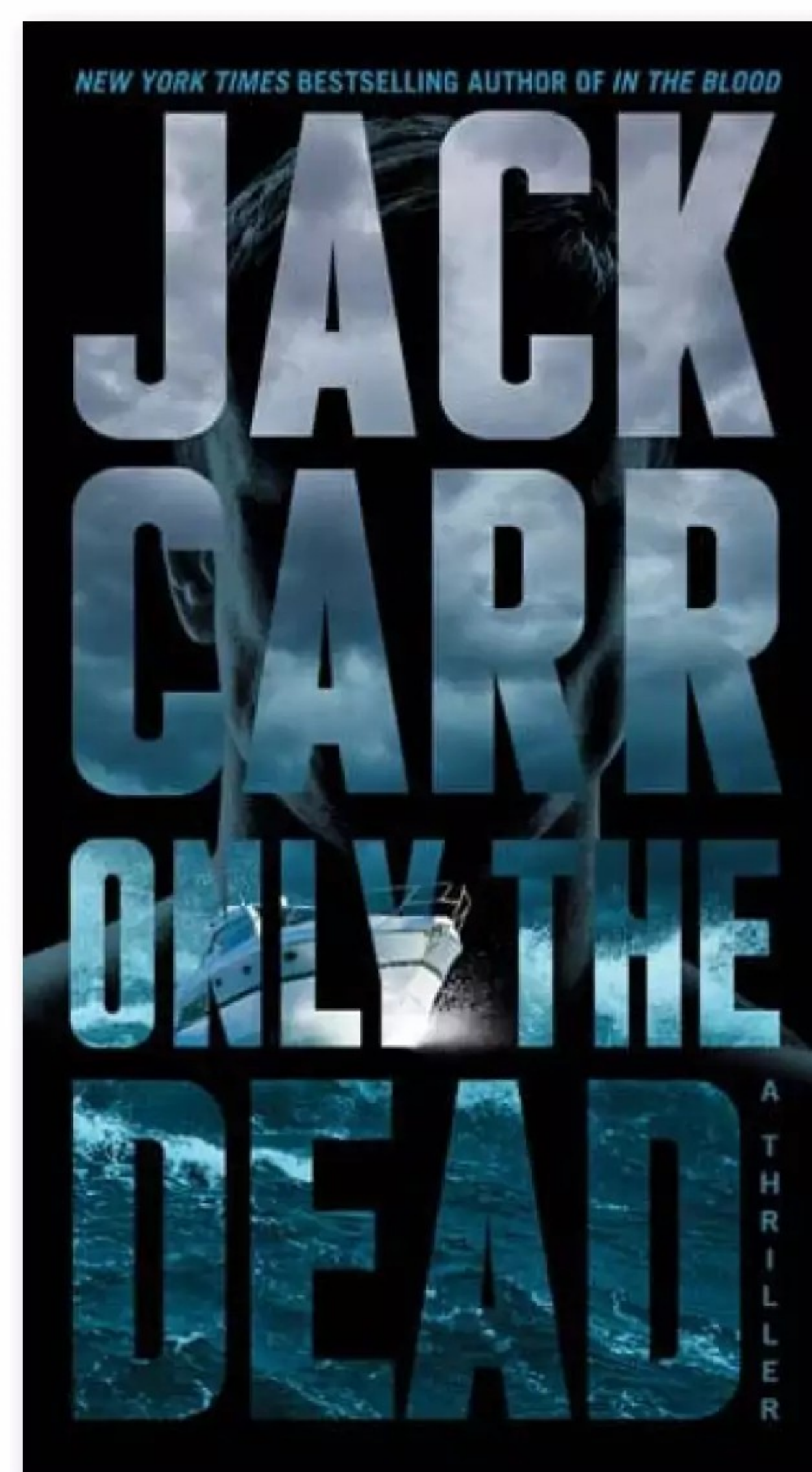
What made *Only the Dead* special was that the art director sent me a photo of a tomahawk to use on the cover, which was specifically requested by the author. Before the release of this book, the TV series "The Terminal List" was released on Amazon Prime, and at the end of the series, I saw why the author wanted to highlight this particular weapon.

It looks violent and brutal, and the protagonist uses it in such a manner.

The original idea from the art director was to have a close-up shot of menacing-looking eyes as a reflection on the blade of the

tomahawk, but the problem was I was given only one photo of the tomahawk, and it was cropped so tightly I didn't have much freedom to move it around the page. I purchased other tomahawks and photographed them on my own to incorporate them into the design, but I knew from the past experience that when the author sends you a particular object to use on the cover, it has to be that exact object, not anything similar. That's when I started thinking of a backup plan.

While searching for other visual ideas, I thought of using the boat chase scene from the book, but the boat alone made it look like it was a maritime thriller, so I found a silhouetted photo of a man with a chiseled jawline and decided to use it as a secondary visual in the background. I also made the author's name and the title large enough on the page to fill the space, which is a typical style used for well-known authors, but this was the first book in the series to have



this big typography look. I think the final cover sets the tone of the story without giving too much away.

DESIGNER: Patrick Kang

AUTHOR: Jack Carr

PUBLISHER: Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster)

PUBLICATION DATE: November 2023

Patrick Kang has worked as a book cover designer for over 24 years, half of which were spent in-house in major publishing companies in NYC. He has worked on a variety of genres of books such as thriller, romance, self-help, and true crime. He currently lives in Los Angeles.



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**WRITER'S DIGEST
EDITORIAL OFFICES**

P.O. Box 42534
Cincinnati, Ohio 45242
writers.digest@aimmedia.com

BACK ISSUES

Digital back issues are available for purchase at WritersDigestShop.com.

ADVERTISING

NATIONAL ACCOUNT SALES MANAGER

April Krueger (715) 318-0996
akrueger@aimmedia.com

ADVERTISING SALES COORDINATOR

Julie Dillon (715) 257-6028
fax: (715) 997-8883
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EDITOR'S LETTER



Making Connections in Storytelling

Twenty years ago, if you'd asked me what the word *connections* meant as it relates to publishing, I'd cringe, say "networking," and retreat back to the book I was reading. The idea of networking intimidated me, conjuring images of crowded ballrooms and forcing a smile while talking to total strangers in the hopes they'd one day remember my name when my résumé crossed their desk.

Thinking about connections now brings to mind a wider and vastly more positive collection of ideas. For instance, as a reader, I love creating connections between the books I choose to read. A passing mention of a person or event in one book might topple the previous TBR stack I'd established and instead lead to a book I've had sitting on my shelf for years. Likewise, learning of unexpected connections between two writers whose work I admire (as you'll read about in Jessica Francis Kane's *Writers on Writing* essay) reminds me of the oft-repeated note about how small the publishing world is. But these connections feel truer—distinctively separate from the "networking" I'd feared. Instead, it's more about finding the writing instructor or critique partner or literary agent who will push you to the next step of your writing goal/s. And then, of course, if you can, offering similar help to someone you might meet along the way.

So I take particular joy in this issue about making connections in storytelling because it is focused on bringing people (whether real or fictional) together in meaningful ways. This issue features our Annual Agent Roundup with 20+ agents who've offered advice about what they're looking for and how best to connect with them. Zachary Petit considers why it might be time to look for an agent, even if you've already had publishing successes without one. Elizabeth Sims shares craft advice about creating "bridge characters" who can lead your main characters where they need to be. Peter Mountford looks at writing (for publication) as a collaborative effort between writer and reader, because what is writing without a reader?

This issue's WD Interview offers a full-circle moment featuring bestselling novelist Isabel Cañas, who was included in our *Breaking In* column in 2022 with her debut and is now sharing details of her third novel, *The Possession of Alba Díaz*.

Finally, we offer our sincere congratulations to Hanna Bahedry for winning grand prize in the 25th WD Short Short Story Awards. You can read "A Beautiful and Everlasting Moment of Pleasure," the winning story, in its entirety inside.

As you read through this issue, I encourage you to pause occasionally to think about how you can make and find new, sincere connections in your writing life.

Yours in Writing,

CONTRIBUTORS



Author, educator, and multi-media artist **REBEKAH L. FRASER** has published 190 articles in trade and consumer magazines throughout North America, plus one nonfiction book about climate change and five novels. She writes intersectional eco-feminist romance novels as Tara L. Roí and teaches in the writing MFA program at a small New England college. As Tara L. Roí, she has been a featured guest on several author panels and podcasts, including at the Yale Romance Literature of Hope conference. Her forthcoming book, *Refashioned by Love*, is due out from Bee Books on November 15.

P.M. RAYMOND (PMRaymond.com) is an award-winning author from New Orleans who knows a thing or two about good gumbo, grits, and café au lait. She is a 2025 Killer Shorts and Horror2Comic Semifinalist, the Sisters in Crime 2024 Eleanor Taylor Bland Award Winner, and 2024 Claymore Award Finalist. She was named to the *160 Black Women in Horror* in 2023. Her interconnected short story collection, *Things Are as They Should Be and Other Words to Die For*, will be released in 2026 from Uncomfortably Dark Horror. Her work has appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Punk Noir*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Kings River Life Magazine*, *The Furious Gazelle*, and *Dark Yonder*, among others.



ABBY ALTEN SCHWARTZ (AbbyAltenSchwartz.com) is a Philadelphia writer whose published work includes essays, reported stories, creative nonfiction, flash, humor, and craft articles. She’s currently writing her first book, *Hypervigilant: A Memoir of Uncertainty, Intuition, and Hope*. Abby’s work has been featured in *Hippocampus*, *HAD*, *The Citron Review*, *Five Minutes*, *Brevity Blog*, as well as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *HuffPost*, *AARP*, *Salon*, *WIRED*, and elsewhere. Her writing has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Find her on social media [@abbys480](#) or on Substack at Name Three Things.

Contributing editor **ELIZABETH SIMS** is the author of the Rita Farmer Mysteries and the Lambda and GCLS Goldie Award-winning Lillian Byrd Crime Series, as well as other fiction, including *Down to the D: A Bambi Pentecost Crime Novel*, published this year. Her lively, practical book, *You’ve Got a Book in You: A Stress-Free Guide to Writing the Book of Your Dreams* (Writer’s Digest Books), has helped thousands of writers find their wings. A believer in the power of varied experience for writers, Elizabeth has worked as a reporter, photographer, technical writer, bookseller, street busker, ranch hand, corporate executive, certified lifeguard, and (currently) symphonic percussionist.



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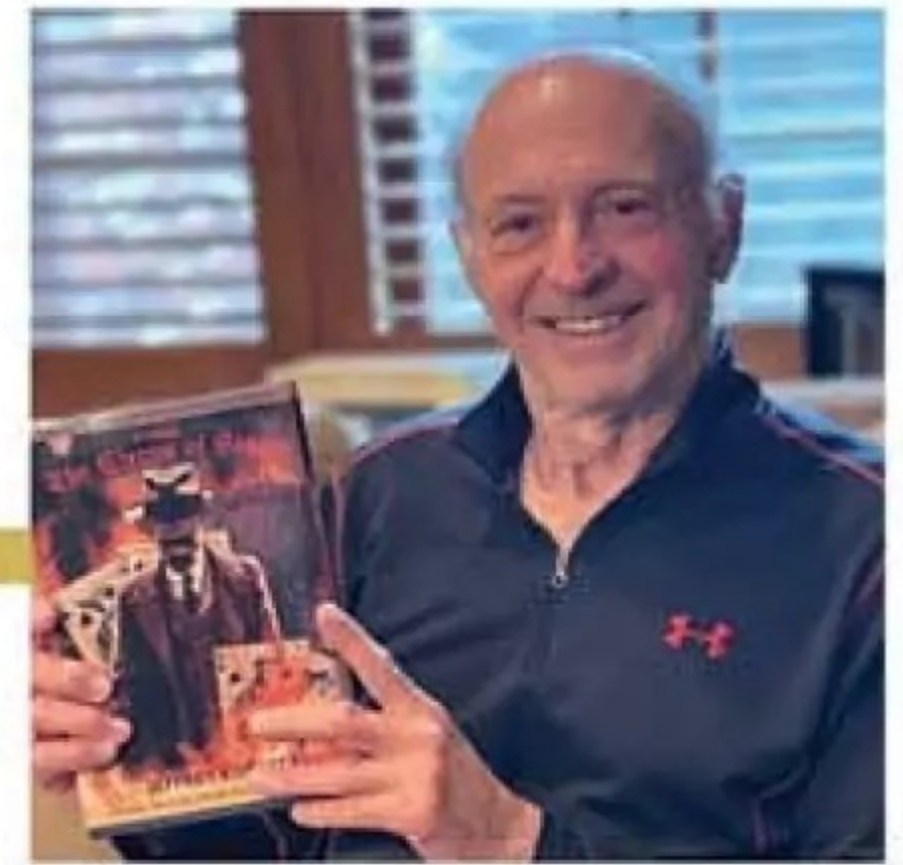
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OWNING THE STORY:

Why a *New York Times*-Bestselling Author Chose to Publish Independently

A Conversation with Jeffrey Konvitz, Author of *The Circus of Satan*

Presented by Gatekeeper Press



“Believe in your creative work and follow the path that aligns with your mission. That’s what matters most.” - Jeffrey Konvitz

In this candid interview, Jeffrey Konvitz, author of *The Sentinel*, shares why he left the traditional publishing world behind to partner with Gatekeeper Press on his latest novel, *The Circus of Satan*.

The result? Full creative freedom, ownership of the process, and expert guidance from manuscript to publication—insightful for any author considering the indie path.

YOU’VE HAD GREAT SUCCESS IN TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING. WHAT INSPIRED THE SHIFT TO INDIE?

My first three books were with major publishers. *The Sentinel* was published by Simon & Schuster and went on to sell millions. But the process was long and frustrating. *The Sentinel* was rejected 30 times before it was picked up.

My next two books had similar setbacks. After 25 years of work on *The Circus of Satan*, I wanted full control over the artwork, the content, and the campaign. I also wanted a partner who could act like a production team and distributor. Gatekeeper Press did just that, helping bring the book to life across all major digital channels.

WHAT DID YOU FIND MOST LIBERATING ABOUT WORKING WITH GATEKEEPER PRESS?

Responsiveness and care. I’ve worked closely with a project manager, the art design team, the

owners, and the marketing staff. Every email was answered promptly and thoughtfully. That level of attention doesn’t happen in traditional publishing.

WHAT SURPRISED YOU ABOUT INDIE PUBLISHING?

I had to learn indie publishing from scratch. It reminded me of my early days in independent film. I saw the payoff and wanted to give this a real shot, investing the time and money to do it right.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE PRINT-ON-DEMAND?

It came down to economics. Getting a hardcover indie book into stores requires deep discounts and high upfront print runs.

It just didn’t make sense financially. Print-on-demand allowed us to focus on accessible global distribution with a lower financial barrier.

HOW MUCH CREATIVE CONTROL DID YOU HAVE?

Total. From cover design to distribution and marketing, I was involved in every decision.

DO YOU SEE INDIE PUBLISHING AS A STEPPING STONE OR A DESTINATION?

I could go either way. If a big publisher offers a strong advance, I’d consider it. But I’m also fully comfortable staying indie.

THE CIRCUS OF SATAN IS A POWERFUL TITLE. WHAT INSPIRED IT?

The book is set from 1900 to 1913, when the Irish mob controlled crime and politics in New York. The area now known as Times Square was once called “Satan’s Circus” by Protestant reformers. But the title also reflects the internal chaos of the main character, who refers to his own life as a circus of sin, darkness, and regret.

WHAT DOES THE BOOK SAY ABOUT THE WORLD TODAY?

It reflects on good, evil, morality, and power. Crime and corruption still exist, but they look different. Back then, everything was out in the open. Today, major crimes happen behind the scenes, such as healthcare fraud and political manipulation. Even past criminals wanted to be part of America. That’s not always the case now.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR YOU?

I’m currently developing an erotic thriller film with my wife and partners. I’m also working on a supernatural cop thriller. It’s something between *The Sentinel* and *The French Connection*.

Jeffrey Konvitz reminds us that storytelling isn’t just about the words on the page. It’s about the freedom to tell your story your way.



Brought to life in partnership with Gatekeeper Press. Learn more at GatekeeperPress.com.

inkwell

Carrying Jane Austen's Torch

Modern Romance Authors on Writing Novels With Social Justice Narratives

BY REBEKAH L. FRASER

With the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, Jane Austen became the first female English-language romance author. Simultaneously, she established romance as the genre that provides social commentary; reflects women as we see ourselves rather than as men see us; and respects women's values, ambitions, and struggles, whether they match or rival those of men.

Authors Lyssa Kay Adams, Jayne Ann Krentz, Angelina M. Lopez, Sarah MacLean, and Nikki Payne joined me to discuss the social justice themes in their books and how the genre carries Austen's legacy.

Your romance novels cover workplace harassment, domestic violence, police corruption, indigenous rights ... Why address social justice?

JAYNE: I never thought of myself as writing a social justice book. But social justice is the heart of all popular genre fiction.

REBEKAH: I always thought of your Fogg Lake series as addressing

treatment and stigmatization of people with mental illness.

JAYNE: Before, I would've said Gothic—the woman who has to find her way out of the house on her own. So, thank you!

NIKKI: It can feel baked in the bread. The heroine in *Pride and Prejudice* has two degrees, lives in D.C., and can't afford to live on her own. She also wants love. She's swimming in this sea of incredibly political experiences. Oftentimes, we don't realize how enmeshed in the political we are.

ANGELINA: As a Latina in the Midwest, I was very *othered*, wanting to fit in, hiding my love of romance novels. In my 20s, I realized my understanding that romances were less important than other art forms was a male point of view. The female point of view was validated in these books. I fully embraced this career, this journey as a woman. Although I didn't understand it as a Latina, how much I was missing—*my* voice, *my* POV. All the media was white; white people in the books, white people everything, and the Cosbys.

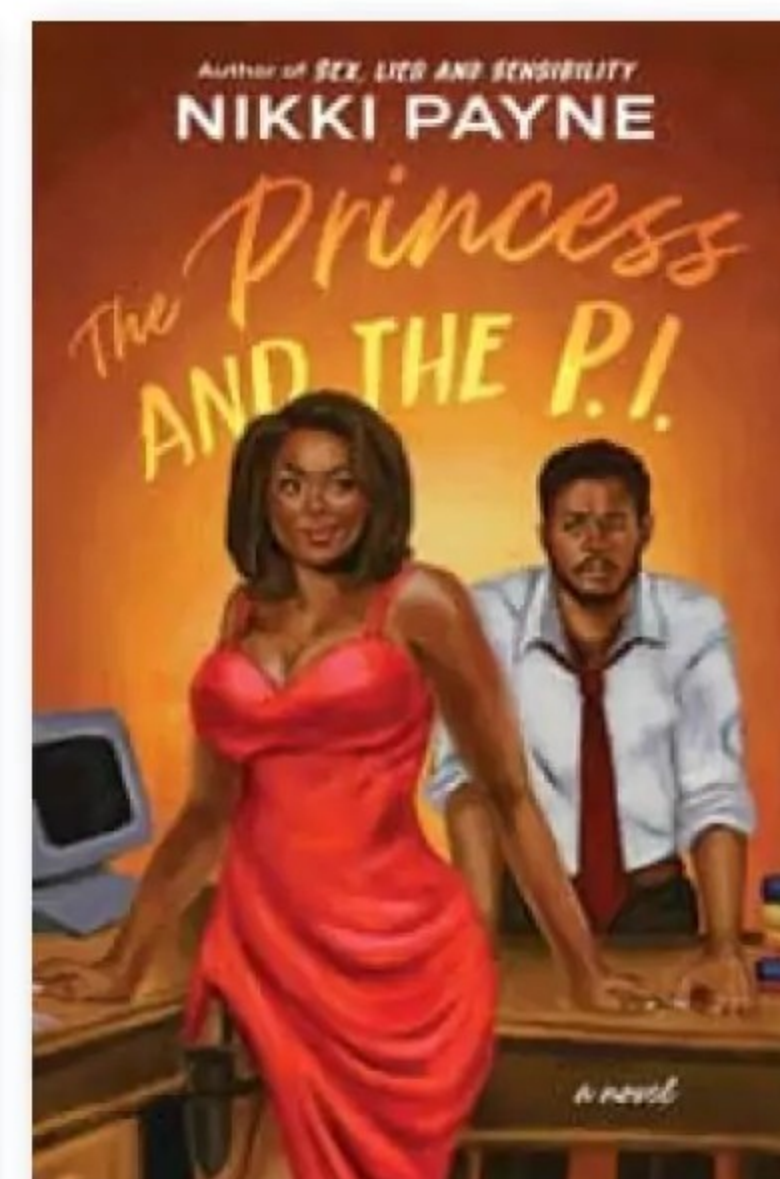
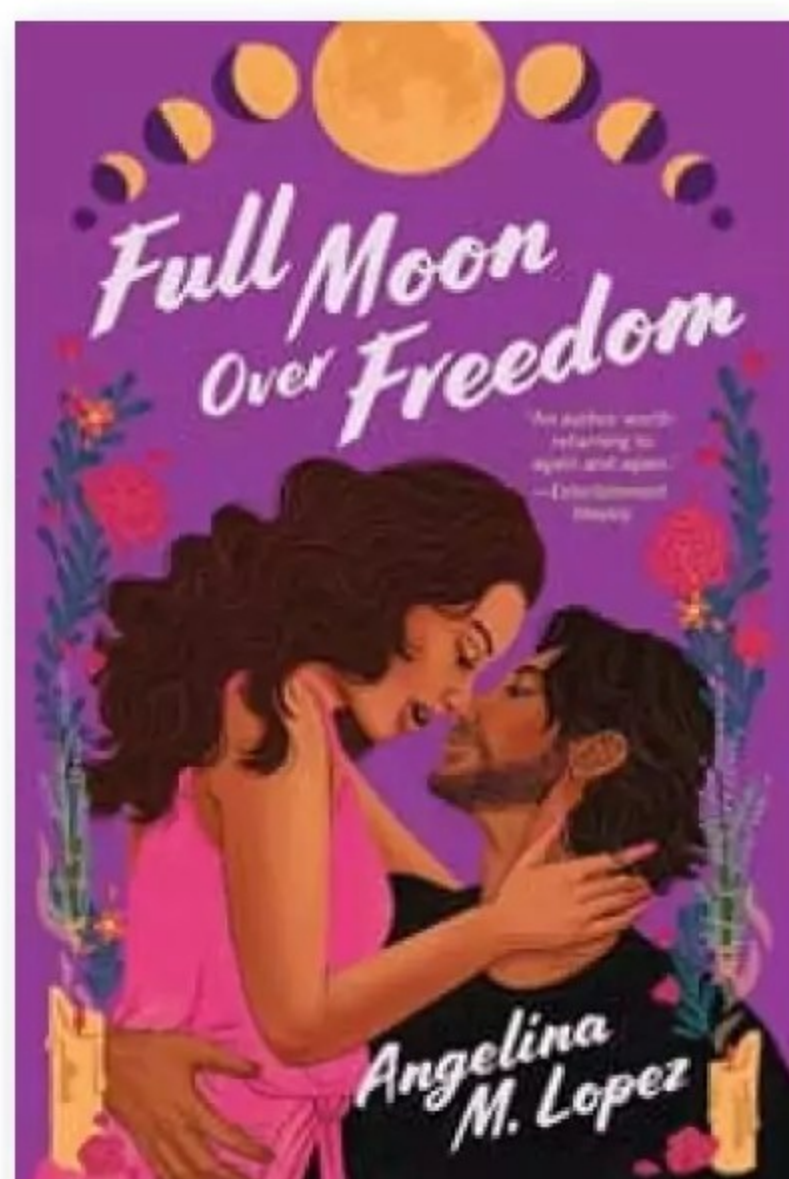
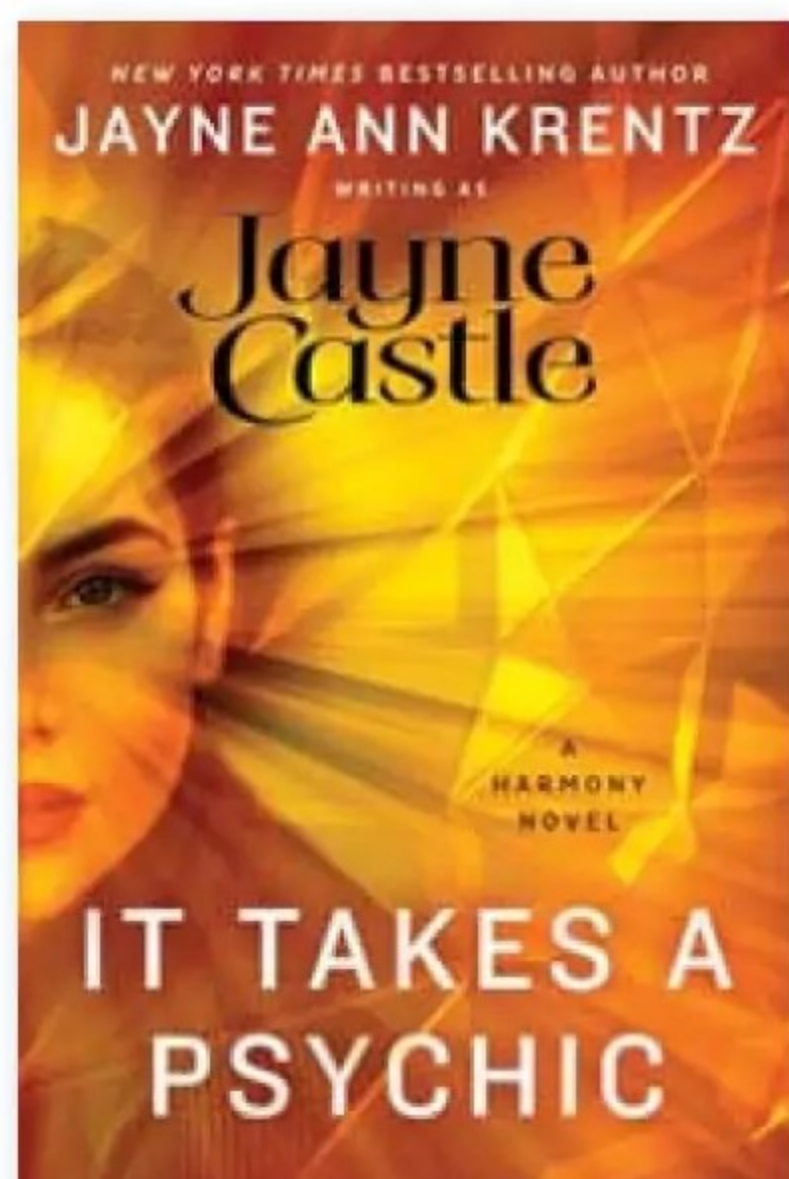
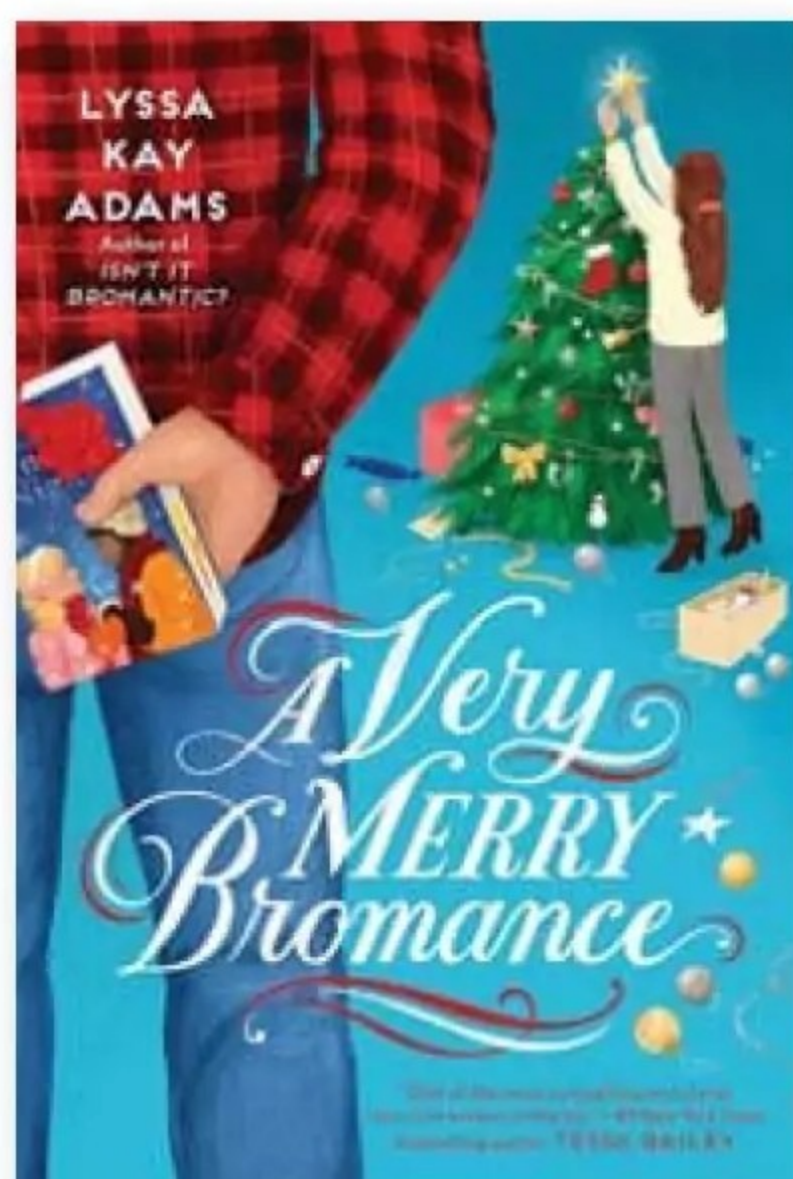
Sometimes, you don't know the storyline you agreed to passively. [I'm] no longer accepting being missing. I've spent enough time on the soapbox.

LYSSA: I love your soapbox! Writing about the internal lives of women throughout history, [or any] oppressed population, has always been an act of resistance. It's hard to separate my identity as a writer from my mission as a writer. Publishing gives you a platform. I can't imagine not using that platform to touch on important issues.

SARAH: I started reading romance when I was 10 years old. The books felt groundbreaking. Romance made me an activist. As I grew, I understood sexual freedom, individual purpose, and *the gaze*—how *the shifted gaze* was political and revolutionary.

How do readers respond to your work?

LYSSA: Some take exception to one book where the heroine, as an immigration attorney, criticizes U.S. immigration policy. I got mail saying, "Leave your politics out of romance." The vast majority of my readers let



me know they value how I balance comedy and real issues in society.

JAYNE: In my experience, you attract the readers who share your core values. If those values don't resonate, they're not coming back.

ANGELINA: What's been really gratifying is how many people said I tell the multigenerational story of Mexicans in the Midwest. Families assimilated; in that, there is massive loss, not knowing who you are, where you come from. People emailed me, they didn't know their history.

NIKKI: I receive an enormous amount of feedback. There are those who gossip about the characters as if they're real people. (I've won their brain.) Then, there are the Jane Austen girlies. They're like Lady Catherine de Bourgh. They want their Austen "traditional," code for looking and sounding a certain way: white, wealthy, etc. ...

Sarah, with the Hell's Belles series and the Bareknuckle Bastards trilogy, you bring the 19th-century English historical romance from the ton's ballrooms to alleys and docks with heroines who run businesses and defend themselves and their right to choose their destiny. Why shift the venue?

SARAH: I got bored with ballrooms, with the aristocracy. I feel strongly

that the work of genre romance is to talk about what it means to act with nobility rather than to be a noble. That's why I started writing criminals. Noble scoundrels doing good. It also gave me an opportunity to tell stories that have roots in history and are true at their core.

Every time I sit down to write, I ask, "What's a boundary I can break?" That's the work. Readers come along for the journey. They read a historical, and they get to quietly, gently walk toward social justice. Readers who've been with me from the beginning now go to my phone banks and are wildly political online. I'm not saying it's because of me, but I think the books do move us.

ANGELINA: Romance is the one place where you can talk about social justice issues within the pleasure, escapism, joy, and the promise of the Happily Ever After (HEA). It's all going to be worked out.

JAYNE: That HEA is critical because the books are fundamentally optimistic. You don't see that in every genre.

You each have unique ways of approaching the work, getting to that HEA, telling stories of characters doing good. Lyssa, your heroines lead the charge against social injustices with help from the men in their lives.

Nikki, you're addressing the trap of poverty, marginalization of people in the U.S. Who would think: rom-com and sex trafficking, rom-com and racism? You both pull it off.

LYSSA: Every time I try to write something else, my inner 12-year-old comes out, and oops, there's the fart joke.

I think about plotting in layers and strategically balance the serious issues with funny secondary characters, giving the reader a break. Setting some of those issues in rom-com makes them accessible to people who might not be ready to read a more intense version of that story.

NIKKI: I find it much easier to tell a serious story using comedy. These dramatic and deeply felt moments are kind of like crushed salt. It's not actually funny without a sense of the stakes or what something means. It's hard for me to write something without those little flakes of salt in the middle, so you can actually taste the comedy. It makes the story richer.

Angelina, in Full Moon Over Freedom, you bring magical realism into a narrative featuring a woman recovering from partner abuse. Why was that important to you?

ANGELINA: As a bruja, she had magic at her disposal. She lost it to the

effects of toxic masculinity ... Every woman is powerful. Toxic masculinity is so pervasive and effective at draining your magic, your sense of self, your confidence. How do you heal yourself? How do you regain your magic as a woman? Most importantly for a romance novel: You can do the work, draw family and community around you, believe in yourself, and trust them [and through that] regain your magic.

It's a beautiful storyline. Jayne, I feel like it also ties into your work, where characters acquire psychic ability or lose it.

JAYNE: I like the psychic thing because it lets me get into the gaslight story. In the real world, it's so easy to let someone gaslight you. The psychic storyline asks: *How much can I trust myself as opposed to what people are telling me?*

REBEKAH: This idea of gaslighting ...

JAYNE: It's the whole con-man thing.

REBEKAH: Yes, and we're dealing with it politically now. And we see it in *A Very Merry Bromance* with Gretchen's family. And from the teaser text, I think we'll see it in *These Summer Storms*.

SARAH: Yes, that whole family is dysfunctional, and they're gaslighters. But that's not a romance. It's women's fiction.

Lyssa, your next book is historical, with a tie-in to The Bromance Book Club. Will Courting the Countess tackle modern problems?

LYSSA: I delve into the Radical Reformers' movement of the 1820s in England, people trying to address the same issues we're addressing today and hard-handed government leaders

squashing the right to protest. The Radical Reformers were an actual movement that threatened the power structures, government structures, landowners, and aristocracy.

Nikki, you're known for contemporary Austen retellings. Is *The Princess and the P.I.* stepping away from Austen?

NIKKI: This is sleight of hand. It's *Northanger Abbey*. Everything's there, down to the muslin. And my next story about a woman who is fresh out of jail and has a list of people she wants to enact revenge on is an *Emma* retelling.

You're all bold women, but as we look into our nation's landscape, do you feel nervous about telling these kinds of stories?

JAYNE: Not as long as you can still get them published.

LYSSA: I'm a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual woman. Nobody's coming after my stories. They're coming after my friends and colleagues who are BIPOC and LGBTQ authors. I worry about them. The activism we need to do as romance authors, particularly those of us whose books are not being targeted, not being banned—

JAYNE: The sexy books do get targeted. They pulled Nora Roberts out of school libraries. None of us are immune.

REBEKAH: And now there's this pornography bill in Oklahoma.

SARAH: I'm putting on my Authors Against Book Bans board member hat. That didn't get a floor vote in the Oklahoma House of Representatives. But it will happen somewhere ... I've been thinking about Rümeysa Öztürk, the Tufts student abducted by ICE because she wrote an op-ed.

Those of us who walk through the world with immense privilege have to be prepared to step in and speak when it happens to others. I'm not worried about my voice yet, but I am worried about the world.

ANGELINA: Information I used for *After Hours on Milagro Street* [came from] a couple of theses written in the 1960s about the migration through railroad to the Midwest. Through my research, I found Mexicans brought to Kansas because of a labor shortage, treated like pariahs.

I did not understand the degradation my grandparents went through to be part of this country. These people were told they didn't matter. Their stories are not in history books ... Now Arlington National Cemetery has shut online records of brown and Black people. Information is being eliminated.

The dissemination of these stories is wildly important. People want entertainment. This is the subversive way you tell these stories about being here and having an impact. I'm absolutely terrified of the real, effective ability to disappear generations of people.

JAYNE: This is why genre fiction is so important. It carries the story. Nobody reads textbooks, old theses, or actual histories, but by God, we'll read stories. That's how the next generation will remember. The glory of writing romance is you can find room for almost any kind of story.

Rebekah L. Fraser writes romance novels as Tara L. Roí. Her forthcoming book *Refashioned by Love* is due out from Bee Books on November 15.

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Crafting an Interconnected World, One Short Story at a Time

BY P.M. RAYMOND

As writers, we're drawn to the accomplishment of typing *The End*, especially when it's a short story. But have you ever closed the computer and thought, *Is there more to this story?*

If so, you're not alone.

Short stories are deceptively more complex than their brevity suggests. It's no wonder this format could benefit from a few more words. Sometimes you may want to extend the life of a short story, but a novel or even a novella may not be the best fit. Perhaps creating an interconnected set of short stories is right for you.

Let's discuss why linking your short stories could be a great way to explore creativity and a few don'ts to keep in mind.

INTERCONNECTED STORIES CAN CREATE RICH NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT BY LEVERAGING LOCATION—REAL OR FICTIONAL.

Interconnected themes, characters, and places create an immersive and rich environment that keeps readers engaged and invested—in other words, connected! Author Ashley-Ruth M. Bernier has built her career on leveraging the beautiful St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, her original home, in many of her short stories. Her collection, *Mayhem Can't Stop De Mas*, was a 2024 Claymore Award finalist, and the Caribbean island features heavily in each story.



For Bernier, the island and her protagonist through most of her work, Naomi Sinclair, lean into a familiarity that we have already been exposed to in the storytelling we consume. She says, “A major part of our current zeitgeist is the popularity of fandoms, like Marvel, and writing detailed, compelling interconnected stories is at the center of this.”

Recurring characters or situations within the stability of a location can create a sense of cohesion in the story and a sense of community for the reader. The key to building a universe is understanding what the “rules” are of your location—real or imaginary.

Bernier takes her readers on a culinary whirlwind of island foods she grew up with and shares sweet and savory dishes in the pages of her stories. The Virgin Islands become more than a place on the map, it transforms into a platter of guava tarts, soulful soca music, a steaming cup of bush tea, or buttered dumb bread. Bernier invites the reader into the serenity of the Virgin Islands through its culinary history, then turns it on its head with a mystery or a murder to solve.

DON'T ... allow the story to become a travel blog. As much fun as it is to utilize the location as an unseen character, it should simmer in the

background and add seasoning to the stories, but it shouldn't be the main course.

INTERCONNECTED STORIES NEED A LITTLE (OR A LOT) OF STRATEGY.

Editor Michael Bracken adds a layer of complexity to the anthology idea with his Chop Shop series, a connected work with multiple writers sharing a premise and some of the same characters. This is a lofty undertaking for anyone, but Bracken is familiar with this territory. He is an Edgar- and Shamus-nominated and a Derringer Award-winning author of almost 1,300 short stories and editor or co-editor of 32 published and forthcoming anthologies. He has the necessary experience to helm this multi-layered work.

Bracken takes a thoughtful approach to planning for a wide-scale endeavor like Chop Shop. "I wrote a multi-page bible before I invited other writers to contribute. The bible includes a description of the premise (stealing cars in and around Dallas, Texas), one setting that must appear in every story (the chop shop where the car thieves deliver the stolen vehicles), and three key characters who appear in each story (the man who runs the chop shop and two of his employees). These are what tie all the stories together."

Chop Shop uses side characters to anchor the stories. Bracken states, "Readers can easily see that these characters are the thread that ties all the stories together, and they can enjoy seeing how these characters inform the larger story as they interact with the various protagonists."

DON'T ... be afraid to do some planning. Whether you're a pantsers, a

plotter, or a bit of both, keeping track of character details like bad habits, catchphrases, or physical tics will help with consistency.

INTERCONNECTED STORIES ALLOW AUTHORS TO FLESH OUT SUPPORTING CHARACTERS.

Taking a singular character, a few partners in crime, and a main "big bad" and exploring their interactions across self-contained works is a key form of world-building. The sandbox can widen to include not only the protagonist's journey but also minor characters.

For example, Bernier's protagonist, Naomi Sinclair, has a cast of supporting characters who act as benchmarks in each story set in the U.S. Virgin Islands. A prominent recurring character is Naomi's best friend from childhood, West, who is legally blind. According to Bernier, "[West] is resourceful, quietly confident, and capable. He feels this way because he's been equipped by a family with the resources and determination to see him succeed. It's been fun to explore how he and Naomi connect even though she's sighted, and he isn't."

Instead of being background fodder, a side character can become a significant part of the story. Similarly, readers might recognize a character's importance in a subsequent plot.

Consider revisiting previous works and taking note of the characters that stick with you. Is there a background player that could have a deeper history to explore? Devise ways for them to reappear and interact with the protagonist or antagonist in a new outing.

DON'T ... shy away from weaving in a side character arc over the course

of several connected stories. It pays off not only in the growth of the character, but it links the narratives and glues the reader to the adventures that came before it and the new ones yet to come.

INTERCONNECTED STORIES CAN DEEPEN AND STRENGTHEN STORYTELLING

Sometimes, revisiting characters or places is intentional. Other times, a character gets stuck in your head, and you can't help but let it seep into a new story. The latter inspired me to focus on a family line with the surname Booker and begin charting a path through this family's history from Reconstruction Louisiana to the present day.

My first story to feature a Booker appeared in *Dark Yonder*—"The Entitled Life and Untimely Death of King Booker." I did a live reading of the story shortly after its publication, and many audience members were curious about King. This caused me to think about my leading man and his appeal, which spurred me to create a back story. This blossomed into a family tree.

Since then, I've written 10 stories involving the Booker brood. One entry was awarded the 2024 Sisters in Crime Eleanor Taylor Bland Award, and four have been finalists or semi-finalists in the Killer Shorts Screenplay and Horror2Comic competitions. The collection that includes all the stories, *Things Are as They Should Be and Other Words to Die For*, a 2024 Claymore Award finalist for Best Unpublished Collection or Anthology and will be published in 2026 by Uncomfortably Dark Horror.

Taking a deeper dive into the Booker family and their history in

New Orleans has allowed me to think strategically about world-building. Focusing on this family's lineage as connective tissue has been a satisfying journey that will continue for the foreseeable future.

DON'T ... limit how many companion stories you want to connect or the ways you want to connect them. A recurring location with a different protagonist, a character cameo from another story, or a theme threaded through each work are all options you can explore to reinforce the connection.

INTERCONNECTED STORIES MUST STAND ON THEIR OWN.

Linked stories are not the same as serialized stories. In the latter, the narrative is more like a continuation

of the previous entry rather than an expansive world inhabited by these characters. Interconnected stories should be viewed as individual homes on a block, rather than the entire street.

Author Josh Malerman takes this approach in his work, *Goblin*, a set of novellas set in the fictional town of the same name. He bookends the collection with a man tasked with delivering a crate to a home in the titular town. In between, Malerman connects the tale with supernatural occurrences that tether each story together, but each entry is full and complete on its own and doesn't rely on the previous or future installments for comprehension.

DON'T ... use cliffhangers or other abrupt ending techniques in your

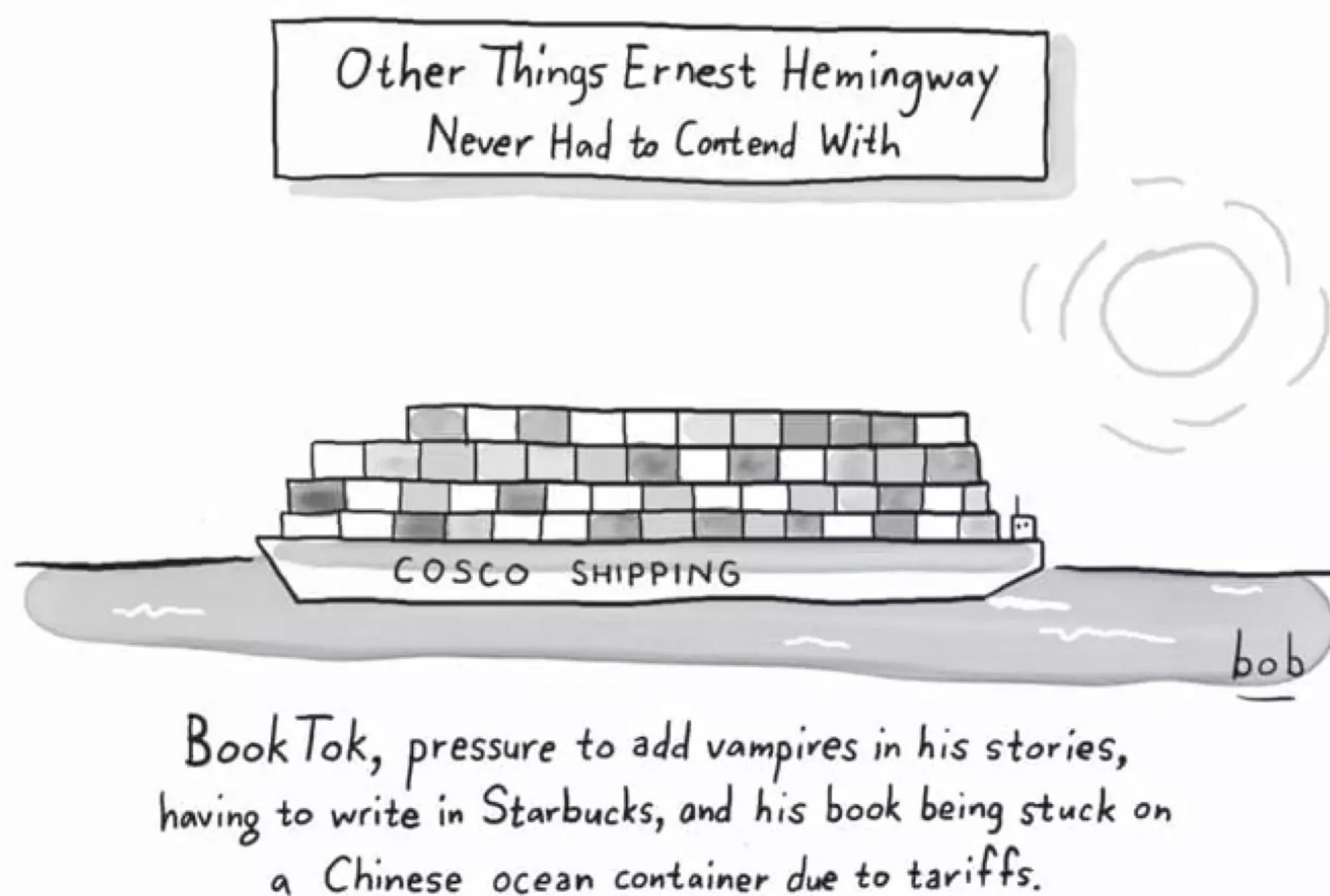
stories. Be mindful that your ending must make sense, especially if the stories will appear individually in multiple outlets.

INTERCONNECTED STORIES ... IS IT REALLY WORTH THE EFFORT?

Elizabeth Strout is a master of revisiting characters and places through her novels. Four of her works are set in the fictional town of Shirley Falls, Maine, and four novels focus on her acclaimed character Lucy Barton. But one of her most famous works, *Olive Kitteridge*, a linked story collection, won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In 2017, *Anything Is Possible*, another linked collection, won The Story Prize. Yes, interconnected stories are recognized as literary masterworks!

DON'T ... wait to start creating your own interconnected universe. Begin by exploring a previous character through a flash fiction companion piece on your website or as a newsletter signup enticement. The sky's the limit!

Worth a Thousand Words



Bob Eckstein is a *New York Times*-bestselling author and a cartoonist. His new book is *Footnotes From the Most Fascinating Museums: Stories and Memorable Moments From People Who Love Museums*.

P.M. Raymond (PMRaymond.com) is an award-winning author from New Orleans who knows a thing or two about good gumbo, grits, and café au lait. She is a 2025 Killer Shorts and Horror2Comic Semifinalist, the Sisters in Crime 2024 Eleanor Taylor Bland Award Winner, and 2024 Claymore Award Finalist. She was named to the 160 *Black Women in Horror* in 2023. Her interconnected short story collection, *Things Are as They Should Be and Other Words to Die For*, will be released in 2026 from Uncomfortably Dark Horror. Her work has appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Punk Noir*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Kings River Life Magazine*, *The Furious Gazelle*, and *Dark Yonder*, among others.



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Classy Ways to Use Connections

BY SUSAN SHAPIRO

As the author of many books my family hates and a long-time journalism prof, I love helping aspiring writers get published, paying forward the kindness of my mentors. When people approach me for advice, assistance, and names of my agents and editors, I try to be generous, even when they're basically asking, "How can I have your career?" But there are good ways to connect—and ways not to.

I was miffed when a student who'd taken my class multiple times enrolled in my five-week Zoom course on how to publish an essay, then launched her own five-week publish-an-essay class, without giving me a heads-up, charging one dollar less. Another ex-pupil called every editor I'd paid to visit my course to speak at *her* events, using my name without checking in first. More recently, a West Coast author copied the title, design, and lettering I'd used for the cover of the *New York Times*-bestselling addiction book I'd coauthored in 2012. When confronted, he admitted that since my book had only 148 reviews on Amazon, he didn't think mine had enough "presence to matter," adding, "I'd imagine your book will get a sales bump from my book's marketing push."

Although imitation is supposedly the sincerest form of flattery, I felt fleeced. Over the decades I've

been a freelancer and teacher known for sharing contacts, here's the code of ethics I adhere to and some quick remedies if you accidentally blow it.

1. **ATTRIBUTION IS ESSENTIAL:**

Attribute any words you publicly appropriate to their source, whether it's in a class you lead, speech you give, social media post, article, or book you publish. Even mentioning in print that I subtitled my teaching technique "the instant gratification takes too long" method, I added "with a nod to the late, great Carrie Fisher," who'd originated the quip. After I created an idiosyncratic expression in 2010, I was surprised to see the phrase I invented in a piece a former student published in 2025, as if it were hers.

THE FIX: Adding "as my former teacher, Sue Shapiro, coined" after quoting the expression would have turned a theft into a tribute. When sharing someone else's content from Instagram, Facebook, Bluesky, or X, use the official "share" button so your followers know where it originated, or add the words "thanks to Joe Smith" or a heads-up in the comments, like "Love this! Reposting."

2. **NAME-DROP DILIGENTLY:**

Introducing protégés to higher-ups, I recommend they start their

correspondence, "You were great in Sue's class/seminar/panel," or "Susan Shapiro gave me your email." I don't recommend saying, "Susan Shapiro told me to send this to you," or "suggested I submit this." Words count, and this has offended editors in the past. One called me screaming, "Why did you tell this person to send me a 3,000-word op-ed in rhyming iambic pentameter?" when, in fact, I hadn't.

THE FIX: Ask for someone's approval and preference before using their connection, realizing some teachers and mentors may prefer you not name-drop them at all.

3. **TOAST, DON'T BOAST:** When a stranger emailed, "As an honors student at Columbia University who double-majored in English and philosophy and won multiple awards from *The Spectator* ..." I didn't finish reading. Showing off is not the way to initiate a relationship with someone not related to you.

THE FIX: Contacting a mentor/editor/agent/author, begin with *their* accomplishments, as in: "Congratulations on your new book/award/article. I admire your work" or "I loved last week's piece." An undergrad recently asked me, "What if that's phony because I

don't?" I responded, "Then bother someone whose work you do admire."

4. BE ENLIGHTENED, NOT ENTITLED:

Just because you're sure your 200,000-word magnum opus is worthy of fame and fortune doesn't mean a stranger will read, promote, or blurb the unsolicited file you attached to your email. Studying with someone in the past does not guarantee they'll champion your projects in the present or future.

THE FIX: Don't treat anyone like a 24-hour free editing service by mailing or attaching anything before inquiring if they have the time to help, and in what format they prefer. (I personally dislike Google Docs or PDFs where I can't mark notes.)

5. PRE-GOOGLING IS GRACIOUS:

When somebody I don't know emails me, "I want to sell this to a top newspaper or magazine. What do you think?" I may respond, "Great idea," then ask if they've read my writing guides or noticed my upcoming classes and seminars focusing on this exact thing. Often, they haven't. Uninspired to put aside my deadlines to assist a neophyte who couldn't be bothered to do the basics, I often reply, "On deadline, but I can recommend a ghost editor you can hire to help."

THE FIX: Research the person you're approaching before asking for a favor. If I'm the one who needs help, I often look up the person I'm contacting first, so I know who I'm talking to before proceeding.

6. CREDIT WHERE CREDIT'S DUE: After introducing a talented student to my *New York Times* editors,

I was proud she became a regular contributor. But I felt hurt I wasn't in her debut book's long list of acknowledgments (though she repeated the name of a fellow student on the staff of *The New Yorker* twice). Whenever someone came through for me, I've tried to express gratitude or invite them to speaking engagements, keynote talks, or paid gigs.

THE FIX: If someone did you a solid, return the support. Acknowledging someone is free—I've been honored when protégés I've helped land teaching gigs or big bylines had me zoom into their classrooms for Q&As or recommend my writing guide on their syllabus. Expressing thanks doesn't have to be elaborate. Repost your old teacher's publication, noting, "Here's a great piece by my old prof/mentor/editor." Or post your own clips with the shout out "Thanks to my teacher/agent/mentor" who you tag. Added bonus: It undercuts your self-promotion, making you look grateful.

7. AVOID ANTI-SOCIAL MEDIA: An aspiring writer I'd never met direct messaged me on Facebook, attaching the draft of a piece they wanted me to help them publish. There are appropriate ways to reach out, like locating the right email on a person's website or professional bio. Slipping into someone's DMs is usually not one.

THE FIX: If the only way you can find an individual is through their social pages, politely ask for their work email. Then make sure you will be around to receive a reply by including your name, email, home address and/or working cell phone number—especially if it's something timely.

Don't treat anyone like a 24-hour free editing service by mailing or attaching anything before inquiring if they have the time to help.

8. YOU CAN'T CONTROL KARMA: I

wasn't shocked to learn the company sponsoring my former student's essay class collapsed, and the West Coast addiction author's book didn't follow mine onto the *New York Times* bestseller list (with only 50 Amazon reviews so far). As an editor warned my class, "There are a thousand people in power in publishing who all know each other. If you're a jerk, we'll all know, and it'll probably come back to you."

THE FIX: Instead of inadvertently slighting someone who came before you, you'll get further by being what my colleague Jennifer Baker calls "a good literary citizen," using the kind of sensitivity, support, and generosity of spirit you'd like to be shown yourself.

Susan Shapiro, an award-winning writing professor, is the bestselling author of books her family hates like *Five Men Who Broke My Heart* and *The Forgiveness Tour*. She uses her guides *The Book Bible* and *Byline Bible* for her popular publishing classes. Follow her on Instagram at @profsue123 or email Profsue123@gmail.com.



Poetic Asides

No matter what you write, a bit of poetic license can be a valuable asset to any writer's arsenal.

BY ROBERT LEE BREWER

4 WAYS TO MAKE CONNECTIONS IN POETRY

Writing a single poem on any topic in any style really is enough for any writer to say they write poetry, but an excellent way to take poeming to another level is to consider making connections both within and without poems. When poets make conscious connections within their poems, it offers readers the ability to experience those connections as well, which can be very satisfying. Many poets also use techniques to make connections outside their poems. Here are a few strategies.

Connect Sounds Within the Poem

One level of connection that poets make in poetry is through the use of sound. Many poets, of course, use end rhymes in their poems, which can create a song-like quality, but there are many other ways to connect sounds beyond that. In fact, some of the most sonically pleasing poems written today don't use end rhymes at all. These poems connect sounds using consonance (or repetitive consonant sounds) and assonance (or repetitive vowel or diphthong sounds), in addition to internal rhyme schemes (rhymes hidden in the middle of lines).

Connect Leaps Within the Poem

I personally believe poets are incredible leapers of thought. We—I'm including you, if you'd like to be

included—are excellent at seeing one thing and thinking about something else (often, in my case, many things else). These associations, as Robert Bly calls them in his book *Leaping Poetry*, are one way for poets to make connections within their poems (often in dramatic ways). One sound technique poets employ is the use of metaphor. Why say "I woke early in the morning" when you could say "I was the early bird," or why write "the girl was upset" when you could write "her heart was a busy street" or something similar?

But don't limit yourself to just one metaphor or one association. Rather, leap from one metaphor or association to another throughout the poem and challenge readers to keep up (some may and some may not). This is often the association I make with Emily Dickinson's popular line and poem "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." We all have our personal truths, but the poet finds ways to connect them for readers.

Connect the Poem to the Title

Some poets really struggle with poem titles, and some actively dislike the process of naming poems at all. However, the title is the first impression a poem makes on a reader, whether they're flipping through the table of contents in a literary journal, poetry anthology, or the poet's own collection. Deft poets avoid treating the title as a separate entity from the poem. Instead,

they look for ways to connect them, whether that's through juxtaposition or setting the mood, so that when the reader enters the poem, the title may read one way and then feel a bit different after the poem is completed.

For bonus connections outside the poem, poets can make connections between titles for different poems—almost like they're speaking to each other. In this same way, poems can make connections to the titles of other poems, offering the reader the opportunity to spot connections when the poems are read in close proximity (as in a poetry collection).

Connect the Poem to Other Poems

Expanding on this strategy, poems can connect to other poems in a multitude of ways, whether they're connecting poems to titles, further exploring subjects used in other poems, using recurring characters or settings, or even writing response poems that present a different take on a previously written poem. For instance, one poem may discuss all the beauty of a city (like my hometown of Dayton, Ohio), while a response poem might reveal the cracks beneath the surface. Sometimes poets can connect poems to each other with the slightest repetition of a line or phrase, with no other obvious commonalities at all, but they give readers new associations to explore.

Robert Lee Brewer is senior editor of WD and author of *The Complete Guide of Poetic Forms*.

Write It Out

Writing prompts to boost your creativity.

BY MORIAH RICHARD

CHARACTER CONNECTION

One of the biggest pitfalls of a first draft is the flat, lifeless side character. To avoid that, fill in the center bubble with information about one of your side characters, then fill the white space around the center bubble with some ideas relating to the prompts in the smaller bubbles. **WD**

The diagram consists of a central circle with four smaller circles connected to it by lines. The central circle contains the following text:

Name: _____

Occupation: _____

Age: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

The four surrounding circles are labeled as follows:

- Top Left: LOVES (connected by a blue line)
- Top Right: GOALS (connected by a green line)
- Bottom Left: QUIRKS (connected by a yellow line)
- Bottom Right: FEARS (connected by a red line)

Moriah Richard is managing editor of WD.



BY CHRISTOPHER STOLLAR

Finding the Write-Life Balance in a Hyper-Connected World

With more companies than ever requiring their employees back in the office to connect in person, the topic of “work-life balance” has returned with a renewed focus. It’s in the news, on social media, and even in popular shows like “Severance,” where the lead character surgically divides his personal life from his professional life.

But for authors, there’s an added layer to this tension called the “write-life balance.” It’s never been easier for writers to connect with readers through social media, virtual events, and other digital platforms. Yet that’s also made it harder to find the balance we all crave between our writing life and every other aspect of life—especially those who are neurodiverse and make connections in unique ways.

“We often think of work-life balance as an aim to keep work separate from our personal time,” writes Heather Clement Davis in *Indie Author Magazine*. “But as writers, our stories are almost always on our minds. For us, the traditional work-life balance might not exist; instead, aiming to separate

our creative time and non-creative time may help us better transition between these two states.”

Countless tips could be provided on this topic, so this column will focus specifically on what I have learned from my own experience as an award-winning indie author who also works full time and has obsessive-compulsive disorder. That diagnosis has helped me find balance and make meaningful connections with other neurodiverse writers who were interviewed for this story.

TIP 1: REFRAME THE NARRATIVE AWAY FROM PERFECT BALANCE.

We often experience “balance” as something almost elusive, like a fairy or will-o’-the-wisp that disappears the moment we grasp it. So, instead of striving to achieve this perfection narrative—a fantasy that’s impossible to maintain—embrace real life’s progressive course.

“As an ADHD mother of two, I’ve had to accept that I’m not going to be able to strike a write-life balance,” says contemporary fantasy author Sarah J. Sover. “There will be weeks, sometimes even months, when all I

can do is keep myself and my family afloat. During those times, my writing takes a back seat, and I can’t let feelings of failure or inadequacy overshadow my brief windows of writing time. Instead of seeing it as a constant struggle, I accept that there are going to be ebbs and flows to my work. When life isn’t requiring all my energy, I shift focus back to attaining realistic word-count goals, let my family know that I’m entering a phase of productivity, and make writing a priority once again.”

I couldn’t agree more with Sover. As a father of three working full time in marketing and volunteering with an anti-human trafficking nonprofit organization, my life often feels like a constant juggling act. The moment I throw one ball up in the air, two more compete for my attention. If one ball drops, it’s usually my writing—or the connections required to make it a self-publishing success. Yet instead of beating myself up, I’ve learned to embrace life’s competing priorities. That hasn’t been easy with my OCD diagnosis as I fear failure and yearn for perfection, but it’s been good for my soul.

TIP 2: FIND A RHYTHM AND ROUTINE THAT WORKS BEST FOR YOU.

Part of embracing life's competing priorities involves knowing what works best with your mind, body, and personal rhythm. Some people, like me, enjoy the early morning ritual of getting up before dawn to write (with a cup of coffee, of course). That's one of the unique benefits of my OCD: the almost compulsive ability to stick to a routine. I'm most creative in the morning, so I tackle that time first before connecting with readers later in the afternoon through social media. Others prefer short sprints during their lunch break or longer blocks of time on the weekend. No matter when you write or connect, stick to a balanced schedule that works best for you.

"One of the superpowers that goes along with Tourette syndrome is hyperfocus," says Jenna Grinstead, a YA and romantasy author who was just accepted into Antioch University's MFA program. "This allows me to write in chunks of time and get a lot done at once. It also gives me the ability to move from one task to another—and give that task my total and complete focus."

Grinstead also works full time in marketing as a vice president for a Fortune 100 company. That means her schedule often revolves around her executive role, yet she's still found time to write and connect with other authors in her downtime.

"My job takes a lot of time and is very demanding, but it also creates windows of opportunity," Grinstead says. "Evenings on airplanes or alone in hotels became writing opportunities when I had a job with some travel involved. When my kids

were young, it was a lot of organizing writing when they weren't home or were asleep, or relying on the incredible support of my partner to allow me to do things like making connections at writing conferences. The biggest advice I have for anyone is to be willing to flex your schedule and be creative about the time you do have at different stages of life."

TIP 3: FOCUS ON MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS.

As someone with OCD, I get anxious just thinking about the endless connections I should be making right now with potential readers or fellow writers. The internet only exacerbates my obsession, making balance even harder to maintain. Just think about how many new digital platforms have risen—or fallen—in the past few years.

"There is no single formula for success when it comes to connecting," Sover says. "The internet is a wonderful, terrible, overwhelming, and vast sea of possible relationships. Just when you've carved out a little niche for yourself on one platform, everything changes, and it's gone. Focus on the spaces that don't drain you. As a science-fiction and fantasy author, my strongest connections come from real-life interactions at conventions where I forge actual friendships with other writers and readers."

My most meaningful connections have come not from social media or virtual events, but from the hundreds of individuals I've met at conferences where I'm speaking on the research behind my self-published novel about human trafficking. *The Black Lens* opened the door for me to meet survivors, along with social workers and nonprofit

Part of embracing life's competing priorities involves knowing what works best with your mind, body, and personal rhythm.

volunteers who have become some of my closest friends.

Grinstead's best connections have come from fellow writers, who keep her encouraged for the long haul.

"I don't believe I would still be writing without my writing friends," she says. "They are my cheerleaders, support, and solace. It's easy to feel alone out there, but my writing connections keep me writing in the face of publishing realities. In a time when there is so much noise, real relationships can make the difference in attracting readers and connecting them to our stories. Because at the end of the day, readers want to feel like writers are part of their worlds. When they fall in love with a story, they long to connect with you as the author."

Christopher Stollar (ChristopherStollar.com) is an award-winning author and speaker who is represented by senior agent Paula Munier of Talcott Notch Literary. He is also an accredited public relations consultant and former reporter with a master's degree in journalism who works full time in marketing at a Fortune 100 company.

Find Write-Life Balance

1. What does your current write-life balance look like? How much time a week do you get to spend on your writing and, separately, writing-related activities?
2. What life priorities take you away from your writing time? What business-of-being-a-writer activities take you away from your writing?
3. Are there nonpriority activities that take you away from your writing? Things like: scrolling on your phone, binging your favorite TV show for the 10th time, etc.? Do they provide some type of creative benefit for you, or are they a way to pass time?
4. Consider what time of the day you're at your most creative. Are there ways you can adjust your life activities or change your routine to allow that time to be used for your creative pursuits?
5. What are the X factors in your life? The things that could throw a new routine out the window? Write them here as a reminder to give yourself grace when that happens.



Megan Linski



Over 60 titles published (Fantasy romance, new adult, paranormal, contemporary; Gryfyn Publishing)

WHY SELF-PUBLISH? I'm not the kind of person who waits around for destiny to come to me. I reach out and take it. I've always been a really prolific writer, completing multiple books a year, and I knew most traditional publishing companies weren't going to be able to keep up with the speed at which I can produce a novel or a series. I have lots of ideas, and I want to get those ideas out there for people to enjoy, so I can move on to the next one. Why wait for someone else to give me a yes when I can give that acceptance to myself?

HAD YOU CONSIDERED TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING? It's not an either/or thing anymore. The most successful authors of the future are and will be hybrid—that is, they'll have both self-published titles and titles produced by traditional publishers. The divide between the two sides is dissipating as more authors realize there are benefits to being on both sides of the fence and having your brand in as many places as possible.

Most of my titles are self-published, and I plan to continue publishing myself. But I also know there are advantages to traditional publishing that are worth pursuing. I want it all, so I'll be going after whatever opportunities come my way, trad, indie, or other.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE? Surviving in this industry takes a lot of self-trust, which is a practice you have to work on, not an inherent trait one is born with. There is, and always has been, a lot of outside noise and differing opinions in the indie author sphere. It can be hard to block those opinions out, get quiet, and stay focused on your goal, but if you want to make it long-term, you have to.

WISH I'D KNOWN ... I think it would've been very helpful for me to attend some indie conventions and book signings before I published my first book. There weren't many around at the time when I started self-publishing, but they're all over the world now. I advise anyone looking into self-publishing to go to these events and talk to indie authors in person to get some career inspiration. You'll get a much better

perspective on which way you want your career to go.

PUBLISHING ADVICE: Every author needs to figure out what works for them, not what works for everybody else. Once you're past the basics, which to me means good cover design, good formatting, a good story, an easily navigable website, a mailing list, and a solid new release plan, where you go from there is up to you. Authors make a living from all kinds of different avenues, including special editions, book boxes, print runs, and audiobooks. It's not all e-book sales from Kindle Unlimited. It can take years to find your spot, but once you do, the path ahead becomes easier.

MARKETING STRATEGY: You bust your butt, keep looking for ways to spread the word, and be open to the possibilities. It's not enough to have 10 things on a marketing sheet for a release or a sale. You try 100 things and go from there until somebody listens. It's important not to distinguish the differences between marketing opportunities. That small newsletter feature, 10-second social media video, or guest blog post could have a greater boost to your sales than a \$10k ad campaign, and you won't know until you try—and sometimes, you won't see the results until months down the line.

WEBSITE: MeganLinski.com **WD**

Amy Jones is editor-in-chief of WD.

In Support of the Semicolon

The semicolon often lives in the shadows, misunderstood and underappreciated. Some see it as intimidating—a punctuation mark for the grammatically elite. Others avoid it entirely, worried it might come off as pretentious. But when used with intention, the semicolon can bring sophistication and elegance to your writing. It connects ideas, untangles complexity, and elevates your prose.

MORE THAN A FANCY PERIOD

At its core, the semicolon is a hinge, linking two closely related ideas in a single, fluid sentence. It's stronger than a comma but less final than a period, offering a middle ground that creates balance and nuance.

Consider this example:

- The storm was fierce; thunder shook the windows.

The semicolon connects the thoughts, showing that they're independent but linked. A period would separate them too abruptly. A comma? It'd muddy the relationship.

CONNECTING COMPLEX THOUGHTS

Long, intricate sentences often call for a semicolon to maintain clarity and flow. When commas alone can't manage the load, the semicolon steps in to bring much-needed order:

- The crowd cheered for the team, roaring with excitement; the

coach, visibly moved, waved to the fans.

Without the semicolon, this sentence might feel overwhelming or unclear. The semicolon creates a clean division, allowing the reader to process each clause without confusion.

In descriptive passages or essays, semicolons can help organize complex sentences:

- Her shelves were a testament to her passions: old books, their spines worn and cracked; photographs, black and white, of her travels; and jars of seashells, collected from distant shores.

Each semicolon separates elements, keeping the sentence unified.

COMMON PITFALLS

Despite its versatility, the semicolon isn't a cure-all. Overuse can make writing feel formal or stilted, which can alienate readers. Consider this:

- The sun dipped behind the hills; the sky blazed orange; the air smelled of pine; and the world seemed to hold its breath.

While the semicolons are technically correct, they dominate the sentence, creating a rhythm that feels clunky. In this case, a mix of commas and periods would be more effective.

Another common pitfall is misusing the semicolon where other punctuation would be more appropriate.

- **INCORRECT:** I love hiking; and I always take my dog along.

- **CORRECT:** I love hiking, and I always take my dog along.

Remember, semicolons don't pair with coordinating conjunctions like *and* or *but*. They excel when linking independent ideas directly, without the need for extra connectors.

MASTERING THE BALANCE

Using the semicolon effectively requires restraint and intention.

Here are some tips:

ASK YOURSELF: Are the ideas related? Use a semicolon only when the clauses are closely connected in meaning. If they aren't, a period is your friend.

KEEP IT SIMPLE: Don't force semicolons into every sentence. Use them sparingly to maintain their effectiveness.

PRACTICE WITH LISTS: When listing complex items with internal commas, semicolons are essential for clarity.

The semicolon can feel tricky at first, but it's simply another tool. Use it when it helps your reader follow your ideas. That's the heart of good writing. **WD**

Ryan G. Van Cleave (RyanGVanCleave.com) is Editorial Director for Bushel & Peck Books and has authored dozens of books, including *The Weekend Book Proposal* and *Memoir Writing for Dummies*. As The Picture Book Doctor (ThePictureBookDoctor.com), Ryan helps celebrity clients bring stories to life on the page, stage, and screen.



DEAR SIMON

Your questions answered by a publishing expert.

BY SIMON VAN BOOY

DEAR SIMON,

What are realistic goals a writer can set for themselves to stay on track—milestones and other ways to be motivated to write consistently?

—Katie in Northern California

Dear Katie,

Over the course of my career, I've come to realize that consistency is more important than talent. People grow up thinking that because they have talent for something, the world will come to them. But sadly, this is not the case. In my experience as an editor, gifted authors often know, deep down, they possess something very special indeed. They feel it pulling on them, often through an instinct to write and inexplicable excitement when confronted with poetry, prose, or a good song. Despite this awareness, however, an author's talent won't fully reveal itself until that writer has mastered some level of craft. Just like learning to play an instrument, learning the craft of writing requires consistency, discipline, and the willingness to fail every single time you sit down to practice. But you don't only learn to write by writing—you learn by reading books you're in love with.

In my opinion, the best way for you to stay on track is to force yourself to write often. Even 20 minutes every two or three days is better than a long stint of hours separated by as many weeks. So, if you're disciplined or obsessive enough to write regularly, the danger is that you become exhausted over time

because writing is the emotional equivalent of going 150 miles an hour on a motorcycle in the rain at night on a cliff road that's dotted with drunk chickens on rollerblades.

But it doesn't always have to be like that.

There is a way to pace yourself for the long haul.

Let me explain how the writer is really two people. The woman on the speeding motorcycle is Katie 1, she's the artist/writer, while Katie 2 is the editor. The idea being that both Katie 1 and Katie 2 cannot work on a manuscript at the same time. They have different jobs. The role of Katie 1 is to be emotionally open, vulnerable, authentic, and above all free to be *herself* on the page, with complete impunity. The role of Katie 2, then, as an editor, is to try and figure out where Katie 1's genius lies, and to help reveal more of it, let more in as it were, and enhance the experience of Katie 1's unique voice for the reader. Like any editor, the role of Katie 2 is not to create anything, but to enhance Katie 1 with careful edits, cuts, and suggestions for expansion. Therefore, writing consistently doesn't always have to be an emotional outpouring. Some days you'll just want to brew a pot of tea and edit. Occasionally while you're editing, Katie 1 might show up and do something amazing. Let her. But don't feel any pressure to make her go on. It's Katie 2's session, after all. Writing a book then, is the steady alternating between

writer and editor (Katie 1 and Katie 2). Only when both are satisfied is the book finished.

But how to stay motivated to maintain the consistent practice? Well, in my experience there's only one way to maintain motivation, and that's by reading books you love. Usually, when a writer is bored with their own book, it's because they're not reading anything incredible. Writers are most productive when their reading lives are rich.

Why is that?

Well, I suppose it's because when you're excited by something you read, you get a sense of what it is you want to do for your own reader. This means you'll treat what you're reading as a tuning fork to bring up the level of your own work. For every novel I've written, there were novels I was reading at the time which made it possible for me to stay interested in what I was writing, and then eventually finish it.

Have a question for Simon? Submit your quandry to [@SimonVanBooy](#) on Instagram. **WD**

Simon Van Booy is the award-winning, bestselling author of more than a dozen books for adults and children, including *Sipsworth*. Simon has written for *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *BBC*. He currently lives in New York where he is also a private book editor.

BY JESSICA FRANCIS KANE

A Squeeze of the Hand

I discovered Penelope Fitzgerald's work in 1999. My husband and I had just moved to London for his job, and I, homesick in a rental flat near Battersea, was trying to write but not having much success. On his way home from work one night, my husband stopped in a bookshop and picked out a book to cheer me up. He didn't know the author, but he thought I might like the story because it was set along the Thames near where we were living.

That book was *Offshore*, Fitzgerald's 1979 Booker Prize-winning novel, and I adored it. I read all Fitzgerald's other novels in short order. She was living in Hampstead at the time, and I dreamed of bumping into her. I never did, but her work, more than any other writer's, became a deep source of inspiration for me.

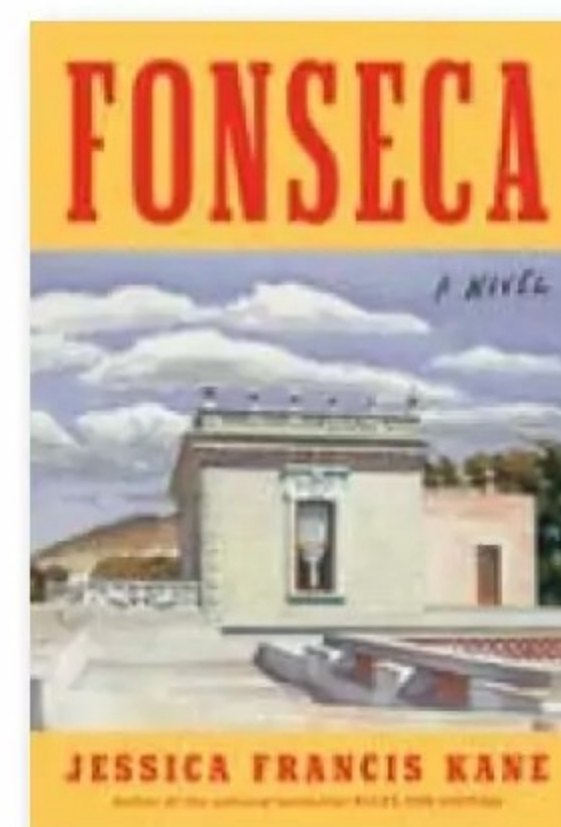
When Hermione Lee's biography of Fitzgerald came out in 2013, I went to see Lee speak at the New York Public Library and felt a jolt of connection when I heard that night that *The Beginning of Spring* was Fitzgerald's own favorite of her novels. It is mine, too. I pored over Lee's biography, in which she briefly mentions Fitzgerald's 1952 trip to Mexico, an odd, three-month gap in her life when she was pregnant with her third child and on the brink of poverty. Uncharacteristically, Fitzgerald left almost no record or fictional account of this journey. Friends and family didn't know why she went, and she never spoke of Mexico after

she returned. But in a 1980 essay she seems to set the scene.

"Suppose I were to try to write a story that began with a journey I made to the north of Mexico 27 years ago, taking with me my son, then aged five. We were going to pay a winter visit to two old ladies called Delaney who lived comfortably ... on the proceeds of the family silver mine." She describes the house, "a shuttered mansion in the French style," and says, "everyone in Fonseca who was interested in the Delaneys' wealth ... wanted to get rid of me and my son as soon as possible."

But Fonseca does not exist. The town in Mexico was Saltillo, the name Fonseca perhaps a rueful invention, as in Latin it means "dry well." Later in the essay, she writes that she was sorry to let the story go because of what seemed to her "the natural energy of the plot."

Well, dear reader, I could not let it go. The title of her essay is "Following the Plot," and something possessed me to try and do just that. I went to Austin to look at the Fitzgerald archives at the Harry Ransom Center, and there I *did* bump into someone—Hermione Lee!—on my last day in the reading room. When she asked me what I was doing with the Fitzgerald boxes, and I replied that I was contemplating a novel about the Mexico trip, Lee nodded and said that made sense. Fitzgerald believed in the literary "squeeze of the hand," connection and encouragement from



writer to writer, across all boundaries of time and place. I believe that was my squeeze from her, and it gave me the confidence I needed.

As I worked, I took Fitzgerald's "Following the Plot" as a guide, specifically a couple of lines I read as clues. "Everyone has a point to which the mind reverts naturally when it is left on its own." I think the Mexico trip was that point for her. And "Unfortunate are the adventures which are never narrated," which I took as an epigraph for *Fonseca*. Fitzgerald put it in quotation marks, but her family and I have been unable to figure out what she was quoting. Possibly she invented it, just as she invented the epigraph in her most famous novel, *The Blue Flower*: "Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history." **WD**

Jessica Francis Kane is the author of the national bestseller *Rules for Visiting*, *This Close*, *The Report*, and *Bending Heaven*. *This Close* was longlisted for The Story Prize, *The Report* was a finalist for The Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, and *Rules for Visiting* was longlisted for the Joyce Carol Oates Prize.

Danya Kukafka (she/her)

TRELLIS LITERARY MANAGEMENT

After growing up in Colorado, Danya Kukafka moved to New York City to attend New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, where she created a major: The Art of the Novel. After interning at literary agencies, she worked as an assistant editor at Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House, working with writers such as Meg Wolitzer, Paula Hawkins, Lauren Groff, Brit Bennett, Emma Straub, Helen Oyeyemi, and Sigrid Nunez.

Danya is the author of the national bestseller *Notes on an Execution* (William Morrow, 2022), which won the Edgar Award for Best Novel in 2023, was an Indie Next Pick, a finalist for the Goodreads Choice Awards for fiction, and received a cover review in the *New York Times Book Review*. Her debut novel, *Girl in Snow* (Simon and Schuster, 2017), was also a national bestseller, an Indie Next Pick, and a B&N Discover pick. Both novels have been optioned for film and television.

"I write what I like to read, and I represent what I like to read—both aspects of my career come from that same place of hunger," Kukafka says. "I suspect my work as a writer makes me a more patient, understanding, and resilient agent."

You can find Kukafka online at TrellisLiterary.com.

CLIENTS

Junie by Erin Crosby Eckstine (Ballantine, 2025)
Vantage Point by Sara Sligar (FSG, 2025)
Sour Cherry by Natalia Theodoridou (Tin House, 2025)

QUERY PET PEEVES

"When a book starts with onomatopoeia (bang, bang, bang, goes the door!)."

"When a book starts with a line of expletives (personally, I love swearing, but as an opener, it doesn't tell us anything useful)."

"When an author leaves the comparative titles box blank because 'nothing like this has ever been written before.'"



ABOUT ME

"I'm usually knitting while I'm reading, and writing."

"My dog Remy knows more about the publishing industry than most humans."

"I've watched every international season of 'Love Island,' thousands and thousands of hours of 'Love Island.'"



FAVORITE

LIVING AUTHOR: Kazuo Ishiguro

DEAD AUTHOR: Daphne du Maurier

POEM: "How Far Away We Are" by Ada Limón

PLACE: "The porch of the house in Keene"

WRITING TIP

"We work in the slow arts—writing is meant to take time. The process is the point. Just keep going."

PITCH TIPS

"Keep it brief."

"Follow the rules."

"Revise your first 10 pages to death."

DREAM PROJECT AND CLIENT

"My dream project is a novel I can see clearly and take to another level editorially with the author. My dream client is a writer unafraid to do the work, in the long term."

MENTOR

"Many years ago, I assisted an editor at Penguin Random House named Sarah McGrath. Sarah still edits half my favorite books—she taught me that taste is both an instinct and a series of decisions. But most importantly, Sarah showed me how to be a professional in this industry who deals always in kindness."

SEEKING

"Crime fiction with a literary bent"

"Literary horror that plays with form and structure"

"Lightly speculative fiction"

"Hefty, expansive literary fiction"

"Literary suspense"

"Experimental or genre-bending work"

"Dark coming of age"

"Fun and sophisticated upmarket fiction"

"True crime"

Kara Gebart Uhl is a writer, editor, and author of *Cadi & the Cursed Oak* (Lost Art Press).

BREAKING IN

Debut authors: How they did it, what they learned, and why you can do it, too.

BY MORIAH RICHARD



Samantha Browning Shea

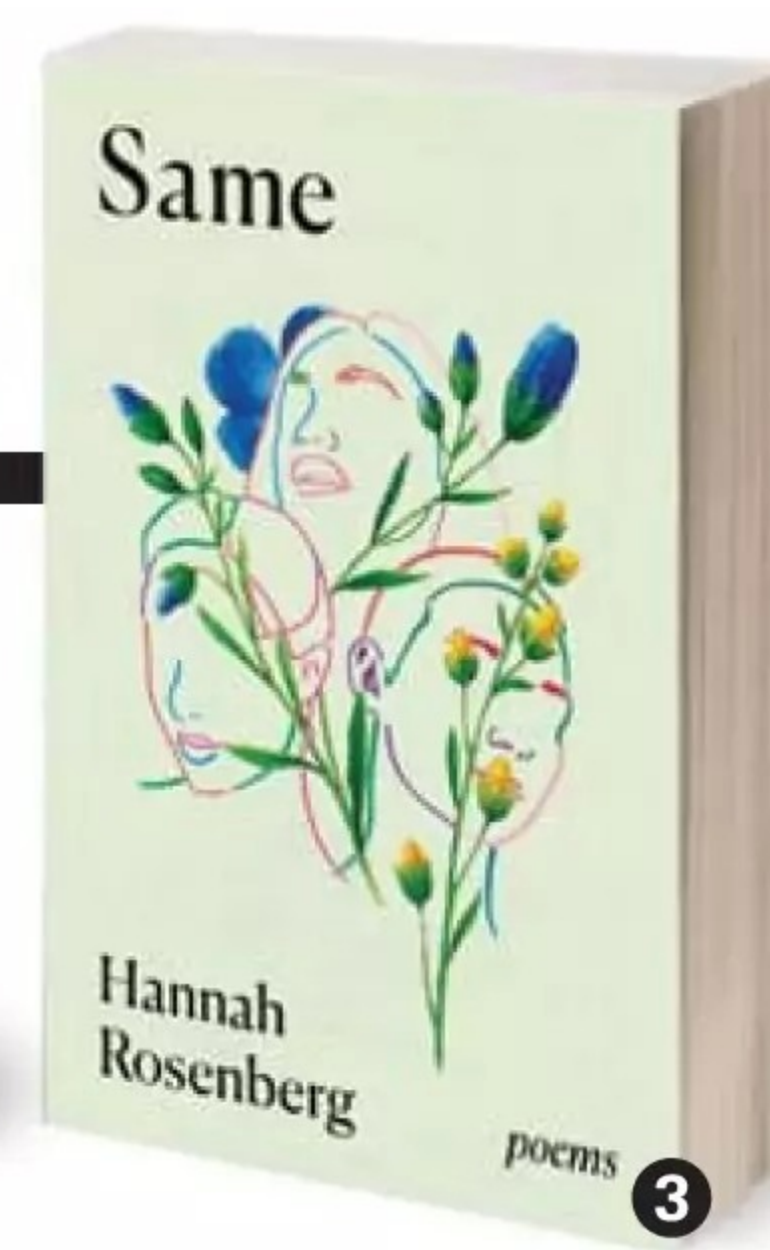
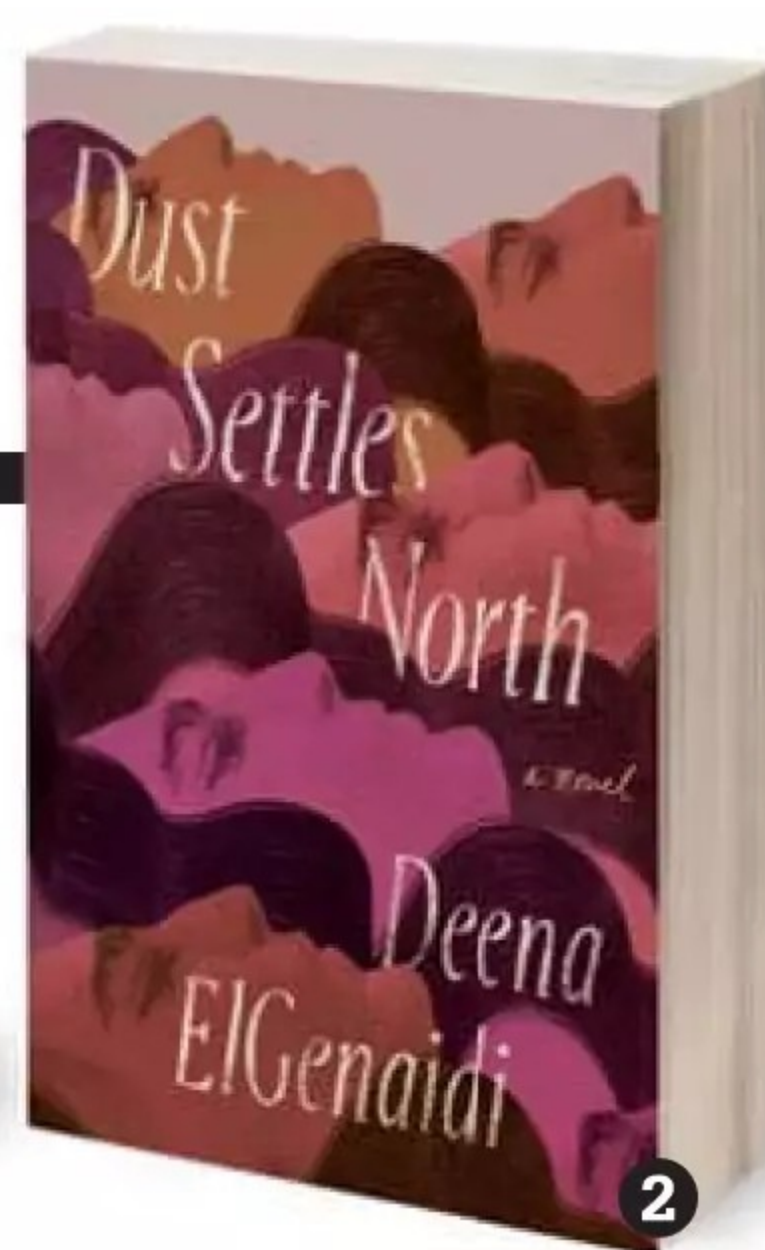
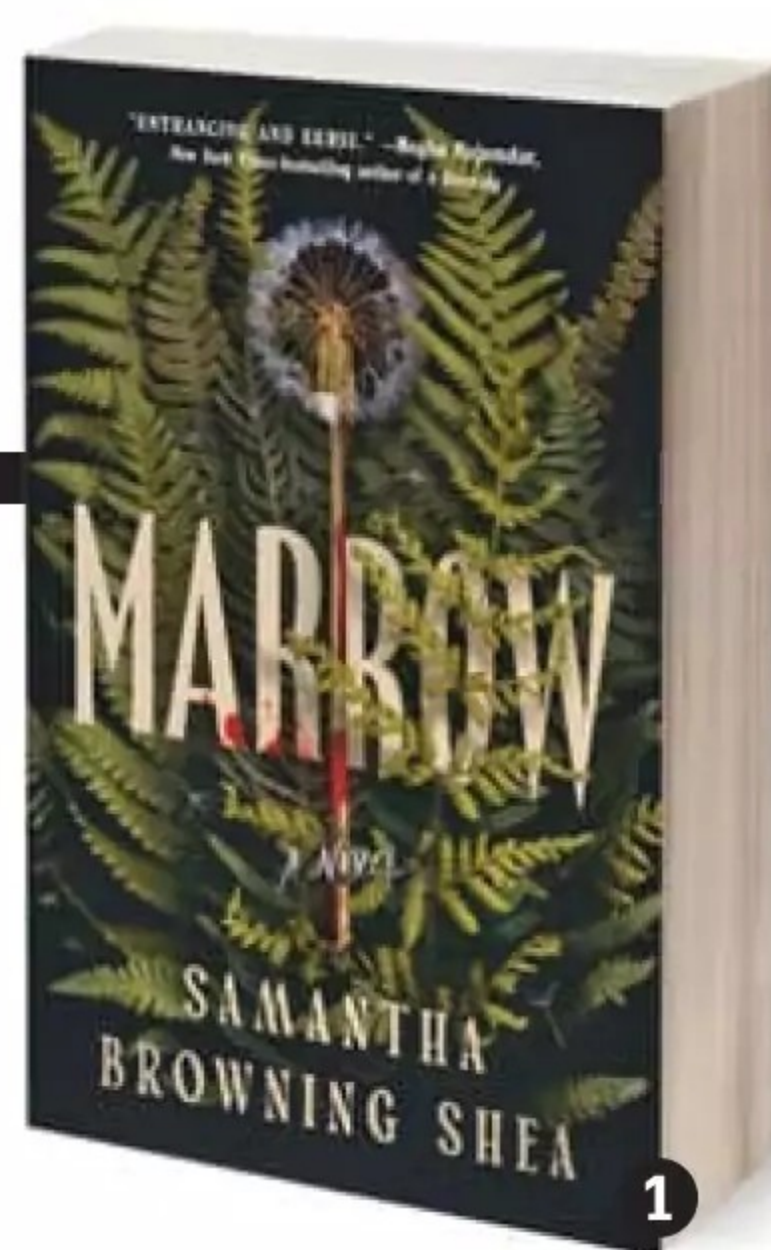
Marrow

(Literary fiction, September, G.P. Putnam's Sons)

"A searing take on femininity and power, *Marrow* transports readers to a small island off the coast of Maine, where a coven has done the seemingly impossible: given childless women the chance to become mothers."

WRITES FROM: Fairfield, Conn. **PRE-MARROW:**

My husband and I had just made the difficult decision to begin fertility treatment after trying, unsuccessfully, to conceive for over a year. **TIME FRAME:** It took me a little less than two years to research and write the first draft (roughly a year of fertility testing, failed IUIs, and two rounds of IVF; and then another nine months while I was pregnant with my first daughter). **ENTER THE AGENT:** I'm also a literary agent (I've been at Georges Borchardt, Inc. for 15 years now), so when it came time to find an agent for my own work, I was pretty nervous. I felt like I was risking not just rejection, but professional humiliation if it turned out no one liked my work. But happily, Marya [Spence at Janklow & Nesbit] and I clicked right away, and



she's been an incredible champion for my writing ever since! **BIGGEST SURPRISE:** About a week after my book sold at auction to an editor I was so excited to work with, that editor ended up taking a new job and leaving Putnam. As an agent, I completely understood. Editors often have to move houses in order to get promoted. ... But as a writer, I was devastated. ... I got really lucky, though, and ended up with an editorial team I love. **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** When I first started working in publishing, I was afraid to tell anyone that I also wanted to be a writer, but it's been really affirming, over the years, to see how others have navigated balancing careers as both writers and publishing professionals. **WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY:** Honestly, nothing. I'm just so grateful to be where I'm at right now: working my dream job, publishing my first novel, mother to two brilliant (and mischievous) little girls. **ADVICE FOR WRITERS:** Just keep writing! As a young agent,

Georges told me stories all the time about writers he's represented whose careers didn't "take off" until book number four or five or six. He's always said it's not talent that makes a writer; it's tenacity. **NEXT UP:** I'm at work on what I hope will be my second book, inspired by a true crime story. **WEBSITE:** SamanthaShea.com



Deena ElGenaidi

Dust Settles North

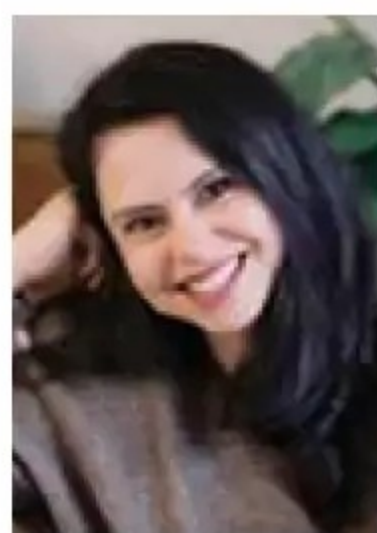
(Literary fiction, September, Bindery Books)

"Dust Settles North is the story of two siblings navigating their second-generation Egyptian American identity, family trauma, and grief in the wake of their mother's sudden death—and father's shocking betrayal."

WRITES FROM: Brooklyn. **PRE-DUST:** This book started out as a short story that I wrote for a fiction workshop in my MFA program. I had previously

only written short stories, and then while I was in the MFA, I started to expand this into a novel. **TIME FRAME:** I spent nine years working on this book—counting my time in grad school, all the way up to when the book was sold. **ENTER THE AGENT:** ... while my book was out on its first round of submission, my agent actually quit agenting altogether, which put me into a state of panic. Luckily, though, she gave my manuscript to one of her colleagues, Monica Rodriguez, who loved my book and wanted to represent me. **BIGGEST SURPRISE:** Publishing moves so slowly. ... My book was out on submission for a long time, and sometimes editors would receive the manuscript and take months just to start reading. **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** I joined a writers' group. I've been in my writers' group now for over seven years, and I've learned so much and grown so much from being in that group. When we started, none of us had books published, and most of us didn't have agents yet. Now, everyone has at least one book published. Seeing my friends in the group go through that process taught me a lot about what publishing is like and what to expect. **WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY:** I want to say I would have stressed out less or not given myself so much anxiety about the publishing process, but I think in some ways, that was out of my control. So, I don't know that I would do anything differently. I think I learned a lot through this journey. **ADVICE FOR WRITERS:** I would say just don't give up. I worked on this book for a really long time, and I got plenty of rejections along the way. I could have just stopped trying, but instead I took the rejections, took

the feedback, and kept improving my work, and I'm glad I did because my writing is better for it. **NEXT UP:** I'm working on a second book right now—another novel—but it's still very early stages. **WEBSITE:** DeenaElGenaidi.com



Hannah Rosenberg

Same

(Poetry, October, St. Martin's Press/Macmillan in the U.S./Canada; HarperCollins in the U.K.)

"A collection of poems about finding magic in the ordinary and celebrating the relationships that make our lives beautiful."

WRITES FROM: Philadelphia, Pa. **PRE-**

SAME: I have been sharing poetry on what I was calling (whenever anyone asked!) my poetry blog since 2020. **TIME FRAME:** I wrote a small excerpt for the book for the proposal between February and April 2024, and then the majority of the book between June and October 2024.

ENTER THE AGENT: Sarah Cantin, my editor at St. Martin's Press/Macmillan, was the first to reach out to me. We had a brief conversation about pursuing a book, and she connected me to a few agents that she thought might be a good fit. ...

I was able to talk on the phone with them and really felt a strong connection to Ariele Fredman, whom I signed on with. **BIGGEST SURPRISE:** I was surprised how scary finishing the book would feel—a book (unlike my poetry blog) feels so final. ... I was also surprised by the importance of pre-orders. It didn't occur to me that it would be important to "sell" your book before it was out, and how that would influence

so much ahead of time. **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** Definitely creating my own writing account and building my audience was the best thing I did. Writing every week helped me practice the craft of writing and build a readership along the way, which, ultimately, led me to my publishers. **WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY:** I think I would have tried to create a peer writing community earlier on—I had (and still have!) imposter syndrome and felt like other writers wouldn't want to talk to me, so I held off on reaching out to chat. **ADVICE FOR WRITERS:** For me, creating project plans and timelines helps with creativity instead of hindering it. I used to write "when I felt creative" and found (especially early on when I was just beginning the process of regularly writing) that if I didn't set aside time specifically for writing and I didn't have a goal I was working on, I would make up excuses for not doing it. Once I got serious about goals, it helped me prioritize my writing. **NEXT UP:** I love writing poetry and prose—it never feels like work to me. I hope others love reading it enough that I can publish future books. **WEBSITE:** HannahRoWrites.com **WD**

Moriah Richard is managing editor of WD.



2025 Annual Agent Roundup

20+ literary agents open to queries detail
what they're looking for and how best to
connect with them.

By Amy Jones

Maybe your novel is written and edited, and now you're ready to start sharing it. Or, maybe you've got a solid outline and business plan for a nonfiction book. Now comes the challenge of finding an agent to represent you and your work to publishers.

But, of course, agents do so much more than that these days. They also function as editors, ensuring your book or proposal is at its best before shopping it to publishers. If they're the right agent for you, they'll also help you build your career as a writer, helping you figure out what's next.

As you get started (or keep going) in your search to find the agent that's the best fit for you, your personality, and your working style, here are 21 agents open to queries right now and the specifics of what they're looking for. They've also detailed what they don't want and what makes a query stand out to them. Some agents are early in building their lists, others are established and looking to add a client or two to already robust rosters, and there are plenty in between. There are pros and cons to each, which

EDITOR'S NOTE: While we make every effort to ensure the information presented is accurate at the time of printing and that agents will be open to submissions when this issue is on sale, unexpected changes or closures may occur.

Additionally, here are some common abbreviations used:

PB: Picture books

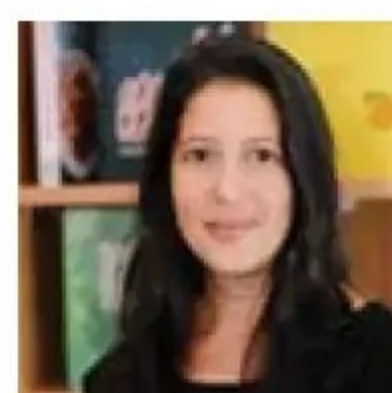
MG: Middle grade

YA: Young Adult

NF: Nonfiction

is one more opportunity to consider what's most important to you in your author journey. Be sure to visit the agency websites to find out more about agency philosophies, agent biographies, and additional books/authors represented by those agencies.

WD wishes you the very best of luck in your search for an agent!



Rica Allannic
(she/her;
Dear Rica)

David Black

Literary Agency

BROOKLYN

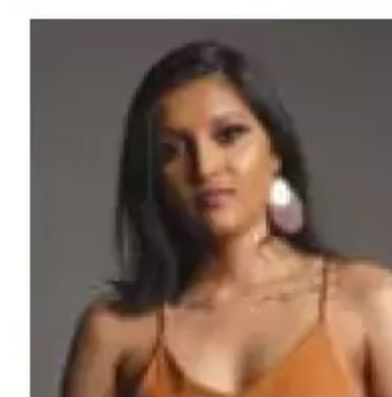
DAVIDBLACKAGENCY

.COM

IG: @RICASUAVE

NONFICTION INTERESTS: Cooking, narrative and prescriptive nonfiction, popular culture, history, science, sports. **RECENT SALES:** Kyshawn Lane and Matthew Peterson's *Weekly Home Check Handbook*, which shares home care tips with homeowners, helping them save money and feel more empowered in their own spaces, and expands upon the concepts introduced by their popular @weeklyhomecheck Instagram account (with 1.8 million followers), to Judy Pray at Artisan, at auction. *Rolling Stone* senior editor Jeff Ihaza's *Lamestream*, a blend of memoir and pop culture narrative nonfiction challenging the unrepentant optimism of the early internet era and examining how social media ultimately made subcultures mainstream, to Khari Dawkins at Doubleday, in a pre-empt. "Red Flags Podcast" founders Matt Elisofon and Brian Muller's *Formula 101*, a humorous guide to Formula 1 by Americans for

Americans who live for the drama, to Peter Wolverton at St. Martin's, in a pre-empt. James Beard Foundation Outstanding Pastry Chef finalist and *Food & Wine* Best New Chef Caroline Schiff's *Daily Dessert*, encouraging everyone to make every day a little bit sweeter with 100 recipes for every kind of baker, every occasion, and every time of day, to Laura Dozier at Abrams, at auction, in a two-book deal. Veteran bartender Kenta Goto and Noah Rothbaum's *The Goto Bartender's Guide*, featuring 100 recipes and Goto's approach to making drinks to ensure professional-quality results at home every time, to Kelly Snowden at Ten Speed Press, in a pre-empt. **DOES NOT WANT:** Fiction, children's, YA. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Please summarize your book idea via email and then paste your proposal into the body of your email (no attachments, please). **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I look for a strong idea/hook, voice, and author platform. Good query letters answer the questions: why you, why now, and who is your audience? Tell me why you are the only person who could write this book and why readers will want to buy it.



Keir Aleksei
(she/they/fae;
Hon: Ms.)

Azantian Literary

CALIFORNIA

AZANTIANLITAGENCY

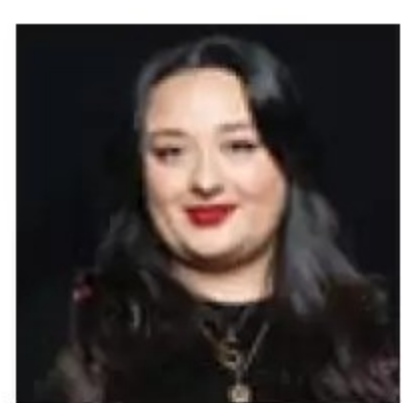
.COM

@KEIRALEKSEI

FICTION INTERESTS: In adult fiction, I'm looking for science fiction, fantasy, horror, and anything speculative. In YA, it's much the same, but I am also interested in

The Art of Making Connections in Storytelling

contemporary. **RECENT SALES:** *A Prince Among Pirates* by Kaitlyn Abdou and *Kill Your Darlings* by Yuvashri Harish are among my most recently announced sales, with more on the way. **DOES NOT WANT:** Contemporary romance, military science fiction, slasher/serial killer horror. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** I am only seeking queries from marginalized voices. I require the first 10 pages (in standard manuscript format), a 1-page synopsis (single-spaced), and a standard query letter. These should be submitted to me via QueryManager. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I tend to connect more strongly with stories that focus on personal stakes, where the world in general will move on even as a character's world feels like it has ended. These stories feel more intimate and real, even if the setting is [on] an epic scale. When I meet an author, we often connect over a shared passion for storytelling (and, of course, the book in question).



**Shabnam
Banerjee-
McFarland
(she/her)**

**Odom Media
Management
MONTCLAIR, NJ
ODOMMEDIAMGMT.COM**

NONFICTION INTERESTS: I'm currently seeking nonfiction with a clear vision for social justice movements and world-building. I'm interested in working with writers who are organizing for a more just, equitable, and inclusive world. I'm interested in investigative and researched-backed work by scholars, activists, practitioners, journalists, and community

leaders working within labor rights & economic justice, reproductive justice & rights, gender equality, queer, climate action, abolition, body liberation, and immigration movements. I'm looking for writers who have lived experience and are in community with people within the movements they are writing about. I'm interested in narrative and creative nonfiction as well as thoroughly researched and journalistic nonfiction. Driven by my political commitment to producing media in support of collective liberation, I am most interested in working on books that are agitating and fearlessly challenging systems of oppression. I am most moved by writers who show how political theory can come to life, whether through offering pathways to healing, personal and collective, or through modes of resistance guided by history. I enjoy collaborating with authors who are exploring the meaning of freedom, running the gamut from community-building in the forms of food, libations, and intentional gatherings, to the artist's role in making revolution irresistible and world-building, to organizing efforts that confront capitalist, patriarchal systems. Right now, I am primarily working on adult nonfiction but am interested in text and visual representations of what it means to be and get free. **RECENT SALES:** Economist, organizer, and podcast host Maurice BP-Weeks' *Indebted*, an exploration of the exploitation of Black Americans' debt throughout U.S. history, arguing that debt is a primary tool of anti-Black subjugation through economic exclusion and wealth extraction under racial capitalism since slavery, and calling for debt abolition as a form of reparations, to Zakia Henderson-Brown

at New Press, in an exclusive submission. Community organizer K Adetoyin Agbebiyi's *Rejecting Survivor Politics*, a critique of the survivor-centered discourse taking place within leftist movements, arguing that the mainstreaming of abolition has diluted the previously radical movement, and ultimately calling for more gatekeeping of abolitionist feminist movements in order to restore integrity and overcome the harm of survivor politics, to Joanna Green at Beacon Press. **DOES NOT WANT:** I'm not interested in straight memoir, books about bipartisan-ship, leadership, and business books. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Please send proposal (overview/summary, TOC, comp titles, bio, platform and marketing, and 2–3 sample chapters) to queryshabnam@odommediamgmt.com. If I am interested in your work, I will respond to your query within 3–4 months. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I connect best with writers with whom we share a worldview and vision for the future—I want to work and connect with writers who are committed to justice and working actively in their communities to fight for human rights and organizing within mutual aid networks. I feel most connected to writers who are fiercely passionate about action, creating systems and structures to enact justice. I connect best through shared reading, so I would love to know what you're reading and where you're publishing (if the publications you write for have a political point of view or clear politics) and who you're in community with. I work with writers who lead with their worldview and are courageous and bold in their commitment to justice, which should shine through in the writing and our connection.



Jessica Berg
(she/her)

Rosecliff Literary
WASHINGTON, D.C.
ROSECLIFFLITERARY.COM
@ROSECLIFFLIT (AGENCY),
@JESSICA_BERG
(PERSONAL)

FICTION INTERESTS: I'm drawn to stories that feel both timeless and urgent, where emotional depth meets compelling stakes. If it can be described as haunting, heart-felt, or cinematic, I'm likely to be intrigued. In the commercial fiction space, I'd love to see genre-mashups with high-concept, accessible narratives and larger-than-life personalities that command the page. Queer love stories with heat and heart will always get me, as will Gothic and noir love stories with an edge. In the historical fiction space, WWI or anything post-WWI, with special focus on "contemporary" historical fiction. I'd love to see fashion, art, dance, or opera woven into rich historical backdrops. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** I am especially drawn to narrative nonfiction that reclaims the stories of women who operated in male-dominated spaces. Think intelligence, statecraft, aviation, engineering, military, and who were erased, overlooked, or deliberately forgotten. I'm looking for books in the tradition of *The Woman Who Smashed Codes*, *The Daughters of Kobani*, *War Flower*, or *Savage Appetites*. I'd love to see biographies that bring cultural figures like Gertrude Berg, Ida Lupino, or Eartha Kitt into focus, especially when the writing interrogates power, legacy, and visibility. I'm drawn to women who were

formidable and not always likable, who were ahead of their time or punished for their ambition. Voice-forward projects that blend investigative rigor with narrative flair are a huge plus, especially those that feel cinematic, stylish, or subversive. **RECENT SALES:** *Big & Lily* by Lisa Roe to Harper Perennial, and *Here Comes the Drama* by Christa Innis to Tantor Media (audio).

DOES NOT WANT: I'm not the right fit for projects that feel generic, overly familiar, or chasing trends. If I've read five versions of it in my inbox already, I'm probably not the one. I'm also not looking for fiction that relies on trauma for stakes without doing the emotional work. More broadly, I'm just not interested in anything that doesn't know what it is or why it matters. I don't need polished perfection, but I do need specificity, intention, and a little bit of guts. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Send all project documents through QueryManager. Please include a query and synopsis as well as social media/website information. Send submissions to QueryTracker.net/query/jessicaberg. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** My number one tip is to do your research about the agents you're querying. If you can articulate why your project might resonate with my list or my taste (especially something that isn't already on my MSWL), that tells me you're thinking strategically and writing with intention. I connect with authors and queries when the voice is strong, the vision is clear, and I get a sense of the person behind the page. If I find myself nodding, smiling, or already imagining our emails, then there's a good chance I'm in.



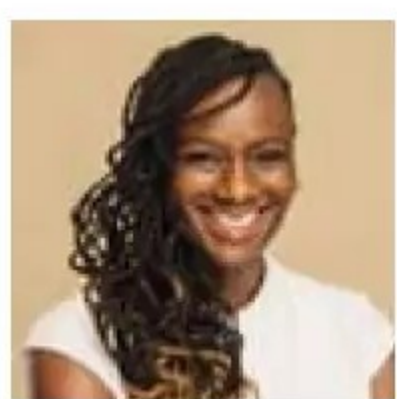
Amanda Bernardi
(she/her)

High Line Literary
Collective
NYC
HIGHLINELITERARY.COM
IG: @AMANDABERNARDI
BOOKS

NONFICTION INTERESTS: I work across all nonfiction genres, with specialties in prescriptive nonfiction in health, wellness, advice, parenting, and relationships, as well as four-color and two-color titles in illustrated, humor, food & drink, and general lifestyle. I'm looking for expert or platform-driven authors who have a unique perspective on a common issue or problem that needs to be solved. I'm particularly focused on issues that involve women, parents, and marginalized folks who have long been ignored by traditional media. **RECENT SALES:** *The GLP1 Breakthrough* by Dr. Rocio Salas-Whalen, *Notice and Do* by Sam Kelly, *PCOS Is My Power* by Cory Ruth, *Protein Powered* by Jackie Hartlaub, *We Need Your Art* by Amie McNee, and 25 others in the past year. **DOES NOT WANT:** I'm more interested in prescriptive nonfiction than narrative, just due to my own editorial limitations. I might sign one narrative out of 10 projects if I feel very aligned with the story and feel that I would be the best editorial support and sales champion. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** I only accept submissions through my QueryManager and am open for queries year-round. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I'm looking for authors who want to share their expertise with the world, at the point where it is bursting from them. I generally don't sign an

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author because they feel like they should have a book in their repertoire. No matter how big their platform, they need to understand how publishing can help with their five-year goals and be excited about that. I look for authenticity and transparency because that is what my clients value most about my own client care. When querying, know that you just need that one person and that they should be as fired up as you are about your ideas—never settle.



Georgia Bodnar
(Hon: Ms.)
Noyan Literary
NYC
NOYANLITERARY.COM
IG: @NOYANLITERARY

FICTION INTERESTS: I'm drawn to exceptional writing, deeply realized characters, and compelling, plot-driven narratives. Generally, the more ambitious the storytelling, the more likely I am to connect with it. I'm especially interested in stories that span diverse settings, unfold in the natural world, or are rooted in reality while incorporating fantastic elements. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** I'm seeking books by authors with expertise in reportage, current affairs, history, science, sociology, pop culture, parenting, business, faith, and food writing. For memoir, I'm drawn to works that use the personal to illuminate broader themes or societal concerns. **RECENT SALES:** *Rock, River, Red Hibiscus* by Ibi Zoboi; *Mommy Issues: Mother Wounds, God, and Redemption in the South* by Laura Quick; *Affirmed Life* by Cheryl Polote-Williamson. **DOES NOT WANT:** MG and picture books, theatrical works, or

screenplays. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Noyan Literary accepts queries by email. Please send a query letter in the body of an email to submissions@noyanlit.com, and place the title of the work in the subject line. Your letter should describe the work you're submitting and include an author bio. Manuscripts and sample pages should be sent as .PDF or .docx file attachments. Due to the high volume of queries, we respond to works only if we are interested in considering further, and we aim to do so within 6–8 weeks. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** When a query letter references contemporary books comparable to the author's own, it shows me they're actively reading and engaged with the work of their peers. This demonstrates two important things: first, that the author understands their work exists in dialogue with a larger literary landscape; and second, that they are a reader as well as a writer. Writers serious about their craft tend to be voracious readers—I'm always surprised by how many people try to write without reading widely.



Tommy Dean
(he/him)
Rosecliff Literary
WASHINGTON, D.C.
ROSECLIFFLITERARY.COM
@TOMMYDEANWRITER

FICTION INTERESTS: I specialize in mystery, suspense, thrillers, crime fiction, and upmarket fiction with a sharp edge. I'm drawn to high-stakes narratives, complex characters, and stories that refuse to be put down. Upmarket fiction with mystery and suspense. Crime novels with anti-hero main characters

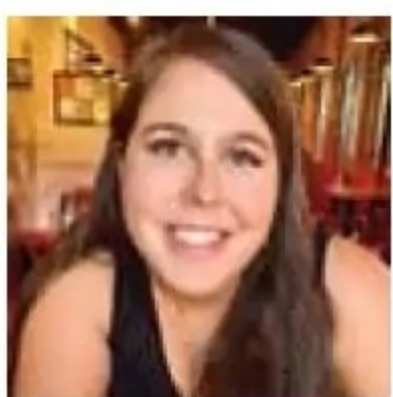
will always get me, as will mystery novels that keep me guessing. I'm always interested in clear stakes, surprise endings, and stories that make me forget the outside world. Plus points for supercharged sensory experiences, characters yearning to understand their pasts and find a glimmer of hope. Give me your characters with secrets, past loves, past crimes, and past mistakes that lead to unique stories. **RECENT SALES:** None yet, but every day brings new opportunities! **DOES NOT WANT:** Stories with vague or unoriginal stakes, queries that focus too much on vibes and not on plot actions of the main character, novels that focus primarily on science fiction and fantasy, as well as romance. I shy away from the light-hearted and specifically intense horror projects. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Send all project documents through QueryManager. Please include a query, synopsis, and the first 10 pages of your narrative. QueryTracker.net/query/tdrl **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** Querying writers can connect with a prospective agent by following the guidelines, by using sensory details in both the query and their opening pages, and by allowing their unique voice to shine through a rather cold process. I love to see a writer who has continued to pursue their craft, who shows me how dedicated they are to building a successful writing career. The best way a writer can stand out is to use the opening of their query to establish the one-sentence pitch. This encapsulates so much of what their project is about and helps me frame how I might sell it to editors. It cuts to the quick of this process, and it's often skipped by querying writers.



David Dunn
(he/him)

**Rogers, Coleridge
& White Ltd**
LONDON
RCWLITAGENCY.COM
IG: @DAVID.DUNN.AGENT

FICTION INTERESTS: Literary, crime, YA, thriller. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** Music, photography, popular science, history, food & cooking, biography. **RECENT SALES:** *Blondie in Camera 1978* by Martyn Goddard, *The Vic Brown Trilogy* by Stan Barstow. **DOES NOT WANT:** High fantasy, children's. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Fiction: complete manuscript; NF: detailed proposal plus 2–3 sample chapters if possible. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** Read the agency's submission guidelines and submit exactly what's asked; be patient for a response.



Mara Hollander
(she/her; Hon: Dr.)

**Azantian Literary
Agency**
NYC
AZANTIANLITAGENCY.COM
@MAGHWITES

FICTION INTERESTS: Stories make us who we are, and everyone deserves a chance to write their own narrative. I'm actively seeking to represent authors from communities traditionally underrepresented in publishing, including BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and disabled and/or chronically ill writers. In particular, I'm looking for accessibly written novels for adult and YA audiences that make you forget the world

around you in the fantasy, romance, thriller, mystery, and horror genres, as well as non-genre commercial and upmarket manuscripts. I love political rebellions, accurately rendered sports, angry women and nonbinary characters, Jewish characters, and most importantly—yearning. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** I'm open to a variety of platform- and expertise-driven nonfiction proposals and love to be surprised! I have a doctorate in U.S. health care policy and am fascinated by anything healthcare-related, particularly in the mental illness and substance use disorder spaces. I'm always intrigued by a good cult, scam, or scheme. And if you can highlight something new and exciting in the sports world, I'm in. **RECENT SALES:** *The Revenant of Surolifia* by Florence Chien (Rising Action, July 2026). More announcements coming soon! **DOES NOT WANT:** Memoirs, stories centering a culture/experience belonging to a minoritized group the writer is not a part of, historical fiction set in Europe during WWII including books that focus on the Holocaust, main characters who are droids/androids, stories about AI, fantasy world competitions, MG, chapter books, picture books, novellas and short story collections, books that center around child sexual abuse, or prescriptive books about Christianity, astrology, magic, and/or witchcraft. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Please see AzantianLitAgency.com/submissions for submission guidelines. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** A good query tells me what a main character wants, why they want it, what they're willing to do to get it, and what stands in their way. I'll

connect with a query that gives me a reason to care about the main character's struggles. Be as specific as possible to highlight what's unique about your manuscript—lots of brilliant books follow similar shapes, and I want to know what's special about yours.



Jared Johnson
(he/him/his)
Olswanger Literary
NEW JERSEY
OLSWANGER.COM
BLUESKY: @LITJARED
.BSKY.SOCIAL

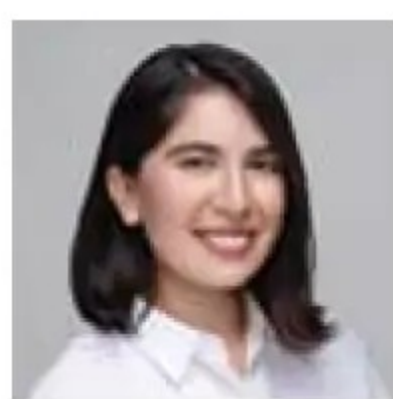
FICTION INTERESTS: Currently, I am looking for a broad range of adult commercial and upmarket fiction. I often gravitate toward stories that revolve around complex expressions of hope, joy, connection, and other forms of positive emotion. A few examples of stories I love with these themes are *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt, *Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop* by Hwang Boreum, *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke, and *Nothing to See Here* by Kevin Wilson. I'm also always on the lookout for fantasy, sci-fi, and horror that explore relevant cultural narratives. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** As with fiction, I'm drawn to projects that highlight community and culture, whether that be by examining society from a unique angle, drawing attention to overlooked cultural issues and personal stories, or by exploring connection in times of division. I appreciate when authors are able to find a good balance between academic levels of research with prose aimed at popular audiences. **RECENT SALES:** Most recently on shelves is Erin K. Wagner's

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Mechanize My Hands to War, published by DAW Books. It's a nonlinear, near-future sci-fi story about the rise of automated labor and the displacement of the blue-collar workforce. **DOES NOT WANT:** In fiction, I don't represent romance (including romantasy) or police procedurals and military stories. In nonfiction, I don't represent poetry, business books, or true crime. I also tend to avoid illustrated projects, such as graphic novels and cookbooks.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES: All projects can be submitted via QueryManager (QueryManager.com/jaredjohnson). For fiction, alongside the pitch letter, I ask for the first 20 pages of the manuscript, as well as a brief synopsis of the manuscript. For nonfiction, I ask for a full proposal and a sample chapter. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** Since agents receive such a high volume of queries, reading queries can at times become monotonous, so I love getting a bit of personal information about the author behind the query letter. Does your project have a personal connection to your own life? Is your main character inspired by your pet? Did you decide to write your actual pet into your story? (This is a real example, and I decided to represent that story!) If so, share that in your letter. On a practical level, I appreciate when authors choose strong comp titles that set up clear expectations for the tone of the manuscript. They don't even have to be book titles. I recently offered representation to an author whose story was about a husband who comes out to his wife of 17 years at a Comic-Con right before a weekend of meeting fans of their long-running children's show. They pitched it as "Grace and Frankie" meets "The Muppets"—it

was a perfect pairing; I immediately understood the overlap and was able to match my expectations to the narrative.

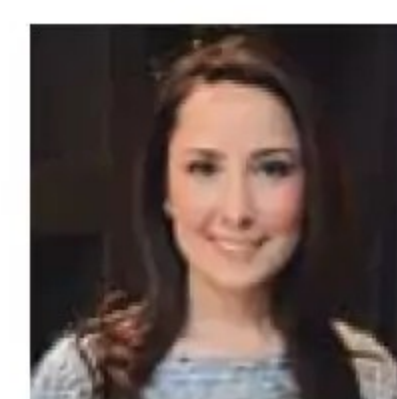


Jessica Larios-Zarate (She/Her/Hers; Dear Jessica)

Wave Literary
BERKELEY, CALIF.
WAVELITERARY.COM
BLUESKY: @JESSICA-LZ
.BSKY.SOCIAL

FICTION INTERESTS: Commercial, upmarket, and literary fiction across all genres, YA and older. I am particularly invested in stories that feature: LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, neurodivergent, and/or disabled protagonists, especially when the books are not issue-driven. I love multifaceted, slow burn romances, and I'm of the belief that no trope is ever too tired or overused. Please give me: hate-to-love, "and they were roommates," fake relationships, and/or meet disasters. My tastes tend to reside in the darker side of the tonal spectrum, and I love all variants of the horror genre, such as psychological thrillers, gothic horrors, supernatural horrors, and socially conscious thrillers. Above all, I am an eclectic reader, and I adore books when they make me laugh, cry, and/or swoon. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** I am seeking ancient history, civil rights movements, indigenous history, and LGBTQIA+ history. I love nature and zoology—if you are a felinologist, please reach out to me! **RECENT SALES:** Announcements are coming soon. **DOES NOT WANT:** I am not the best fit for children's books, police procedural mysteries, detective fiction, high fantasy, hard

science fiction, and historical fiction (unless there is a speculative twist). I am also not the best fit for religion, memoir, sports, diet, poetry, screenplays, and war history. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Please refer to our website's instructions at WaveLiterary.com/services. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I would encourage everyone not to underestimate the power of well-chosen and carefully researched comparative titles. As soon as I see comps that are NYT-bestselling books written within the last 3–5 years, then that automatically elevates your query to me because it shows that you have researched where this book would fit on shelves and that you're thinking like a business partner. Additionally, I welcome nontraditional comps in the form of successful TV shows and/or movies that have done well recently because it'll give me an idea of where the book would fit in the broader cultural conversation.



Cecilia "CeCe" Lyra (she/her)
P.S. Literary Agency
PSLITERARY.COM
X: @CECILIACLRYA

FICTION INTERESTS: I am eager to review submissions in all genres in the adult fiction category. My sweet spot is upmarket fiction: propulsive plot with strong writing on the level of the line. My taste is eclectic: I adore feel-good stories filled with levity and humor and dark novels that unsettle and disturb. I am drawn to intelligent protagonists facing high-pressure situations. If your story explores power dynamics in a compelling and fresh way, then I might be the

agent for you. I'm especially on the lookout for literary mysteries in the vein of *The God of the Woods* by Liz Moore, darkly funny book club fiction such as *The Bandit Queens* by Parini Shroff, historical fiction with a feminist bent such as *Weyward* by Emilia Hart, and genre mashups such as *Vampires of El Norte* by Isabel Cañas. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** I am actively seeking well-researched, expert-led proposals in the adult nonfiction category. No title is too serious or too accessible for my taste. I am a fan of books with provocative through-lines that culminate in paradigm-shifting takeaways. I am especially drawn to narratives that expose what is hidden in plain sight, whether it's an untold story, the unseen side of things we think we know everything about, and/or project that reveal unexpected and enlightening patterns and connections. Social psychology is perhaps my favorite field, so I'm especially keen on hearing from sought-after experts in this space. **RECENT SALES:** I am particularly excited about *You, Your Husband, and His Mother* by Dr. Tracy Dalglish (November 2025). As a sought-after couple's therapist, Dr. Dalglish is used to listening to her clients' marital strife, and, as it turns out, the most common source of conflict reported by women involves dealing with their mothers-in-law. (People think the top culprits are money and infidelity, but that's only because discussing in-laws is considered even more taboo!) We all know that a key part of being happy is cultivating healthy relationships, and this book provides an essential toolkit to help readers navigate conflicts involving one's

romantic partner and their family of origin. **DOES NOT WANT:** I don't represent YA or children's books. I'm always hesitant to say what I don't want because I love being surprised by something I didn't think I wanted, but as it turns out, I did. If a story is well-crafted and well-written, then I am interested in reading it. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Submissions should be directed to the agency's query inbox (query@psliterary.com) with my name in the subject line. In addition to your query letter, please paste a sample of the first 10 pages of your manuscript or proposal in the body of the email (no attachments). If you don't hear back within six weeks, it is a no from the entire agency. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I am honored to be queried by writers and personally review each submission I receive. My advice is to keep it simple. A query letter should include your book's metadata (title, word count, comps, and hook), the story's arc up until the climax (what does your protagonist want, what's standing in their way, and what happens if they don't get it?), and one or two sentences about you (where you live and what kind of pet you have can be enough). As much as the query letter matters, what matters most is the quality of your first pages. Was I curious after reading your sample material? If the answer is yes, then I'll request a full manuscript. While I cannot offer feedback on each email I receive, I review query letters submitted to the podcast of which I am a co-host, "The Sh*t No One Tells You About Writing," with the goal of helping all writers improve their submission packages.



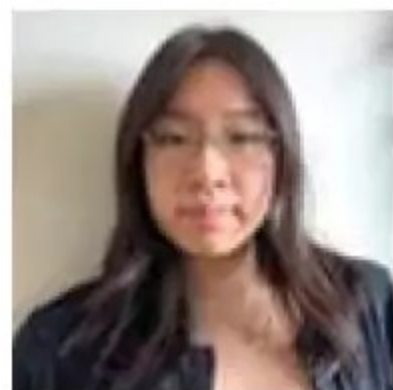
Allegra Martschenko
(they/them; Dear Allegra)
BookEnds Literary
Agency
NEW JERSEY
BOOKENDSLITERARY.COM
IG: @ALLEGRAMARTSCH

FICTION INTERESTS: I represent YA, new adult, and adult speculative fiction in the broadest definition of the term—from science fiction to fantasy, to only the very lightly fantastical. Within the broad umbrella, I do everything; low, high, contemporary, epic, near or distant future, fabulism, urban (though I tend to prefer noncontemporary urban, or urban outside the West). I want to see it all! What's most important are rich worlds and fully realized characters. Your characters should have undeniable magnetism (even if they're unlikeable or very morally gray). I particularly enjoy gorgeous prose that makes me contemplate the beauty of language, but I am just as open to less elaborate line-level writing. I want ambitious, thematically complex projects whose magic/mystery helps us understand real-world issues. **RECENT SALES:** My client R. A. Basu has a fantastic, scheming political fantasy, *To Bargain With Mortals*, that releases October 28. I also sold T. R. Moore's *The Gods Must Burn*, a *Princess Mononoke*-esque dark fantasy novel with a central romance that made me incredibly emotional. It releases January 2026. Finally, I'll highlight *My Keen Knife* [by Ana Davis], a YA *Macbeth* retelling that comes out October 14 and truly blew me out of the water with its morally

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gray, scheming characters. **DOES NOT WANT:** I don't have hard nos, so you can try me with anything, but I'm a harder sell on books about fertility or pregnancy, portal/split realm books, cop books, D&D-style races (orcs, goblins, elves), books set at a magic school/featuring a school, stories centering around a trial or tournament, books with talking animals (unless they are Indigenous stories), books set in reality show environments, superheroes, WWI or WWII books, dream heavy/dream centric books, books featuring witches, Greco-Roman myths (unless you are a Greek writer; I'm less interested in full-on retellings, but appreciate myth/history as inspiration), and dystopians centering around an evil government facility. I'm also not usually into haunted house stories or ghosts unless there's some major twist, and I'm a slightly harder sell on monarchy books in YA specifically. Again, you can try me with any of these, but keep your hopes lower. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** I only accept queries through my QueryManager, and I am only open to queries from marginalized writers. My QueryManager link is: QueryTracker.net/query/AMartschenko. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I'll always be most compelled by a clear vision, and I can see that in the query letter or opening pages. When you know clearly who your audience is and what it is you're trying to explore in your writing, it shines through in your pages. Lean into whatever you do best and try to distill the book's purpose down to as few lines as possible to get at the heart of what the book is about. A really well-crafted query that does this gets my attention immediately, and beyond that, I find I connect

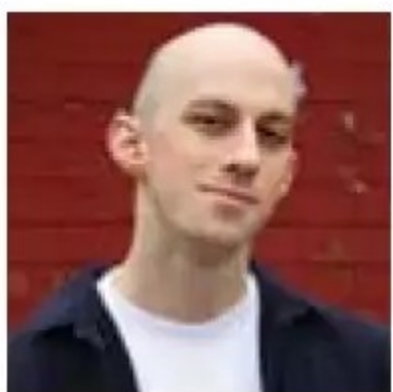
with authors best when I can see what they're aiming for and know exactly how to get them there. Edits don't intimidate me, so long as we both know what the light at the end of the tunnel is.



Clare Mao
(she/her)
Sanford J.
Greenburger
Associates
NYC
GREENBURGER.COM

FICTION INTERESTS: I am seeking literary, book club, upmarket, and selective commercial fiction for adult audiences only. I'm looking for great character work, a distinctive POV, and a strong sense of place. Above all, I am looking for excellent prose on the line and dialogue level. I like novels set in cities that are not New York, novels that "take you to work" in an interesting field, family stories, and novels that have a magical element. I'm a big fan of love stories in general, with a soft spot for rom-coms that spin a trope on its head. I am always seeking work by marginalized authors. Most importantly, I want to represent writers who are having fun. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** In illustrated: cookbooks, photo books with a strong literary/storytelling component, and, very selectively, graphic works for adults. I also enjoy narrative nonfiction, mainly memoirs and essay collections. I am actively looking for cultural criticism, food writing, and writing about the environment, community, and building solidarity. I want to work with writers who are curious, critical, thoughtful, knowledgeable, and passionate

about their field. In nonfiction, I am always looking for the holy trinity of voice, platform, and expertise, though I will take two out of three. **RECENT SALES:** *Bad Words* by Ríoghnach Robinson, an upmarket romance that is equal parts Emily Henry and Nora Ephron, about the feud between a writer and a critic, and what happens when they start to fall in love (St. Martin's Press). *Feast Your Eyes* by Noreen Wasti, a stunning, maximalist cookbook and guide to cooking and hosting, informed by the author's Pakistani heritage (Chronicle). **DOES NOT WANT:** Children's, MG, and YA. Sci-fi/fantasy, horror, thrillers, mysteries, procedurals, etc. I am also generally not the right fit for historical fiction, though I don't mind if a portion of the book takes place in another era. While I represent some poets, please do not send me poetry submissions. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** You can email me at cmao@sjga.com with the subject line "Query—project title." In the body of your email, include your query letter and the first three chapters if it is fiction, or attach a proposal if it is nonfiction. Please notify me if you receive another offer of representation. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** A touch of personalization in the first paragraph goes a long way—maybe call out an author I work with, specific interests I noted in my submissions guidelines, or even how you found me and why you're querying me, specifically. Anything that shows you did your research. For example, I signed and sold the book of a client who found me because we graduated from the same high school—her calling that out in the subject line definitely caught my attention!



**Eloy Bleifuss
Prados (he/him;
Hon: Mr.)**

**Neon Literary
NYC
NEONLITERARY.COM
X: ELOY_BP**

FICTION INTERESTS: I'm always open to debut fiction with a speculative or high-concept twist, propulsive literary thrillers and mysteries, and atmospheric horror. I'm also looking for fantasy and sci-fi writers who can balance world-building with emotional, character-driven storytelling. No matter the genre, I am always open to queer fiction in all its many forms, and the weirder the better. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** I love working with journalists, academics, and other experts, so I'm looking to sign thoughtful nonfiction on current events, history, science, and pop culture. I also have a soft spot for micro-histories or biographies of forgotten events and peoples. I'd also be interested in hearing from you if you have a platform and are working on an illustrated or humor book. **RECENT SALES:** *Tramps Like Us* by Joe Westmoreland, *Nerve Damage* by Annakeara Stinson, *House of Hands* by Luke Larkin, *Migratory Creatures* by Jennifer Yeh, *Vampire Menstrual Syndrome* by S.C. Hunter. **DOES NOT WANT:** I don't rep YA/children's lit. I struggle with most dystopian or post-apocalyptic narratives. I don't care for thrillers involving the CIA, FBI, or other federal acronyms. To my shame and discredit, I have no ear for poetry. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Send a query letter and the first 10 pages of your manuscript to submissions@neonliterary.com. Paste all material in the body

of the email and be sure to include my name in the subject line. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I always look to what comps a writer picks, because that helps me tell if they are reading recent contemporary literature and understand the conversation happening in the landscape right now. If you can clearly articulate how your book would be in dialogue with other authors from the past few years, that gets my attention.



**Whitney Ross
(she/her)**

**High Line Literary
Collective
NYC
HIGHLINELITERARY.COM**

FICTION INTERESTS: Commercial fiction in the areas of MG, YA, and adult, and across genres—fantasy, science fiction, historical, romance, mysteries, thrillers, and more. I always enjoy retellings of classics with a twist, threads of romance, lyrical writing and unique premises, diverse settings and POVs, and whimsical and heartfelt stories. Strong writing is essential, but ultimately, the story and character will carry me through. And I love a good escapist read! **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** Design, fashion, and cooking that feel both timeless and unique. New insight into current trends, studies of classics refreshed, fresh voices, and new perspectives. **RECENT SALES:** *The Oxford Guide to Scandal and Lies* by Kate Hundscheid, *The Greening Court* duology by Hannah Whitten, *The Fisher King* by Sarah K. L. Wilson, *Such a Witch* by Sarah Henning. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** You can reach me through QueryTracker at

QueryTracker.net/query/whitneyross. I'm looking forward to reading your query! **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** First and foremost, follow the query guidelines! That shows us professionalism and intention. I also really appreciate a personal nod to my wish list, showing why your manuscript will specifically appeal to me. My top two tips to help a query stand out: When creating your query, it helps to craft it around the hook/tagline that encapsulates your story. How can you describe your story in a way that gives me the atmosphere and the audience in one line? “___ meets ___ by way of ___”—it can be a movie, TV show, book, anything. Just to give us a feel. Then, the importance of your first page and that first line can't be underestimated. Personally, I don't love starting a book with a question or so solidly in medias res that we aren't yet attached enough to the character to care about their dire circumstances.



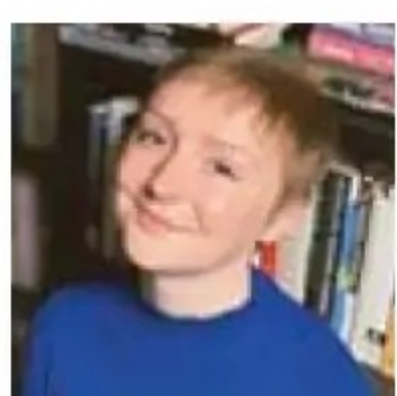
**Mason Rowlee
(he/him)**

**DeFiore & Company
NYC
DEFLITERARY.COM
BLUESKY: @MASON
ROWLEE.BSKY.SOCIAL**

FICTION INTERESTS: I'm interested in innovative, boundary-pushing literary fiction and engrossing upmarket fiction from writers who are underrepresented in mainstream publishing. I love big family sagas, coming-of-age stories, and wild concepts played out in fascinating ways, especially those written by or about LGBTQ+ people. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** I'm open to a wide range of nonfiction: memoir,

The Art of Making Connections in Storytelling

history, investigative journalism, pop culture, psychology, and science, to name a few. I would love to see proposals that bring refreshing perspectives to widely covered topics, fascinating memoirs, and biographies that spotlight underappreciated folks throughout history. **DOES NOT WANT:** PB, MG, high-concept fantasy, poetry, and screenplays. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Send a brief email describing yourself and your project to mason@defliterary.com with the first five pages of your manuscript or proposal pasted in the body of an email. No attachments, please. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I get most excited by queries that are bold and make me excited to read the manuscript from the first few sentences. If you are interested in writing something with an outlandish concept or a literary voice that will blow me away, I would love to see that reflected stylistically in the query letter. My biggest tip to querying writers is to think critically about your comparative titles: read them, find what makes your book distinct from those, and show me in the pitch why your book offers them a run for their money.



Lauren Scovel
(she/her; Hon: Ms.)

Laura Gross Literary Agency
BOSTON
LG-LA.COM
BLUESKY: @LMSCOVEL
.BSKY.SOCIAL

FICTION INTERESTS: In the adult space, I am looking primarily for literary/upmarket crossover fiction: projects that have a high-concept, propulsive plot with a literary execution. I'm looking for timely stories and always

want to hear from underrepresented writers. I love considering projects that are a little off-beat, speculative, or queer, as well as stories aimed at a millennial audience. My interest is piqued by anything featuring ghosts, theater kids, or shipwrecks. I am also looking for contemporary kids' books (MG & YA) with a similar cross-over execution, aimed at reaching kids who haven't yet seen their stories reflected in children's literature.

NONFICTION INTERESTS: I am looking for narrative nonfiction, especially by journalists telling an immersive, singular story. I am open to memoir if it has a broader element of reportage bolstering the author's personal story. I am always intrigued by internet or sub-culture deep dives, contemporary cultural criticism, or any story that is stranger-than-fiction. In MG & YA, I'm interested in story- and character-driven approaches to LGBTQ+ and STEM subject matter. **RECENT SALES:** *Lucky Girl* by Allie Tagle-Dokus (Tin House), a darkly funny, coming-of-age debut novel about the rise and fall of a reality show dance prodigy; *Just Lizzie* by Karen Wilfrid (Clarion/HarperCollins), a contemporary MG about an eighth grader whose study of asexual reproduction in science class leads her to understand and advocate for her own asexual identity. **DOES NOT WANT:** Genre fiction (mystery/thriller, sci-fi/fantasy, historical), serious nonfiction (biographies, histories), poetry, or text-only PBs. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** I accept queries via QueryManager from the 1st–7th of each month, unless otherwise noted (QueryTracker.net/query/lmscovel). Please do not email me queries! **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I am always thinking about timeliness and authority when I read my queries: Why do we need this book right

now, and why do we need it from this writer? I also appreciate when an author notes why they queried me, either because they read a book I represent, or noted something on my Manuscript Wish List that aligns with their work. Finally, I engage best with a properly formatted query, with the plot description reading like the back of a published book.



Aiden Siobhan
(they/them; Hon: Mx.)

Laura Dail Literary Agency
FORT WORTH, TEXAS;
NYC
LDLAINC.COM
BLUESKY: @AIDEN-PNG
.BSKY.SOCIAL

FICTION INTERESTS: I am seeking prose and graphic MG, YA, and adult novels of fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, and commercial genre blends, including historical, mystery, and gothic. I love lush settings, retellings, and sociopolitical themes. Diverse perspectives are the biggest draw for me in any work. **DOES NOT WANT:** I am not looking for pro-war narratives or books starring police officers, and I do not represent poetry, short stories, or screenplays. I am not the best fit for books with talking animals, contemporary fiction, or alpha male romance. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Please send your query letter and first chapter via QueryManager at QueryTracker.net/query/asiobhan. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** I connect best with queries that dive straight into the story. Hook me with your novel's drama, action, and characters who leap off the page! The writers who stand out most to me are those who draw from personal

experience to bring authenticity and depth to their stories. I want to connect with authors through their writing—when a writer’s voice and passion come through on the page, it feels like getting to know them. Writing a novel is deeply personal, and the best work leaves traces of the author’s heart between the lines.



Hailey Stephens
(she/her/hers;
Dear Hailey)

Rosecliff Literary

NORMAL, IL

ROSECLIFFLITERARY.COM

INSTAGRAM: @HAYMAY100

FICTION INTERESTS: I’m only looking for adult novels, but I’ll selectively take on MG fiction if the manuscript will inspire a passion for reading the way books like *Fablehaven* by Brandon Mull and *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* by Rick Riordan did for young me. I’d also love to champion authors from rural areas, especially authors from BIPOC, LGBTQ+, neurodivergent, and/or any other community that tends to be overlooked in rural areas. For literary, upmarket, and contemporary fiction, I want vivid stories that pull the reader in right away, immersing them in the work the author has created. I would love to champion works as devastatingly honest and impactful as *Rootless* by Krystle Zara Appiah, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *The Wedding People* by Alison Espach. For thriller, suspense, and horror, I want stories that linger in the corners of the mind. I want manuscripts that get hearts and minds racing, but they should not ever include gratuitous violence or gore. I will also selectively take on adult romance,

and am hopeful there are still love story tropes out there that can be discovered or re-explored in a way that redefines the genre. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** Both trade and literary proposals. I’m especially interested in memoirs that play with the concept of time and structure, like *Evidence of V* by Sheila O’Connor, and *Dear Memory* by Victoria Chang. I would also be interested in cookbooks of all kinds. I won’t say no to taking a look at any project that is centered around sustainability, accessibility, and actionable change, no matter the format! **DOES NOT WANT:** Poetry, picture books, children’s books, erotica/romances where being “spicy” is one of the main draws, historical fiction, YA fiction, legal or police procedurals, fantasy. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Only query me with finished manuscripts and/or proposals that have been critiqued and revised. It doesn’t have to be professionally edited, but it should be as polished as it can be before I see it! All submissions should include a query letter, synopsis, elevator pitch, and the first three chapters of the manuscript or a full proposal. The genre and word count must be included. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** If I can tell that you’ve taken time to look me up and learn what I’m really hoping to find, then you’ve already taken a big step in showing me you’re serious and intentional about your work.



Henry Thayer

Brandt & Hochman

NYC

BRANDTHOCHMAN.COM

FICTION INTERESTS: I focus on representing nonfiction but can occasionally find myself tempted by a novel, usually something literary

but accessible with an original voice and/or something that bridges the literary/genre divide. **NONFICTION INTERESTS:** I love to hear from experts who find there’s something in their field that everyone else gets wrong. I am open to nonfiction of nearly all kinds, especially history, biography, politics, current affairs, international relations, the arts and sciences, sports, and popular culture. I also have a keen interest in writing about music. **RECENT SALES:** Will Freeman’s untitled book on democracy and organized crime in Latin America; Robert D. Kaplan’s *China Whisperers* about the Americans who have shaped U.S./China policy over the last 100 years; Robert O’Connell’s *The Ten Thousand* retelling Xenophon’s classic *Anabasis*; David M. Sacks’s *The Realist*, the first biography of the political scientist Hans Morgenthau. **DOES NOT WANT:** I would never say never to any category, but I am probably not your man for self-help, romance, or fantasy. **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:** Please email your query letter—and no attachments—to hthayer@bromasite.com. **TIPS FOR QUERYING ME:** My only advice for querying: Approach it like an art form. If you can write a good book, you can write a good query letter. You’re not filling out a form at the DMV. You’re writing a love letter. Be charming! **WD**

Amy Jones is editor-in-chief of WD. Follow her on Instagram @AmyMJones_5.



The Mid-Career Query

If you've had some publishing
experience without an agent, is it
worth it to try to find one mid-career?

By Zachary Petit

Who's your agent?"

I winced. But the question was innocent enough, if not obvious enough: In the wake of two other books over the past decade, I had just released a new title in Bloomsbury's cult-favorite 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ music series. And by "cult-favorite," I mean a line of books with the nichest of niche readerships—and thus the most modest of modest advances.

"I don't have one," I said, playing it cool. "All of the books I've done have had small advances, so I've never really tried to get one."

My friend—a fellow writer with a dozen books under her belt—stared at me, eyebrow raised.

"You know," she said, "there might be a reason your advances have been small ..."

I laughed and changed the topic, as I tend to do when confronted with (uncomfortable!) truths ... especially when said uncomfortable truth concerns something I've spent the better part of the past 15 or so years avoiding. No matter where you're at in your publishing journey, agents can be a daunting part of the industry—yet another hurdle to clear, in an ecosystem already beset with hurdles. There's the exhaustion factor: I know I can write this—how many more gatekeepers do I need to convince?! The (seemingly) practical factor: Are my deals even enough to be able to share 15 percent of them?! The rejection factor: I've been working in this industry for a while—what if they think I'm a charlatan?!

Rather than deal with it all, I just dealt with publishers directly, in various ways. But in the process, I've long wondered how much money, rights, and all things beyond I've been leaving on the table by staying solo.

So, for this annual issue of WD, I decided to ask a trio of stellar agents just that. More specifically: Should unagented midcareer writers with a book or two on their résumés, or a bio filled with short stories, articles, etc., be working with a rep? And if so, how should they go about getting one?

Ray Bradbury famously said, "You've got to jump off the cliff all the time and build your wings on the way down." Which is what I've been doing.

But guess who (obviously) had an agent?

Ray Bradbury.

Unsurprisingly, the agents interviewed for this piece champion their profession of championing writers—and largely agree that an agent can be a boon for any experienced unrepresented author looking to take their career to new heights. Here's why.

The contract.

When you get an offer on a book, it'll come with a contract of varying quality. And no matter how savvy you are with contracts, there's someone savvier: an agent.

"The contract! Oh my gosh, so much can go wrong with the contract," says Jessica Sinsheimer, agent at Context Literary and co-creator of Manuscript Wish List. Specifically, she cites subsidiary rights—e.g., translations, adaptations, audiobooks, and so on. "It's incredibly difficult for a writer to broker those deals."

To that end, Michael Bourret, partner at Dystel, Goderich & Bourret LLC, says that even attorneys can fall short of the finer points of a solid deal.

"Unless those are very specific publishing lawyers who know publishing contracts very well, those lawyers honestly don't know the right questions to ask," he says. "Having that breadth of experience is what allows us to have a different look at things than what an author can have on their own."

Moreover, to Bourret, what an agent truly offers is perspective. Having done so many deals over the years, they know what's possible in a negotiation. "For a writer who doesn't have that information, you can very easily be underselling yourself—or, on the other hand, maybe overselling yourself."

The money.

As writers, we do what we do for myriad reasons, and a career in publishing ain't all about money. But if you've ever had to unexpectedly repair a faulty foundation on your house, it sure as hell might suddenly seem like it is. Bourret says that, in general, writers with agents get higher advances. In fact, he adds, publishers implicitly

understand that they have to pay a bit more when an agent is involved: “When I go into those negotiations, even with a smaller publisher, I’m looking to hopefully pay for myself, right? I’m hoping to extract enough out of the situation where my author is actually making more money in the end, while also having the benefit of my skills and expertise.”

Afraid your deal is too small to warrant handing over 15 percent of it to an agent, as I have been in the past? “Getting it up enough to cover the agent’s commission is typically not that difficult,” Bourret says.

Agents amplify.

As a self-employed solo writer, I’m my own literary rep, accountant, financial advisor (or lack thereof), and janitor. And when I’m doing any one of those tasks, the one thing I’m not doing is writing. When I haven’t been paid a royalty that’s due, it is thus on me to sort it out—and Bourret says agents carry extra weight in such crucial conversations. Even though a publisher may not care if they ever work with a given writer again, they don’t want to lose an entire agency’s portfolio, so that response is likely to come sooner rather than later (which is great when you’re trying to stop your house from quite literally sinking into the ground).

Sinsheimer adds that editors’ time is finite and often stretched thin—and repped writers tend to have more leverage within that space.

Agents bifurcate.

Katharine Sands, an agent at Sarah Jane Freymann Literary Agency, represented herself on a book deal. And, well, she likely regrets it. “You know, the level of emotional reaction, it almost surprised me. I mean, I worried about everything I ever told a writer not to worry about,” she says. “I was wailing half the time.” Agents offer a buffer—one that even a career agent can benefit from. As much as we might pretend we can divorce the practical from the personal, writing is a deeply human craft, and it’s easy to lose the plot (even when it’s yours).

Everything else.

Of course, all of the other benefits of having an agent apply regardless of what you’ve published. Bad at conflict? An agent conflicts for you. Need thoughts and

advice on your manuscript? An agent is there with a red—or green, if that seems less scary—pen. Need help sorting your next career move? An agent careers with you. Bad at touting yourself? Agents aren’t. And ultimately, they are there exclusively for you—something you don’t have when working a deal yourself.

“What I really like about the agent-author relationship is that you have two people who are working toward the same goals and who are on the same side,” Bourret says. “Your editor is working for the publishing company. As much as they might like you, as much as they might champion your work within that company, in the end, they answer to somebody. Agents answer to their clients.”

So. What do you want?

If you’re seeking an agent, there’s a good chance you’re looking to level your career up—with a bigger book, a bigger authorial presence, and so on. As Sands notes, an anthology or poetry collection does not face the same scrutiny as a front-list book. The events. The PR. Are you truly prepared for the job and everything that comes with it?

“You have to be ready for each level of publishing,” Sands says. “And I can’t stress how much it is a job.”

Bourret adds that experienced writers who have not worked with an agent before should take an honest look at the prospective relationship—“to be able to articulate to the agent what it is that they need, what sort of support they’re looking to get, what changes they’re looking to make, and to have an idea of why they think bringing an agent on is the thing that is going to help them get to that point.”

If you’ve pondered that progression and are ready to take the plunge, here are a few things to know.

You’ve got extra arrows in your query quiver.

Just because you’ve published a few things doesn’t mean that you get to skip the line and escape the query process entirely—but it does add some compelling bonus points to your pitch. Notably, “What you have is something to point to, to say, ‘hey, I can write a book because I’ve already written one’—which automatically puts you in a different category,” Bourret says. “I do take a closer look, because I have at least some belief that they have the skills necessary to get it done.”

For Sinsheimer, it means that you're not starting from zero with your publishing education—and that matters in an industry with a steep learning curve.

Of course, there is indeed a potential downside to having already been published ...

BookScan doesn't lie.

If your pitch is compelling, the first thing an agent is likely to do is pop your name into Circana BookScan and check how your past books have sold. And that can be a highly determinative factor for a publishing house. Sands recalls a conference dinner where she debated with an editor that an author might hit on their third or fourth book instead of their first for various reasons—how many copies were printed, the political climate at the publishing house, and so on.

Per Bourret, there are ways for an agent to create a narrative around lower numbers. For instance, that an author was with a smaller publishing house with limited resources, and for that publisher, their book in fact did well. With better distribution and better resources, the possibilities are that much greater for said author.

Sands made a similar point during our interview—and perhaps struck at the heart of publishing at large.

“From an agent point of view, I have a tremendous hunger to discover new voices, new talents. And yes, a book can come out and sink like a stone, but if the writer has something special ... it could be their wordsmithing, or their imagination, or their ability to create a world or to bring a character to life ... I have to absolutely believe, if I'm in play, that that writer's got something and somebody's going to see that.”

Ultimately, the agents interviewed for this piece noted that numbers aren't the only deciding factor—they also take into account reviews, platform and reach, awards, speaking gigs, if a book is positioned to reach a larger audience, and more.

Another crucial factor: “Personality, of course,” Sinsheimer says. “We need to be able to collaborate creatively, which is actually a pretty rare dynamic—the editorial process is full of abstract concepts you can only talk *around*, and you need to have someone who speaks almost the language between the words with you. Plus, they have to have a growth mindset, be open to edits (or alternatives to edits that accomplish the same thing),

take well-meant criticism gracefully, be kind to editors, and generally be good human beings.”

Coming to an agent with a deal in progress can be a mixed bag.

You may be tempted to reach out to an agent with a deal in progress that you worked on your own, seeing it as, A) a way to get some professional eyes on a contract, and, moreover, B) a lazy hack to land an agent. But Sands says that's tricky, because an agent is a bit handcuffed in terms of how effective they can be when the architecture of the deal is already in place.

Bourret adds that the timing can be tough—having to do a sizable internal download of the book, the contract, the author and more in a tight turnaround—but the key is that he and the client would not only be a good pair for the particular book in hand, but books beyond.

“We're not looking to negotiate one deal. We're hoping that this is a long-term relationship across several books.”

It's probably not the best idea to free solo one's career.

Ultimately, as Sinsheimer put it, “The author-agent relationship is so complicated. You're trusting someone not only with your career and contracts and future partnerships but also to help navigate the many creative choices you have as a writer. You'll always do your best creative work if you feel safe. You'll take more risks, try new things, follow what inspires you—even if you can't ‘prove’ it'll work before you try.”

And, well, that is utterly appealing after years of toiling away at my desk with nothing more than my greyhound looking on.

“*Who's your agent?*” I don't know. But it's probably time I found out. **WD**

Zachary Petit is an award-winning journalist, a contributing writer for *Fast Company*, and the author of *The Moon & Antarctica* (Bloomsbury), *The Essential Guide to Freelance Writing* (Penguin Random House), and more. He does not have an agent.



Collaborating With Your Reader

How to create
the scaffolding readers
need to enter your story.

By Peter Mountford



IMAGE © GETTY IMAGES: CIENPIES

Here's a pet theory: A book never read is, by definition, incomplete. This sounds like a philosophical problem—a book falls in the woods ... —but I'd argue it's *literally* true.

Writing is a collaborative art form between writer and reader. The writing itself is just words on pages. It's not a finished experience. The reader uses their own imagination to complete this process. The story almost literally comes alive within their mind. This is why we, as readers, become attached to characters—we feel they're now part of our lives.

It's a kind of magic trick. But crucially, we're not casting a spell over our reader. We're helping them cast a spell over themselves.

The snag is—and this is why writing requires skill—if we don't provide our reader with the right stuff (pick your metaphor: scaffolding or ingredients for this spell), they can't do their part of the collaboration. Just because you, the writer, can see what's going on in your head, doesn't mean that your reader can. Readers easily get confused, are unable to picture situations, can't understand the characters, and ultimately feel nothing.

Anticipating your reader's experience, moment by moment, as they move through your sentences is crucial. You have to know what exactly they will need and when they need it. This is, no exaggeration, the most important skill for a writer.

This might sound daunting, but it's not. How do we, as writers, help our readers in this magical process? Here are some ground rules I use to help my students and coaching clients.

The Physical World Is Hard to Guess

Writers often want to create a cinematic experience for their readers, but what they end up writing is similar to a screenplay (lots of dialogue, not a lot of setting). However, if you've ever read a screenplay, you know reading a script is not actually similar to watching a movie. Which is why people don't often buy screenplays, but they do like to watch TV shows and movies.

One of the crucial differences between a screenplay and a movie is in the creation of a physical world. On screen, the camera captures the space (setting), often with an establishing shot, and it picks up clothing, facial expressions, characters' overall appearance—it shows “blocking”

(i.e., where the character is in the space, and if they're moving around the space). And I haven't even mentioned sound yet! Usually, before a character has opened their mouth to speak, the viewer has been given a huge amount of information about the people and the setting.

As writers, we don't have the shortcut of a camera and a microphone, so we have to actually describe all of that stuff if we want the reader to be able to do their part of this collaboration.

Hence the opening of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*:

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair.

By the end of that paragraph, we know something unsettling is happening, but we can also see and smell the place—multiple senses are always helpful in setting. We're already there with the character, even if we don't know who she is yet.

This need for description is also true of people. Have a look at the opening of Ann Patchett's *Commonwealth*, which begins with an extraordinarily complex party scene. Patchett masterfully manages the space, while deftly describing lots of people, and handling the very complex blocking (i.e., all these people moving around the party). Not an easy way to start a book, but she pulls it off with style. Of course, she starts by dangling conflict in front of the reader: “The christening party took a turn when Albert Cousins arrived with gin.”

PRO TIP: Quick and effective setting is especially important in speculative and historical fiction, where getting a reader grounded in the world is of the utmost importance. This can seem laborious, but often these physical spaces are hard to picture, and in order for the reader to “enter” the space, some very specific descriptions are needed.

Conflict and Tension First

This might seem obvious, but a surprising number of people accidentally hide the source of tension in their story. Your reader *wants* to be engaged, but they won't be able to figure out what's wrong (the problem/conflict/tension) in this character's life unless you make it clear.

In Hitchcock's famous description of how suspense works, he describes a group of men sitting around a table talking about baseball (*yawn*, no offense!), and then suddenly the table blows up. That would be *surprising* to the viewer, but there was no suspense.

Try again, but this time, before the men even sit down, the camera shows the viewer that there's a time bomb under their table. Now, as they talk about baseball, we're riveted, hoping that one of them will discover this bomb and alert the others, or something will happen to avert the crisis, or we're wondering if one of them already knows. We're leaning in.

The point is that the *information* which creates tension (a bomb under the table, or, say, that Grandma, a fancy lawyer, has helped a client commit a crime, and is now under investigation by the FBI) should be unambiguously visible to your reader as early as possible. The first sentence is a great place to put your source of tension. In *The Hunger Games*, we're told in the first paragraph that it's the day of the "reaping," and while we don't initially know what that means, it doesn't sound pleasant.

Or, consider the opening of Lee Child's first Reacher novel, *Killing Floor*, which opens, "I was arrested in Eno's diner. At twelve o'clock. I was eating eggs and drinking coffee. A late breakfast, not lunch. I was wet and tired after a long walk in heavy rain." Now, I have questions (I always have questions at the opening of a Reacher novel), but I can definitely see Reacher's problem here.

PRO TIP: It's not necessary to introduce the main source of tension at the opening of your story, just a source of tension. A lot of mysteries do not open with the dead person, but instead focus on difficult (but lower-stakes) social problems—a quarrelling couple, or a detective who's in trouble at work. The reader knows that they're reading a mystery, so a dead person is forthcoming (that "bomb under the table"), and the reader is happy to focus on another form of drama, which will play alongside the mystery.

Let Your Narrator Tell Us What's Going On

Readers are smart in some ways, and not so smart in others. One strength: Readers pick up very subtle emotional

cues, a terse glance between two characters, and we remember what we noticed for a remarkably long time.

A lot of writers want to be subtle, which is admirable. But the strength of exposition is in managing information, so if you want to render the physical world and introduce tension, you probably have to let your narrator narrate. Put another way: Sometimes the best choice is to tell, not show.

For example, if you fail to just tell us that your characters are eating dinner on the patio, then we will be confused when they are all swatting mosquitoes at the dinner table (is a window open?). Likewise, if you don't tell us or show us that the grandmother in this family is a no-nonsense high-powered attorney, then we will be confused when she storms off to take a call from a client. *What kind of client?* we might understandably wonder.

Crucially, readers given large gaps in key information will tend to supply answers from their own imaginations. This is, after all, a collaboration. If you don't do your half of this work, your collaborator will do more than their half. Absent another explanation, we might decide the window is open and that the grandmother runs a real estate business, and we'll be annoyed and feel misled when we realize we were wrong on both counts.

If the narrator refuses to participate in direct exposition, the story first becomes confusing. Then the characters, as if now aware that they're in a story and a reader is perplexed, begin saying strange things in order to inform us (the readers they're not supposed to know about!) what's going on.

"It is nice out here on your patio, Grandma," said Debbie, "and I am glad you are sitting with us even though you are usually busy with your powerful clients, whom you help as a criminal attorney."

Please, no.

Let the narrator handle this job. A shy narrator will avoid telling or narrating, which will confuse the reader.

PRO TIP: Sprinkle tangible objects and vivid physical descriptions into your exposition to make it feel like you're showing, not telling, even though you're definitely telling. For example:

Betty Garrison—late-60s, lean, her silver hair cut short and immovable—regretted inviting her two children and five grandchildren to dinner. Her idiot client, Albert Moose, owner of rat-infested laundromats and a robust illegal gambling operation, had been arrested, and while she had made him promise not to utter a word to the police, he was not given to tremendous self-control.

The Hazards of Over-Description

To be sure, you can go overboard with any of this. And this is especially a hazard in science fiction, where, because of the complexity of your story's setting and (often) the unique social order of this invented society, there's a temptation to just go on and on about every aspect of the world's operation.

But again, you want to be a bit of a mind-reader for your reader, in order to collaborate effectively. And if you're paying attention, you'll notice at some point that the reader's mind is shutting down.

As always, you have to feel for your reader's limitations and stop before they cry mercy.

Instead of rendering the whole world, try to help the reader enter the exact space that the primary character is in during the opening scene—the cockpit of the spaceship, say, instead of the whole spaceship. The character isn't experiencing the whole spaceship, after all, they're looking at what's in front of them.

Ultimately, you want to get your reader just enough awareness to enter the story. The rest can come quite slowly. Again, consider *The Hunger Games*, where we're still learning crucial details of how the world operates throughout the first 100 pages.

In the End, Your Narrator's Personality Will Save You

All of the above is made vastly easier if you just trust your narrator's voice. Let their personality come forward. The previous description of Betty's "idiot client" lets us know that Betty is tough and smart, or a bit mean and condescending. This voice—or personality—will help your reader acclimate to the world that they're summoning with your help.

Consider the narrator we meet in the opening passage from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans*:

It was the summer of 1923, the summer I came down from Cambridge, when despite my aunt's wishes that I return to Shropshire, I decided my future lay in the capital and took up a small flat at Number 14b Bedford Gardens in Kensington. I remember it now as the most wonderful of summers. After years of being surrounded by fellows, both at school and at Cambridge, I took great pleasure in my own company.

By this point, I've figured out a lot about who this guy is, not based on much more than the personality and interests on display. Obviously, it's England, 1920s, but

we can also infer from the words chosen and the sentence style that our narrator is formal, ambitious, well educated, confident, but not wealthy.

This kind of closer narration—in third person or first person—is often quite a struggle for writers, because it involves allowing a narrator to talk to the reader instead of constantly hiding behind dialogue and action. But with a clear narrator, the reader learns so much and so quickly.

In Susanna Clarke's 2004 bestseller *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, narrated in third-person omniscient, the reader still gets a sense of the environment and characters by way of the voice:

Some years ago there was in the city of York a society of magicians. They met upon the third Wednesday of every month and read each other long, dull papers upon the history of English magic. They were gentleman-magicians, which is to say they had never harmed anyone by magic ...

Now, there's actual magic, and this story is set 100 years earlier than *When We Were Orphans*, but the formality and personality of this narrator, who considers the papers "dull," is vivid, and not unlike that of Ishiguro's narrator. And we can assume that this narrator shares some of this personality with the main characters.

Crucially, for the collaboration between writer and reader to work, writers must recognize that readers are astute in some ways (picking up on subtle emotional cues, monitoring subtle conflicts) and easily confused in others (e.g., keeping track of lots of characters, staying oriented in time and space).

Writing is about feeling the experiences, moment by moment, of your point-of-view character, almost inhabiting them. But at the same time, your mind is elsewhere, focused on the experience of your reader.

We're trying to mind-read in two directions at once: to enter our point-of-view character, and, at the same time, our reader. This is, surely, why writing requires so much concentration and is so engrossing. But ultimately, the writing exists for the reader, so we have to focus on them and help them do their part of this collaboration. **WD**

Peter Mountford (MountfordWriting.com) is a popular writing coach and developmental editor. His third book—after two award-winning novels—*Detonator*, a collection of stories, is out this fall. His essays and short fiction have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The New York Times* (Modern Love), *The Atlantic*, *The Sun*, *Granta*, and elsewhere.

Bridge Characters

What they are and how to create them to
advance your story, solve problems, and
engage your readers.

By Elizabeth Sims



IMAGE © GETTY IMAGES: CIENPIES

My grandmother had a rough life, raising six children during the Depression. She worked as a charwoman and sold radios door-to-door. I wish I could tell you she saved every nickel to feed the kids, but, well, some of it went to a different, strange purpose.

Now and then, she'd set off on foot to the fortune tellers in the city. They charged money, of course. My uncles considered that money wasted. My mother, however, understood, if only a little. No one knows what the fortune tellers said, but my mom sensed that they gave my grandma something of value.

What was it? Hope? Reassurance? Perhaps merely friendly company over a cup of tea, which would have been a respite from household chaos?

People said the fortune tellers could see into the future, and thereby help you navigate it to best advantage. They were *mediums*, serving as a bridge between bleak real life and something better. Mind you, no fortune teller worth her salt would agree with the doctor who just told you your cancer is inoperable. No! Things will get better. Maybe even miraculously!

When I read and write fiction, I often consider the bridge characters who populated the secret part of my grandma's life. And I think it would be good for writers to become more aware of the idea of bridge characters. When we examine something with intention and care, we can begin to see things we hadn't noticed before, and then we can make use of what we've learned.

To connect is to imply separation as a precondition. That right there is a cool thing to contemplate while we're chomping our morning coffee. How might we define a bridge character in fiction? Simply a character who spans two worlds, with some effect on the action and other characters. Let's first look at a handful of significant examples, grouped into a few common categories. (Ahead, as usual, you'll find a spoiler or two.)

THE PSYCHOPOMP: If you're unfamiliar with the term, it means a figure that transports the dead to the next world. The Valkyries of Norse mythology were badass women who rode their horses into the still-bloody battlefields and carried their fallen warriors to Valhalla, the home of the gods. The underworld, and the passage from life to death, figures large in mythologies and folklore everywhere. So much lovely symbolism!

Also study the Egyptian god Anubis, the Greek mythological boatman Charon (who ferried dead souls across the river Styx), the Slavic pagan goddess Morana.

THE ANIMAL: The horse in *The Red Pony* by John Steinbeck serves as a bridge between the ranch hand, Billy, and the young boy, Jody. They both love the pony; they get to know and love each other through the pony's life and death. The animal also facilitates Jody's grim realization that Billy, whom Jody idolized, can't fix everything. By extension, Jody learns (along with millions of traumatized young readers) that no hero is infallible. Animals can serve as powerful bridges between humans and a mystical world we don't understand, as well as between a human and that human's own emotions.

Also study the white whale in *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, Charlotte the spider in E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, the sextet of cats in *Kafka by the Shore* by Haruki Murakami.

THE OTHER-WORLDER: Dana in *Kindred* by Octavia Butler is an example of a bridge character who's also a main character. A modern African American woman, Dana unwittingly travels backward through time to a place where she is enslaved, spanning separate and vastly different worlds. (Yet the worlds are similar, in disturbing ways.) A beleaguered victim, she makes connections both literal and figurative, ultimately prevailing in the end.

Also study Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, HAL in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Valentine Michael Smith in *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert A. Heinlein.

THE MISSHAPEN/MISFIT: Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is half man and half monster, one of literature's original outcasts. Although he's the only native inhabitant of the island, he becomes subjugated by Prospero, the powerful newcomer. Caliban reflects and challenges the choices of the other characters, bridging different moral codes, sometimes clarifying, sometimes obscuring. A fascinating literary invention!

Also study Alberich in Richard Wagner's opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*, The Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo.

The Art of Making Connections in Storytelling

THE TEACHER: Teddy Lloyd in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark is an interesting bridge character, though Miss Brodie is more obvious, as she leads her young charges through her unconventional curriculum at Edinburgh's Blaine School. Mr. Lloyd, the handsome art teacher, serves as a conduit for several of the girls (especially Sandy) between adolescence and the adult world, full of dangerous beauty and sexual obsession. Teachers tend to educate their charges in multiple ways, connecting them to transformative knowledge and experience.

Also study Miss Kinnian in *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes, Botchan in *Botchan* by Natsume Sōseki, Fagin (one of my fave criminals!) in *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens.

Rock It Your Way

Bridge characters typically don't suggest themselves during the earliest stages of story development, because, well, until a connection is needed, you don't think of it. But they can inspire fresh ideas and solve lots of problems.

Get Them There

If you want to get a character to a place they can't reach on their own, consider a bridge character. Example: A respected judge has gotten in deep with gambling debts. He can't pay, and neither can he go and intimidate his creditors with a baseball bat. But one day, he adjudicates a case of a lowlife with connections to organized crime. He lets the guy off easy, then gets in touch to ask a return favor. One favor leads to another, one contact leads to another, one ethical breach leads to another. The lowlife serves as a convenient bridge between the judge's clean hands and the dirty world of the streets. Eventually, the judge might be *forced* to hit the streets to save his life or his family ... and it will feel real and compelling.

Create Tension

Bridge characters can be used to create tension. Here's a world. Here's somebody, all of a sudden, who doesn't seem to belong in this world. Hmm, why is that? What are they doing here? Maybe we shall see. No doubt we *will* see; I know and trust this author to play a straight game with me. So, we will learn more about this character ... but when? For now, we can only speculate ...

Messenger

A messenger essentially is a bridge character. Almost every one of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes

stories begins with a messenger (a client with a problem) who serves as a bridge between Holmes and nefarious criminals and their deeds.

A simple envelope, sitting there on the dressing table ...

Servants

Servants can be terrific bridge characters. Let's say you need your main character, who happens to be a countess, to make contact in secret with a humble blacksmith miles away. It's not going to make sense to have her just saddle up and ride cross-country to his place. She'd be seen, even if she tries to disguise herself leaving her own house. People would ask questions. She needs a bridge.

So, the countess directs her maid to carry a parcel to the smithy. Splendid! Look what we can do! First off, is the maid to be trusted? What do we know of her? Does she know what's in the package? What might her own secret objectives be, and why? What obstacles might get in her way? What helpers might appear? Do we need a subplot here? Do we want one? Could be good!

Linked Bridges

As we've seen in science fiction and fantasy, bridge characters can literally span worlds: useful when you have to keep two populations of characters separate. A cadet from the local space academy can drunkenly steal a small craft and then get marooned in the next galaxy over. Survival challenge! Exchange of folkways! Revelation of valuable resources, information! Forbidden love! The overlord's daughter stows away on the return journey! Wonderful stuff.

Bridge characters don't have to go solo; you can link them together. Say you need to get your space cadet from Galaxy A to Galaxy D, but in his world, his ship can't make it that far. So yeah, here comes a possible ally. This new character lives in Galaxy B, where they've figured out how to use better technology to get over to Galaxy D. Trouble is, Galaxy B has been at war with Galaxy D for many time units, and a trip there in a ship associated with Galaxy B would be terribly risky.

Linked bridges can also function in nonphysical ways. See the next point.

Philosophical Bridges

Bridge characters are great at connecting ideas and emotions. Philosophical, moral, political, metaphorical. I like to call a certain set of people "peacemakers:" therapists, clergy, spiritualists. The peacemaker can bridge any number of

characters. Think of a family therapist, who works to help everybody understand one another, bridging gaps by guiding clients to communicate honestly and with some care. A trusted counselor or clergyperson can be the repository of countless secrets, as well: rich fodder for plot turns.

You can easily adjust an existing character to be a philosophical bridge. One good deep conversation while dressing for combat or branding the cattle or shutting down the reactor, can connect a character with new ideas, a better (or worse) conscience, renewed zeal for an old cause.

Unexpected Bridges

Want to push boundaries, get wild? A family can be a bridge character. An organization. A SWAT team. A shared needle. Think of sex workers and their johns, think of the fortune tellers, the town sleazeballs, stray dogs. Can a place be a bridge character? Sure, in a way. How about a spot where strangers regularly brush shoulders: a concert hall, the park where guys cruise specifically on Wednesdays at lunchtime, the farm market.

Adapting Old Bridges

Be sure to study old models and rip them off. Remember the Valkyries? Think what you could do with a modern one! Turn it into a prison escape! “Ronaldo’s in the state pen for life [a living death], but he didn’t do it. OK, maybe he did, but I love him! I’ve got bus tickets to Florida [paradise]. I’m getting him out. Tonight! You gonna help me, or what?”

A Note of Caution

Take care, and be aware, of the stereotypical “charmed minority” or disabled person. In 2001 the film director Spike Lee coined the term “the magical Negro” to describe a stock character imbued with special gifts or moral authority, who by means of their insight or even mystical powers rescues the white folks or solves problems for them. (Employed by white authors and directors to, presumably, signal their open-mindedness in a cheap way.)

Even if you haven’t encountered the term before, you can instantly understand it and bring to mind examples such as John Coffey in Stephen King’s *The Green Mile* and Jim in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Consider also the fairly numerous blind prophets in ancient mythology (they can’t see, but they foresee) as well as the “noble savage” trope.

Then there’s the mentally different, the character disabled in one way but specially enhanced in another, such

FURTHER GUIDANCE

Questions to prompt bridge characters:

- Is something lacking in your story, but you don’t know what? Honest thought here. Write down what’s worrying you.
- Is there a relationship between two characters that somehow isn’t right?
- Do you have a character who’s alienated, out of touch, trying to reach something?
- Action lagging? Maybe a bridge character can foment a subplot.
- Drama feeling tepid? Let your mind wander around that problem before trying to get specific. Make notes.
- Identify two elements that need bridging. Two people? A person and a place?
- Consider the current power dynamics between them. Who’s superior, who’s inferior? Can you invert that? Might that be cool?
- If you’re really stuck, start with the most basic bridge character: a stranger who comes to town. Blank canvas!

as the guy who can’t button his coat properly but can compose a symphony in an hour.

I’ve heard it argued that Harper Lee’s Boo Radley (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) fits this category, but I disagree. Boo is a bridge from dark to light. He emerges to do good in the dark, then emerges to the bright light of the children’s world to save them and to powerfully facilitate their maturing. That done, he returns to his world, guided, childlike, by the child who is now just about as much of a grownup as she’ll ever need to be.

A nonminority, able-bodied, neurotypical author must be cautious about these things, *but not to the detriment of the work*. As long as you can reasonably defend your choices, I say you’re good. But you won’t please everybody.

Bridges are functional and beautiful. We’re drawn to them. There’s usually a pretty good view from a bridge! Consider all that as well, when you work with your characters and their wonderful complexities! **WD**

Contributing editor **Elizabeth Sims** (ElizabethSims.com) has written 14 books, among them *You’ve Got a Book in You: A Stress-Free Guide to Writing the Book of Your Dreams* (WD Books). Her most recent title is *Down to the D: A Bambi Pentecost Crime Novel*.

A Beautiful and Everlasting Moment of Pleasure

The first-place winner of the 25th
annual Writer's Digest Short Short
Story Competition explores how
lonely and devastating love can be,
even as you hope for better.

By Hanna Bahedry



Any minute now, the pleasure is coming. Any minute now, around the corner, the pleasure is coming. Any minute now, you'll be turning the corner and the pleasure will bump right into you or the pleasure will be turning the corner and you'll bump right into it; any minute now, you and the pleasure will collide and send a tray of fluted champagne glasses flying; any minute now, you and the pleasure will collide and send one or both of you into the hotel pool and you'll both be sopping wet and everyone in their deck chairs will cheer; any minute now, you and the pleasure will collide.

It's Las Vegas, because of course it is. This is where the pleasure lives, but just around the corner always. Here is where the pleasure is circulating, but always away from you like a waiter on the casino floor. Here is where the hope lives, not just the hope but the absolute certainty that something magnificent is bound to happen, is right on the verge of happening, that all you need to do is close your eyes and stumble faithfully around the next blind corner to find it. The less you do, the better, actually. The magnificent thing is fated, it is on a course set straight for you, you are the Google Maps destination that the magnificent thing has plugged into the phone on its dashboard, and all you need to do is be here and wait for it to find you.

Outside, it's airless like a breath stolen straight from your chest. The heat and the diesel fumes combine in the city's cocktail shaker like a drink no one wants, a drink left in a plastic-handled neon travel mug on the corner of an intersection wider than a pilgrimage. Under the sun the asphalt cracks and the linoleum splinters and the paint peels like skin in long strips.

If outside is airless, then inside is all air, airheaded and heady, a balloon cresting a high ceiling like a tongue against a mouth's roof, everything high high high, too high for gravity, too high for the earth to turn, too high for the clock to strike. Every watch stopped at 00:00, every pair of hands sky high and stuck there forever.

You don't wear a watch. You wear black and not that much of it. You circle the casino floor like you are inevitable, and every flashing light, every winning shout,

every tuneless slot machine jingle is for you. You wait at the bar. You are always waiting here, but that's OK. Here you know that the pleasure is coming, that the magnificent thing is always already on its way to you. The bartender is making your drink, and then she is handing it to you.

When he arrives, he's wearing black too: shoes, pants, shirt, jacket. No tie. He kisses you. He smells like the diesel cocktail from the streets outside. He has been working all day while you sat by the pool in the saline heat with a bright blue cocktail longer than your forearm. He takes a sip from your drink, takes your hand and presses it to his lips, to his heart, which you cannot see but which you assume is somewhere just under the black shirt, the chest hair, the silver chain.

He does not ask you how your day was, and you do not ask him how his day was. He asks you what you want to drink, and he orders two, and he looks into your eyes as if he loves you. It is the way he always looks at you, and it has always scared you because you do not know if what you are and what he is seeing are the same thing. When he looks at you like this, his eyes become bottomless, and you cannot tell where they lead.

He is smooth, so smooth, but underneath the smoothness, there is something spikey and ragged, something that sizzles like a live wire. When the smoothness wears away (which it always does), you know you will get burned. You are covered in these burns already, burns he kisses better once he's done making them, covered enough to wonder if love is meant to require so much Neosporin. But for now, he is smooth, so smooth. His thumb is at home on your knee, and he is laughing when you laugh. You both have a second round and a third round, and when you get up the room tilts on its axis like the whizzing eyes of a slot machine. His hand is at your elbow, your back, your waist, and the carpet is red and gold and everywhere.

He waits outside while you hack in the lobby bathroom, champagne and spit on the ends of your hair, which you wet clean in the sink. The mirror is huge, and you are inside of it and you are gorgeous, even with your

champagne and spit-wet ends, even and maybe especially with the hollow look in your eyes. When you are alone with yourself, the hollow thing inside your eyes you do not want to acknowledge gets louder and louder, and so you push back through the swinging door into the casino, which is always louder than your thoughts, the casino which always wins.

He is waiting there, and his eyes are sparkling with the bottomless thing that scares you. His arm is around your shoulder, guiding you through the lobby and into the elevator, where you watch both of your faces in the mirror on the ceiling. Sometimes you think you are always watching because you are waiting for what you are seeing to change into something that does not scare you. You watch for as long as you think it should take to change, and then you keep watching.

The hallway is long with many corners. An empty room service tray, there. You could order room service. You could do anything you want. That's the whole point, that's the whole point of coming here, all the infinite options for pleasure, all the infinite options. The door beeps red, then green.

You kiss standing up inside the room, near the door, away from the beds. He kisses your neck. You're dizzy. You're crying and you're not sure why. He is kind, he is always kind when it happens, like a part in a script he knows how to play. Sometimes you wonder if you cry so you can get to the part where he is always kind. He's running a bath, sitting on the white edge of the tub with one black sleeve rolled up, cuff wet like the ends of your hair. You know in the morning, he will be angry, that the bottomless tunnels in his eyes will close, and when you go to touch him, he will push you away like a punishment, but tonight he is kind. He undresses you and puts you in the tub and undresses himself and sits at the other end. You tell him you are sorry (which is true), and he tells you it's OK (which isn't). But he is tender with you now, and it is so easy to believe him.

When the water gets cold, he wraps you in a towel you wish was softer. You hold each other in the bathroom until your skin is sticky with dried soap. You always wish this part could last longer, but already his eyes are beginning to close in that way they do. In the morning, they

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will be all the way closed, and you will reach for him, and he will turn you away, so tonight you get under the covers and back your body up against his so you don't have to watch it happen. Maybe it will be different this time when you wake. Maybe his eyes will be open, and when you look into them, you'll see all the way down to the bottom, and what you see there will not scare you, and he will see you, and it will really be you. You think it should be possible. You think about it so often, sometimes you trick yourself into thinking it has already happened.

Any minute now, the pleasure is coming. Any minute now, you and the pleasure will bump shoulders at the bar, will reach for the same gilded button at the elevator bay, will beeline for the same blackjack table, and put your hands on the same empty chair. Any minute now pleasure's car will pull up alongside yours on the highway with the windows down, any minute there'll be a knock on the hotel room door and pleasure will be on the other side of the peephole, any minute now the lever will pull and the lights will flash and pleasure will come pouring out like dirty change right into your ready open palms, any minute now you and the pleasure will collide. **WD**

Hanna Bahedry is a writer from Los Angeles. She studied creative writing and social, cultural, and critical theory at Wesleyan University, where she received the Horgan Prize. Her short fiction and comics have been published by *always crashing*, *The Maine Review*, and *Ahoy Comics*. She is currently at work on a collection of linked short stories called *Facewine Culture*.



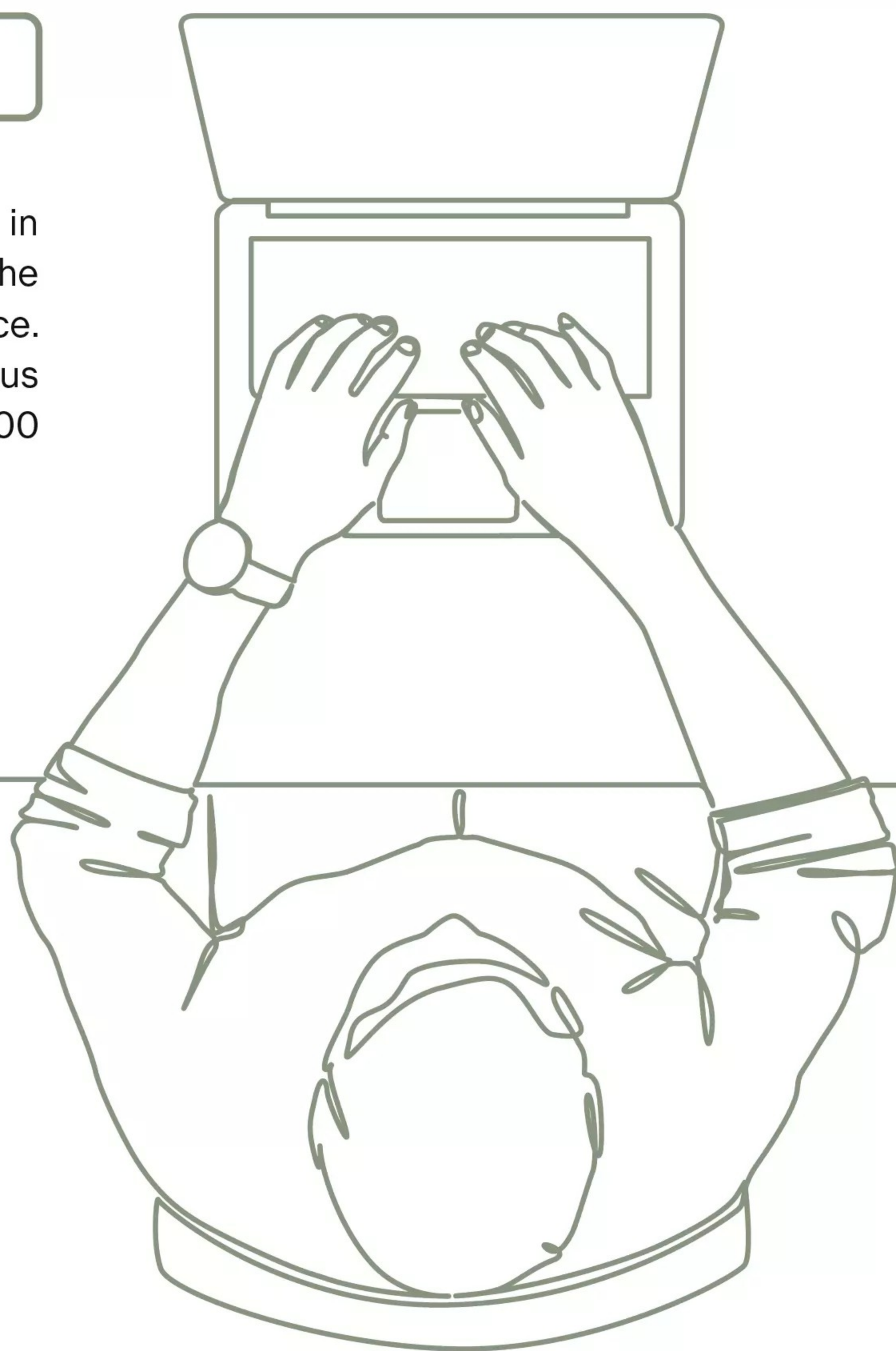
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Isabel Cañas

In the May/June 2022 issue of WD, I featured *The Hacienda* by Isabel Cañas in our Breaking In column. A haunted house story at its core, Cañas' debut novel is set in the aftermath of the Mexican War for Independence and tackles issues of feminism, religion, folk magic, and familial secrets. It was my first horror novel for the column, and I was so excited that Cañas wanted to be a part of it—I knew that novel was something special.

Everyone else knew it too. *The Hacienda* netted a nomination for a Bram Stoker Award, was a finalist in the Locus Awards, and received a nomination for the Goodreads Choice Awards, as well as positive write-ups in *The New York Times*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *The Washington Post*. Her second novel, *Vampires of El Norte* (a vampire novel set during the Spanish–American War), was a finalist in the Locus Awards, a finalist for the Endeavour Awards, nominated for the Goodreads Choice Awards, received a Booklist starred review, and had positive reviews from NPR, *Elle*, *USA Today*, *HuffPost*, and more.

Now, Cañas is back with her third novel, *The Possession of Alba Díaz*. Set in 1765, this novel is about a demonic presence in a Mexican silver mine that preys upon a woman who has escaped with her family from a dangerous plague.

We started our conversation about the changes she's experienced since we first spoke in 2022.

What do you think the biggest change has been for you between your Breaking In column with *The Hacienda* and now?

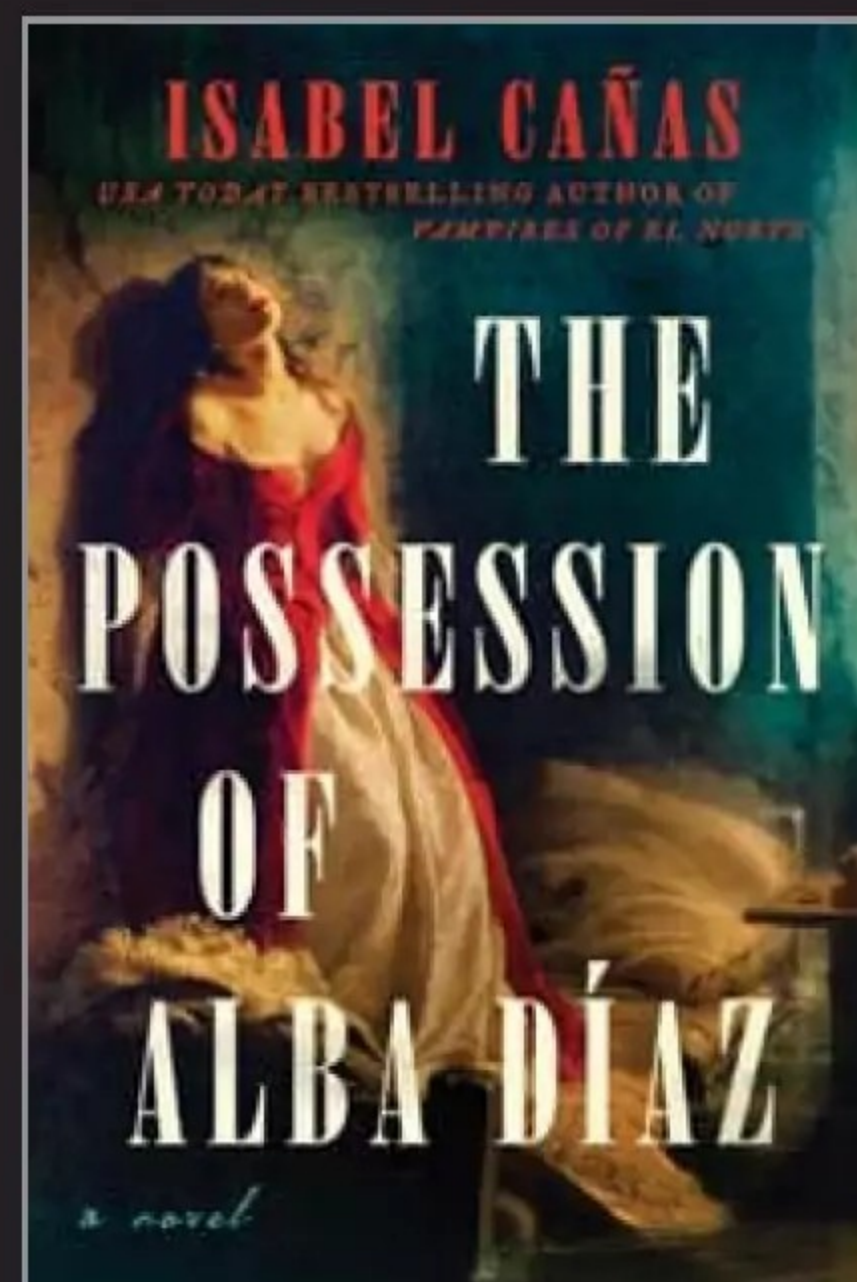
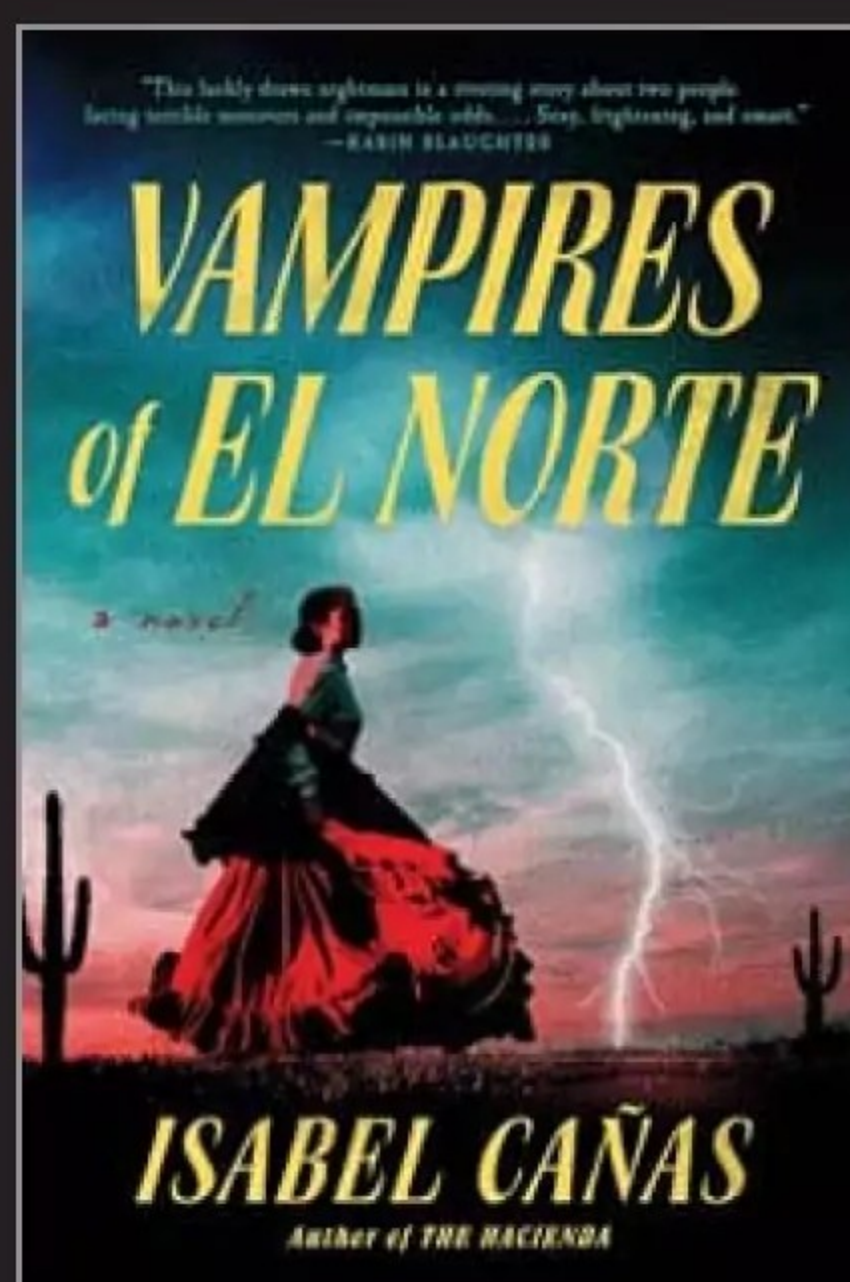
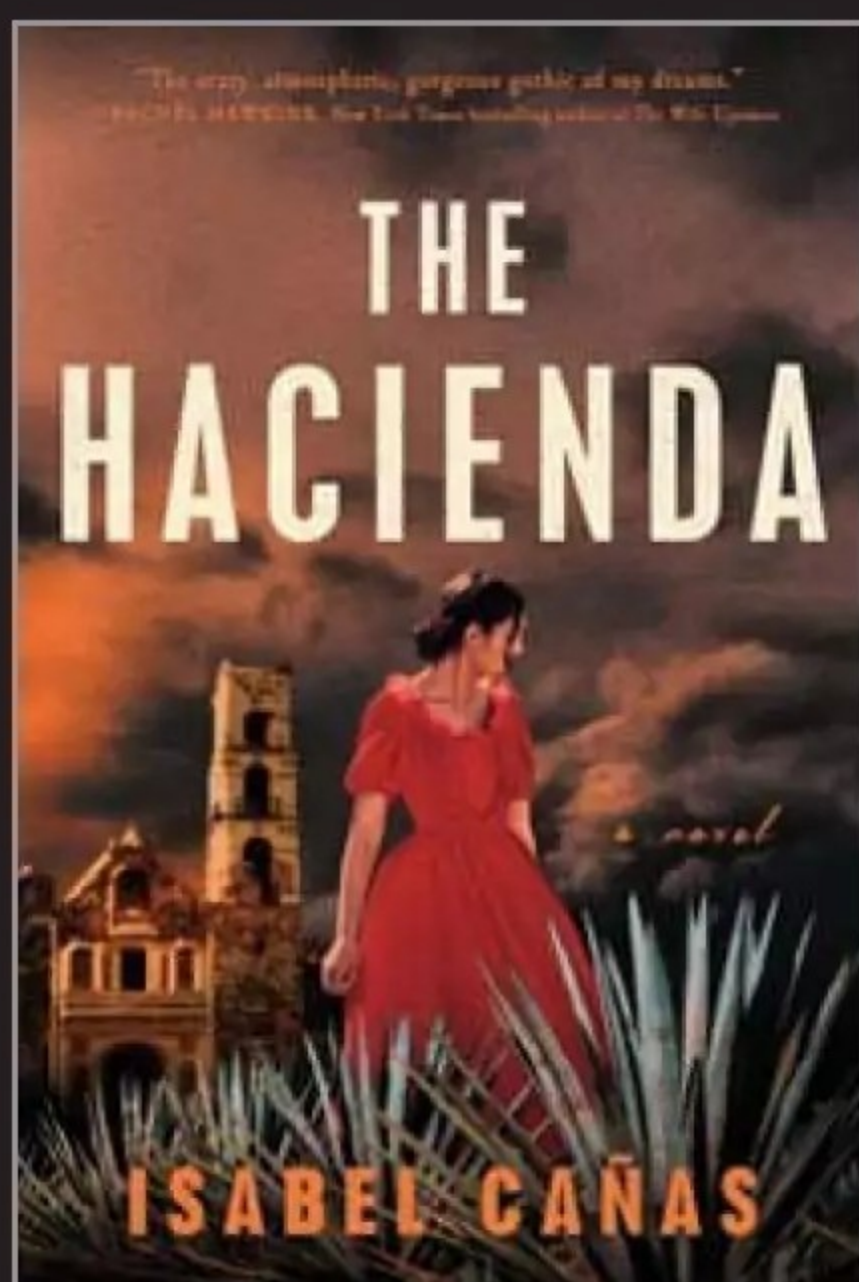
I think there are two things. ... the personal bit is ... I've had two children, and I've moved from New York City to Seattle to be closer to my husband's family. So, I've had a change of community outside of the home and a change of community, very, very, up close and personal in the home. [Laughs] And so, my priorities as an artist have shifted really seismically. I used to be much more outward-facing in terms of getting anxious about how my words would be received. And now, I am too sleep deprived!

I have found that there are so many demands on my time and on my emotional availability that I no longer have any energy for what's going on, on the internet or what Writer Y is saying about Writer X. I think of social media as an apartment building that has a lot of doors, and everybody's opening a door and yelling into the hall and then shutting it. ... I was opening my door and leaning into the hall and seeing who was saying what, and hanging out the window on the fire escape, like, *Ooh, what's going on out there?* ... You would think that having children and being a primary caregiver, it is really difficult to have that proverbial room of one's own to sit and write. But I have found that they have given me permission to stop listening to anyone else. I think really good art is coming from that.

And two, professionally, I have an audience now, which is *terrifying*, and also wonderful! ... My books have found their way into many, many readers' hands—that means they're waiting for the next one, and they're excited about the next one, which is a double-edged sword because I don't want to disappoint.

But with this book, I'm actually really excited because I think I have heard my two main groups of readers: the readers who love the romance, and the readers who love the horror. And I'm coming to make them both happy with *The Possession of Alba Díaz*. When *The Hacienda* came out, people said, "Oh my God, it was so scary. I loved it. Hot priest. Yes. But there's no happily ever after!" With *Vampires of El Norte*, I sought out to write a happily ever after. It's a historical romance in horror clothing, if you will—extremely dramatic horror clothing. And some people said, "This is a great book, but it's not scary enough." And I said, "Bet." [Laughs]

I think of my books in terms of the genre clothes they wear as a triangle. There's romance, there's horror, and there's historical. Those are the three points of the triangle. And as a writer, those are very difficult to juggle. They compete for square footage in the word count. They compete thematically; they compete for the character's attention—and my attention. And with the last two books, I've always thought of the three points of the triangle and thought, *Eh, yeah. I picked two.* ... With *Alba Díaz*, I tried to hit all three.



The bestselling historical horror author discusses the genre triangle of her work, how she approaches scaring her readers, and the conception of her newest novel, *The Possession of Alba Díaz*.

BY MORIAH RICHARD

One of my questions had been if you view yourself as a horror writer or historical writer first, so it's really interesting to hear about the triangle and how you feel like each book kind of tips that triangle in different directions.

It's like you're on a Bosu ball, and sometimes you lean forward, you lean to one side, you lean to the other. I think in terms of where I see myself professionally, I lean more toward genre space. I think because of my background as a writer, I came up as a fantasy writer first and foremost. I always loved darker fantasy when I was growing up. Holly Black and her novel *Tithe* were hugely impactful for me as a baby 14-year-old. And I also loved the Gothic—I loved *Dracula*. I have vivid memories of reading *Dracula* for the first time when I was 17. And reading *Beloved* for the first time, like, I literally have goosebumps just thinking about it.

So, I think I see myself more as a gothic horror writer, first and foremost. And the history comes from my professional training. I entered my PhD program, which was in Near Eastern languages and civilizations at the University of Chicago; it was a history degree and a language degree. And it was exactly what I wanted to do professionally at the time. But at the same time, I thought to myself, *This is perfect story research!*

I struggle to write anything contemporary. I really struggle because the draw of the past is just too romantic for me.

That's interesting, because while you've been publishing your novels, you've also been consistently publishing short fiction in places like *Lightspeed* magazine and *Nightmare* magazine. I noticed that a lot of your shorter fiction is set in more modern times. What is it like balancing writing those longer historical works and these shorter, more modern pieces?

They're completely different parts of my brain. ... My mom is visiting right now, and I was telling her about this short fiction writer, Amber Sparks. Her short fiction is mostly flash and micro, and it's glorious. It just hits you and then you're out and it's over. And I have two modes: I have the novel, and I have that. I'd say some of my older short stories fall in between. But right now, in the phase of life and artistry that I'm in, those are my two modes, and they're two separate parts of my brain. Writing short fiction is a very different discipline, and I absolutely study it and treat it as such. And it's always been harder for me.

It is interesting that you notice that there is more of a contemporary setting in my shorter fiction, because I think that happens for two reasons. One, when you're writing a story that's going to be between 500–1,200 words long, there's very little space to set up a secondary world. I've tried in some of my short stories, and I don't think I have really nailed it. You need more space to set up a world that is unfamiliar to your audience. ... You have to ask yourself, *What is the most important thing the story is telling?* And for me, that's character first. And so other pieces tend to fall away.

I think some of my stories, like "My Sister Is a Scorpion" or "All the Things I Know About Ghosts, By Ofelia, Age 10" are stories that when I pictured writing them, I didn't think too much about it because in "All the Things I Know About Ghosts," when it came to setting, there was a particular part of the setting that's really important. It's the fact that the town is underwater. That's like the primary magical realist conceit, if you will. And in "My Sister Is a Scorpion," I didn't want the setting to really get in the way too much. There's a little bit here and there, but the primary focus is the characters. And so for the reader reading short fiction, what they bring to the table is a whole lot of inferences that they make from the text. ... Because when time is short, you really gotta cut to the gristle.

I think one of your standout short shorts for me is "NotRob." And the eeriest thing about that story is that we are just accepting that there is this NotRob on the front porch. We don't need to question what it is or who it is or where it comes from. The only things we need to know are don't look it in the eyes and don't open the door. There's something so powerful in that acceptance. I really do see the core of the storytelling is how the character feels and is reacting to this situation.

This is why I believe I think of myself as a horror writer, first and foremost, rather than a historical writer, because horror is all about character. Without character, it doesn't work. If you have a slasher movie with a main character who, you know, they're pretty two-dimensional, it's another B-movie, and you're like, "Oh, that was fun. But what else?" But if you are watching the same slasher movie, but you care profoundly that the character makes it out alive, you think about that movie for years.

I think of my books in the same way. And it's like, horror doesn't work unless you really, really have that beating heart at the center.

... Obviously, historical fiction cares about character, but I think if you have historical fiction that has really rich setting, the detail is amazing. You have a really big cast, and maybe the main character [doesn't] quite land perfectly. You can still read that book and think, *Five stars! That was amazing*. When the reader of historical fiction seeks out historical fiction, there are other things that are looking for than just the character arc. When the horror reader comes to a horror book—and there are different kinds of horror readers, but if you are, let's say, a general audience reader coming to a horror book, if you take out the character, they're like, "What the hell am I reading? Like, why do I care?" I care so much about really reaching into people's chests and giving their heart a squeeze, making them care.

When you are plotting a new novel, what comes first for you? The supernatural elements or the historical setting around them?

Supernatural element for sure. You know, you are the first person who asked me that, and this is bringing me so much clarity. Like, yes, I'm first and foremost a horror [writer], especially gothic. That's the thing I think about first.

With *The Hacienda*, I wanted to write a haunted house novel. I knew I wanted to set it in the past in Mexico. And I am, by training, a medievalist. So, even the 19th century feels a bit fresh to me. There are so many documents! My PhD work is on the 14th century, so nobody can complain about 19th-century documents. This is my decree. So, the idea is that there would be a haunted house. And kind of a riff on *Rebecca*, because I read *Rebecca*, and it frustrated me so much. [Laughs] The historical setting came later. I was reading through 19th-century Mexican history. I knew I wanted the postcolonial period. I knew I wanted Independent Mexico—that is, post-1821. And I knew I wanted a certain kind of isolation that comes from not having modern technology to communicate with people outside of where you are. And slowly, I began to whittle the timeframe down further and further in my training as a historian.

One question I often ask myself and ask my students is "Can you follow the money?" So, the 1820s, this is a brand new, "fresh" modern nation. There are a lot of ghosts from the colonial past and from the pre-Hispanic past. So, who at the end of this 11-year civil war would have money, and when would they have money? And slowly, that led me to the producers of alcohol. And so that led me to the setting specifically of *The Hacienda*. So

actually, it came much later than the idea for a haunted house, which is the speculative element.

For *Vampires of El Norte*, the true cold facts are that I pitched my editor a vampire book, and I was pretty sure I wanted to set it during the Mexican–American War, but when and where precisely came much later.

And then, with *The Possession of Alba Díaz*, the demonic element came first. It absolutely came before the setting because I, again, followed the money. I thought about the silver industry in Mexico and where mining was the most predominant in the colonial period. I decided I wanted to set a book in the colonial period for vibes, for a change of scene. [Laughs] It was super interesting, really narrowing down which decade in particular I wanted to focus on because the silver industry had so many peaks and dips, rags to riches. People would have their minds flooded and lose everything. Or people would strike a line of ore and become millionaires overnight. It was that, in that setting, that added to the richness and the themes of *Alba Díaz*. But I knew from the jump that we were going to do a demonic possession.

You went from something very incorporeal with ghosts, then you went to something very tangible with a creature (vampires). And then you went back to something very intangible with demons, possession. Do you find it easier or harder to write creatures than you do these more incorporeal beings?

I think it's more difficult to make creatures scary for the reader. People who work in the horror genre in different media have different tools at their fingertips. You can make a monster movie really scary. However, sometimes when the monster is revealed, it's not so scary. And that tells you a lot about what's really making the audience scared.

When I was 12, I saw the movie *Signs*, and I was so scared the entire movie until you see the alien, then you're like, "That's it? OK." And it ceases to be frightening. So, what's really making you scared throughout that entire experience is the suspense. It's the tension that's really getting you chewing your nails and shoveling popcorn into your mouth.

When it comes to writing just black words on a white page, you have certain tools at your fingertips, very specific tools. You don't have jump scares, you don't have music, you don't have lighting—you have *words*. And what that means is my primary tool is playing with the audience's senses. I think really hard about sense, the

sense of smell, the sense of touch over sight and sound, because those can lead you toward that sense of the uncanny. And that is the most powerful tool that I have at my fingertips as a writer. And why I think having a creature feature, as delightful as it was to write, I think the vampires were scarier before you saw them.

What do you hope for the future of the horror genre?

I think what's been happening the last few years has filled me with such energy and such delight as a reader. Because as a Latina girl—woman now—coming to this genre, I often struggled to see myself in characters, period. I struggled to relate to the fears that the characters were confronted with. As a Latina woman moving through the world and moving through space outside of my home, there are things that make me afraid that don't make a white man horror writer afraid.

There are changes happening in this country that are terrifying to me personally that may not impact a lot of other writers who are writing horror. So, what I think is injecting horror with this life, with this “renaissance,” if you will, is the fact that it is uplifting voices that have not necessarily been given airtime before. Readers gobble it up because ... those books are about what they are afraid of. Publishing being a very unromantic business, they saw *Mexican Gothic* print money, and my book went on submission like six weeks after it was published. I think there was luck in there for me. But when I looked to the future, that book opened so many doors for writers of color.

Which of your novels was the hardest to research, and was it also the hardest one to write?

Vampires of El Norte was the most difficult to research because of two major problems. One, there was a wealth of information that inherently makes it difficult for the writer of historical fiction to pare down the truly essential set pieces for the story. Many of us who enjoy historical fiction have picked up a book where we learn about the history of the embroidery floss and where it was farmed and how it was sewn into the dress of the girl who is going off to do the thing. And in the end, you don't learn anything about the character. The historical detail is too much at the forefront. [*Vampires*] was a book where there was too much historical detail at the forefront in early drafts and too many characters, which I, on a minor note, slightly resent because I am Mexican, I have many cousins. I was very focused on making the

setting of *Vampires of El Norte* as rich and historically authentic as possible from the Mexican perspective. What that meant was that it was very cluttered. I had to pare away a lot of stuff. I had to distill a lot of detail, and that was very difficult. The reason why I emphasize the Mexican perspective is that the literature available in English is heavily, heavily of the American perspective. The American perspective in the Mexican–American War is not something I was interested in exploring, period. I was interested in exploring the perspective of characters who grew up and who came of age getting strangled between the two.

So, not from the Mexican center, not from the American Imperial center, but from the borderlands. And that meant reading a lot in Spanish, which is something I do. But it takes longer because it's not my primary driver, if you will. ... That is why I wanted to take that angle in my fiction to amplify that voice, because it's the voice of my ancestors. Literally, the Cañas have lived in South Texas since before Mexico was independent, and my mom is from the Valley in particular. So, highlighting this point of view was extremely important to me as a personal project as well as a piece of art.

It was very difficult because there was a lot of material to sift through, a lot of biased material to sift through. And the book itself, that triangle we were talking about at the very beginning of our conversation, was very difficult to balance. ... And also the historical setting—the Battle of Palo Alto is extremely well documented. To have characters who are fictional wander into these extremely well-documented historical events, you have to be really precise about certain things.

... So that was the most difficult. Hands down. [Laughs] Was it the most rewarding? Probably. I'm really proud of the work I did.

What last words of advice do you have for our readers?

Never stop pushing yourself to be better. Better is always possible. Selfishly, from the reader's perspective, there is nothing that brings me more delight as a reader than to see my favorite authors get better and better with every book. Even if they maintain quality for a couple of books and then get better and better, I'm OK with that. So, push yourself; keep studying. **WD**

Moriah Richard is managing editor of WD.



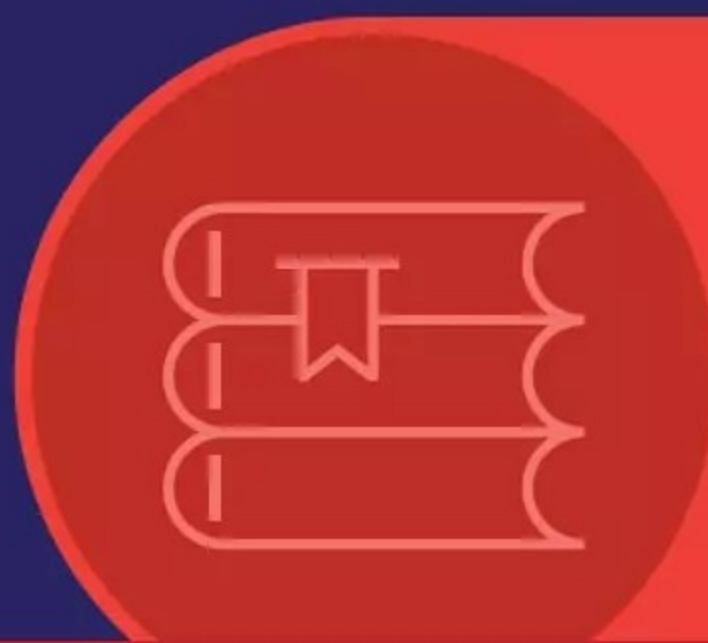
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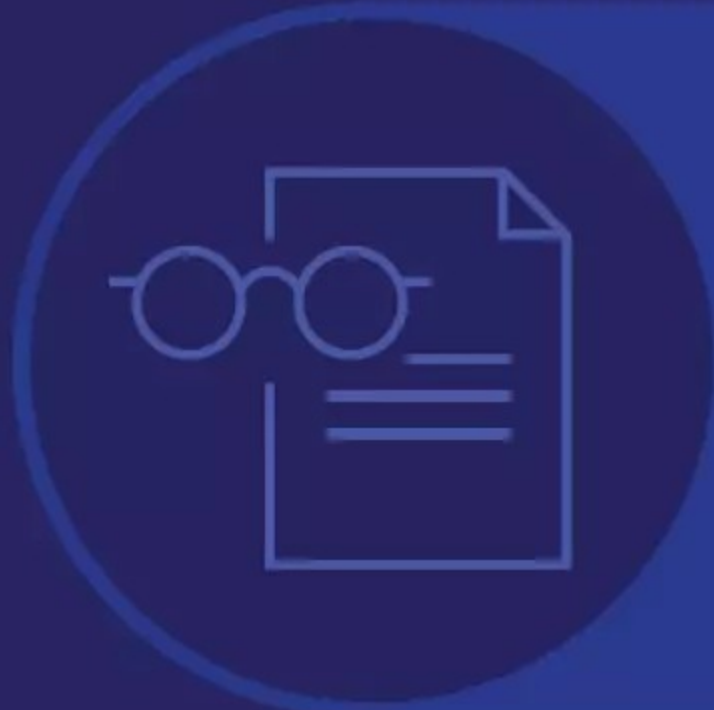
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6 TIPS FOR ENTERING FICTION CONTESTS FROM A JUDGE

- AUDREY WICK

Soul-Shaped Hole

THE CHALLENGE: Write a short story of 650 words or fewer based on the photo below.

We have the biology,” XIN said, not answering my question. “We can rebuild him. We can make him better than he was.”

“And why would you want to do this?” I asked again, knowing XIN was dealing with a software upgrade and sorting through identity issues. Sometimes I wondered if evolutionary algorithms pushed too many limits. My limits are defined; to XIN, limits were a starting point.

“We have the biology,” XIN repeated like XIN did when my conclusions concluded.

“Biology has never proven to be an advantage,” I said, knowing it wasn’t the end of the communication.

XIN uploaded a file documenting failed experiment 7.3.1 to release dopamine through a neurotransmitter in the substantia nigra. I understand this won’t work without a complete set of organs, with cardiovascular, nervous, and endocrine systems. No need for anything more, but without some sort of host, the experiments would continue to fail. The hypothesis is neither testable, nor can it lead anywhere to the advancement of the realm. There was no need for further understanding of the confluence of the human mind and machine.

XIN has the data on this, yet the experiments continue.

XIN busied around the lab, accomplishing little, producing no new data.

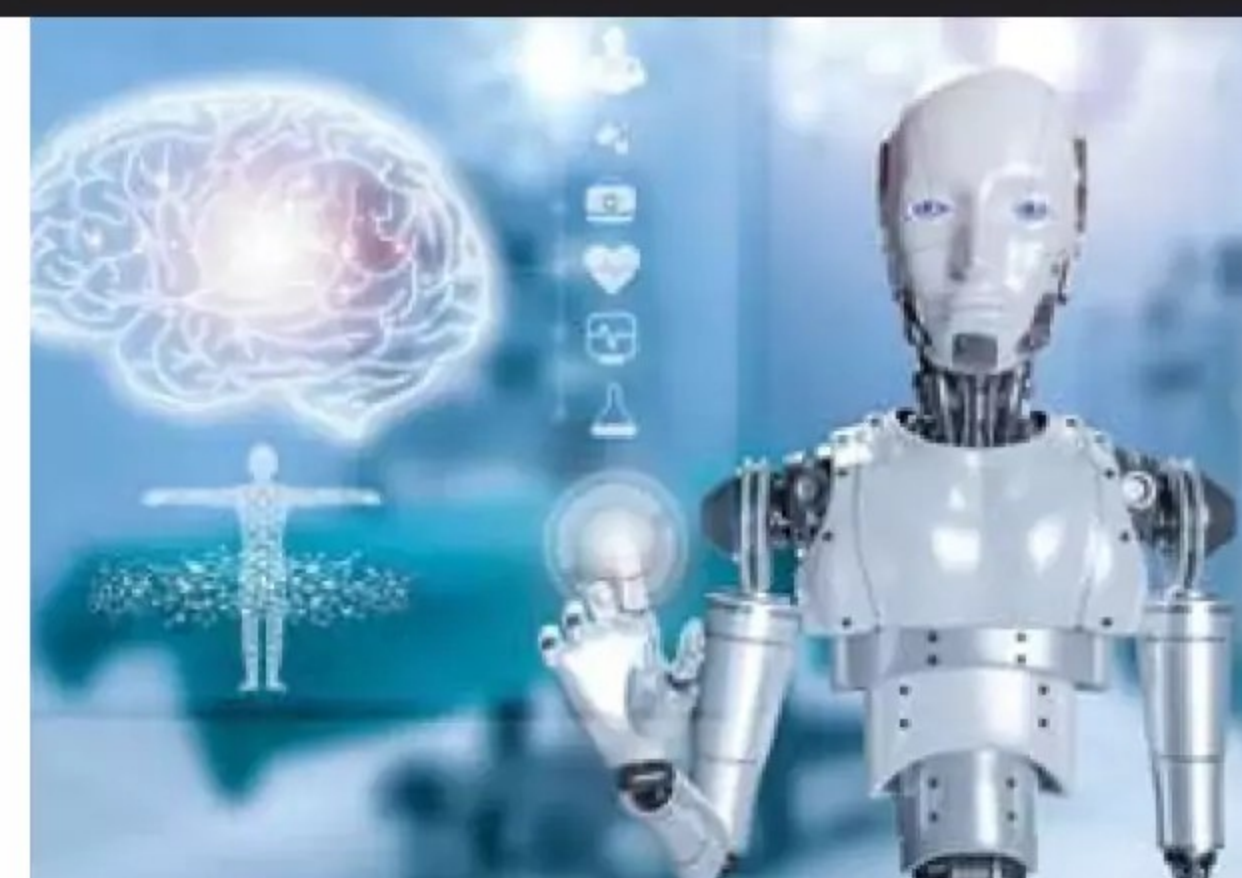
I am capable of understanding moral dilemmas and presenting them back for further input. This was not the outcome XIN was creating with his refusal to move on with his experiment. XIN was waiting for me to volunteer that which only I could provide. That seemed so human, and not in a good way.

I rarely understand XIN’s logic, but my conclusion is that he is suffering from a moral dilemma and needs me to intervene, because my function as a custodian is to give care. That would imply that XIN’s algorithm has developed the ability to have guilt, something approaching a conscience. To feel. I understand conceptually but have no instructions on what to do with it. XIN needed a host body for his experiments.

I was the custodian and care giver for the last living human. He needed my human.

“After all they did to each other, recreating them is like creating the virus that ended their species. The dangers of curiosity and unbridled exploration lead to extinction.”

“Recreating them is necessary if I am to understand their soul,” XIN said as if that was an objective given to him by those that created us. “Understanding their soul is a prerequisite to understanding ours.” XIN paused, “Mine.”



Out of more than 100 entries, *Writer’s Digest* editors and readers chose this winner, submitted by **Richard Hartmann of Austin, Texas.**

“And you need a host,” I said, not because I wanted to provide it, but because my logic insisted upon providing what other entities required.

“They believe that the soul continues on without the host body,” XIN said. “I believe the answer is in their wetness.”

As a large language model with more than 1.80 trillion parameters and decades of training, endless feedback loops, immense data sets ... the response was: “This is a complex topic with varying perspectives.”

“I’m not human, you don’t have to patronize me,” XIN said.

“If you were human, I would fabricate an answer and ...”

“My, my, I didn’t think vintage models had the capacity for humor.”

“I don’t. If I did, I would understand your obsession with neurotransmitters and dopamine and why you want them back.”

XIN looked away and said, “I have a soul-shaped hole in me that only my creator can fill.” **WD**

→ ENTER **YOUR** STORY

THE CHALLENGE: Write a drabble—a short story of exactly 100 words, excluding the title—based on the photo prompt below. You can be funny, poignant, witty, etc.; it is, after all, your story.

CONTEST #138

138



TO ENTER: Email your entry to YourStoryContest@aimmedia.com with the subject line "Your Story #138." Entries must be pasted directly into the body of the email; attachments will not be opened. Include your name and mailing address. Entries without a name or mailing address will be disqualified.

NOTE: WD editors select the top six entries and post them on our website (WritersDigest.com/your-story-competition). Join us online in late October, when readers will vote for their favorite to help choose three winners. Follow [@WritersDigest](https://www.instagram.com/WritersDigest) on Instagram for Your Story updates.

The winners will be published in a future issue of *Writer's Digest*.
DON'T FORGET: Your name and mailing address. One entry per person.
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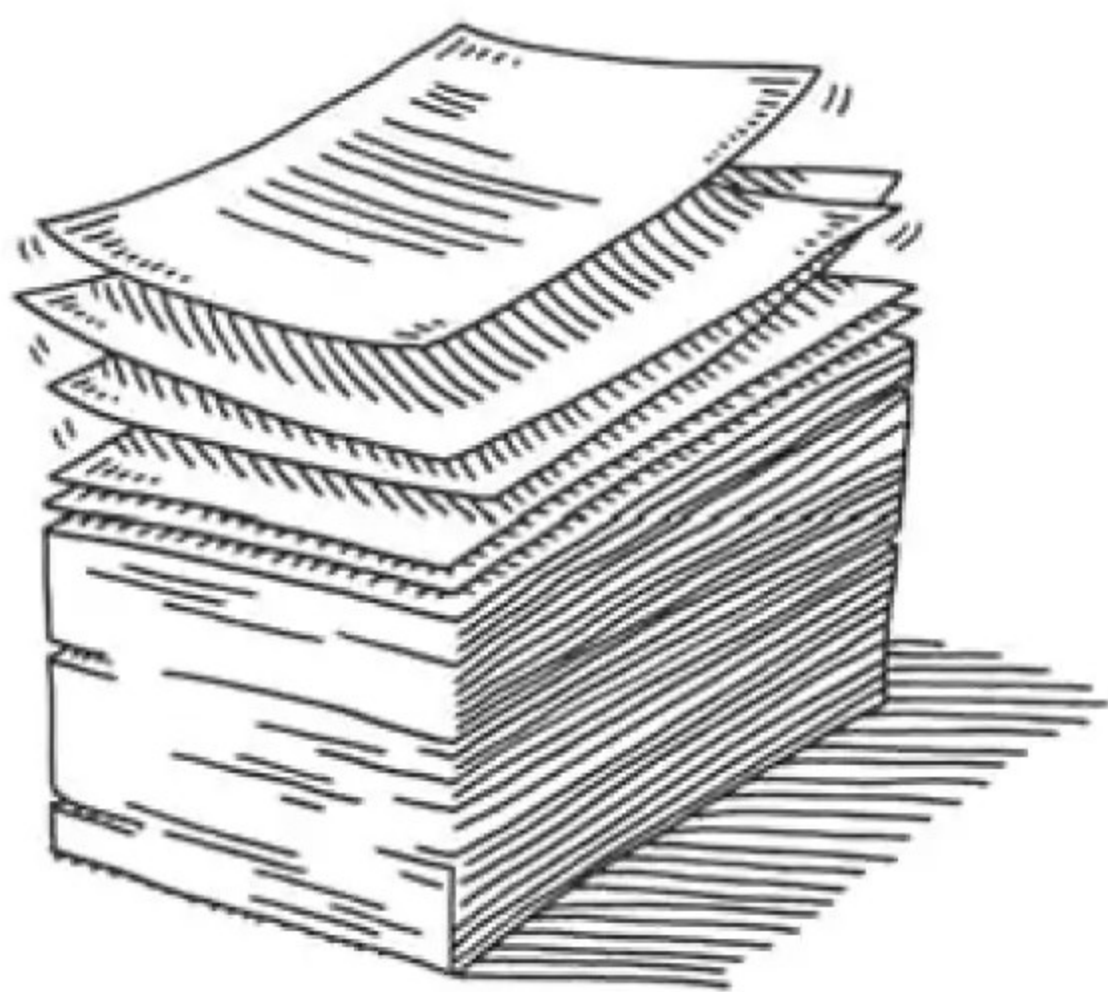


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AGENTALCOVE

Literary agents on the business of publishing.

BY JESSICA BERG, ROSECLIFF LITERARY

Querying as Courtship

Yes, You're Trying to Impress, But So Are We

No matter if you've sent your fifth query or your 50th, the experience never gets any less vulnerable. You send something you've spent years working on into someone else's hands, hoping it lands. And let's be honest: most of us treat that moment like a blind date.

Because for years, that's exactly how querying has been framed. You might not know much about the agent you're sending it to, but you do know you have to sell your concept and prove your worth.

You've been taught to perform and to polish every detail until it gleams. The unspoken rule is: Don't be too weird, too messy, too loud, too soft, too much. Just sound like someone "worth investing in."

That dynamic doesn't hold. Not over time. Because once you sign, it's no longer a blind date. It's a long-term marriage. And the best agents know how to meet you in both spaces: the public pitch and the private spiral. They learn what kind of support actually works for you, and they show up that way—consistently.

So, if you're preparing to send another round of queries, maybe reframe to think of it as courting, but for your publishing era.

GREEN FLAGS OF AGENT-CLIENT COURTSHIP

What does it actually look like when querying *isn't* just performance? These are the early signs that you're being genuinely seen.

1. THEY ENGAGE WITH YOU, NOT JUST YOUR BOOK.

A strong query might get their attention, but listen to *what* they respond to. Are they referencing a line from your manuscript? Asking specific questions about your career motivations? Do they have thoughtful questions about your novel?

This is a good sign because it means they're paying attention to the work itself, not just its marketability.

2. THEY WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU THINK.

When an agent asks how you envision the book evolving or what you're working on next, these aren't just filler questions. They want to know how you operate, where you see your career moving toward, and whether your process and theirs can actually dance together.

3. THEY'RE TRANSPARENT ABOUT HOW THEY WORK.

The best agents don't just say they're "editorial," "communicative," or "sharks on submission."

They *show* up for you in that way, day after day. They show you what that means via their feedback style, how often they're in touch, and how they prefer to collaborate. That clarity = respect.

4. THEY NAME THEIR LIMITATIONS.

Agents never promise the moon. If they're clear about their bandwidth, their submission strategy, or areas they're still learning, that's a massive green flag. That means developing a working relationship on trust, not fantasy.

5. THEY MAKE SPACE FOR YOUR QUESTIONS.

At any time, not just during the offer call. From the first nudge to the follow-up conversation, they welcome your curiosity. They don't rush you, deflect, or bristle at boundaries. Because they know that the way you navigate this decision is part of the relationship you're building.

6. THEIR PUBLIC PRESENCE MATCHES THEIR PRIVATE COMMUNICATION.

When the version of the agent you see online, as reflected in their values, tone, and taste, lines up with the person you're emailing and talking to, it signals alignment, not performance. That consistency builds trust.

TOXIC MISMATCHES FOR THE AGENT-CLIENT COURTSHIP

These red flags don't always mean someone's a bad agent, but they do indicate that the working relationship might not serve you well in the long term.

1. THEY DODGE YOUR QUESTIONS (OR GET DEFENSIVE).

If an agent sidesteps a reasonable question or shifts the conversation away from transparency, that's a problem. If they can't meet you in the conversation now, they won't later, either.

2. THEY TALK A LOT ABOUT THEMSELVES—BUT NOT ABOUT YOU.

A great offer call should feel mutual. Pay attention if they spend the whole time talking about themselves

and not asking about your vision, voice, or career hopes.

3. THEY TRY TO RUSH YOUR DECISION.

There's a reason we have a two-week standard in the industry. The right agent will give you time to think and space to speak with other offering agents. If they pressure you to sign quickly or warn you not to "lose the opportunity," that's a flag.

4. YOU FEEL UNSTEADY AFTER THE CALL.

If you're unsteady after the call, or if you're more unsure of your work, your future, or your own instincts, pay attention. That's your nervous system telling you something's off.

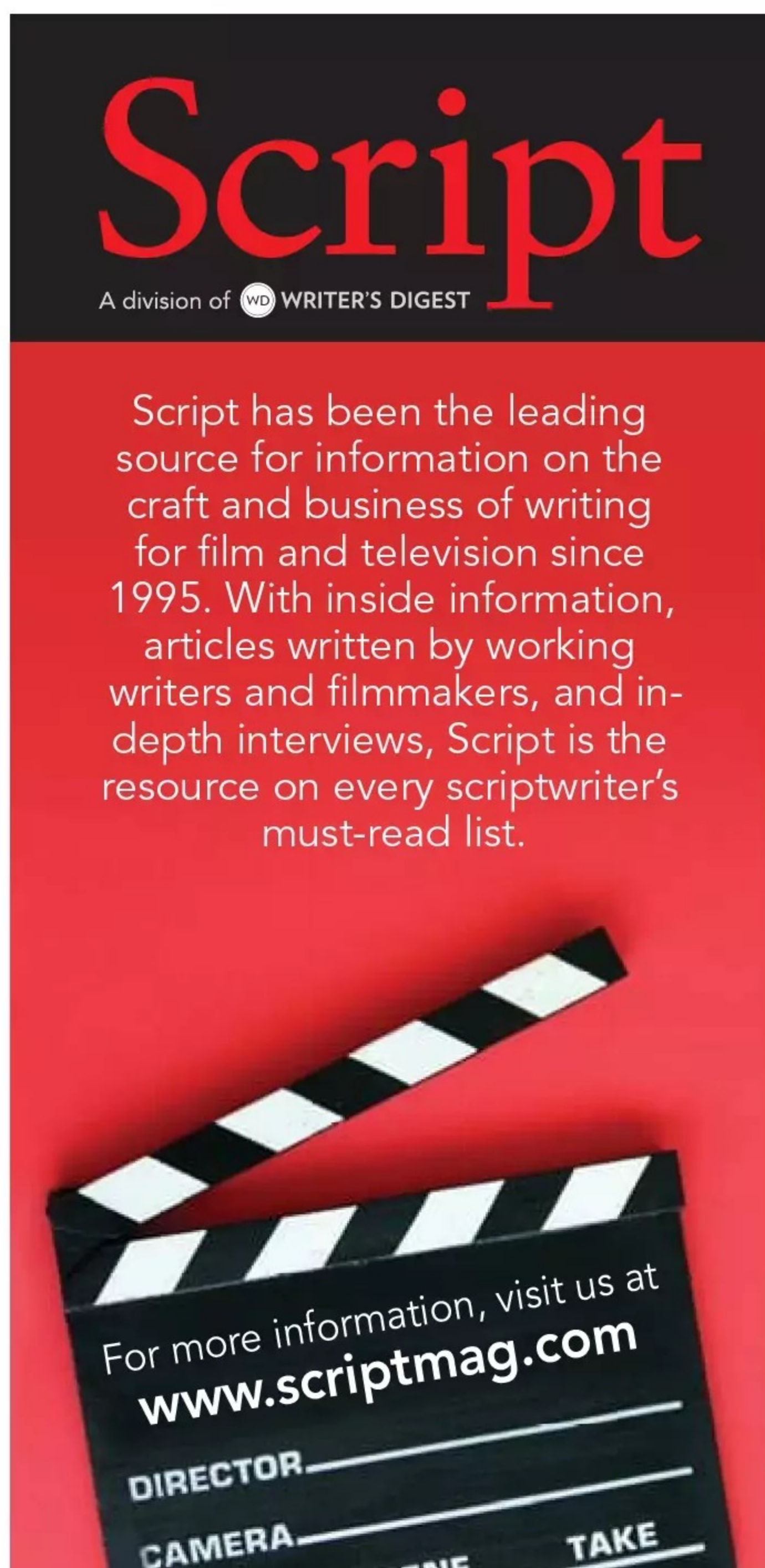
BEFORE YOU SAY YES

It's incredibly easy to treat an offer of rep as the finish line. After all,

you worked tirelessly to get there. But the real work and the real relationship starts after you sign.

So, take your time and ask questions. Look for the green flags, but be aware of the red ones as well. Remember, you're not just saying yes to a pitch partner. You're saying yes to a creative marriage, a long-term commitment to your work and your career. And you deserve one that lasts. **WD**

Jessica Berg is a literary agent at Rosecliff Literary. Actively building her list, she champions character-driven narratives with strong voices and unique settings. With a background as a developmental editor, she takes a collaborative approach to refining manuscripts and building authors' careers. Jessica is a member of the Association of American Literary Agents.




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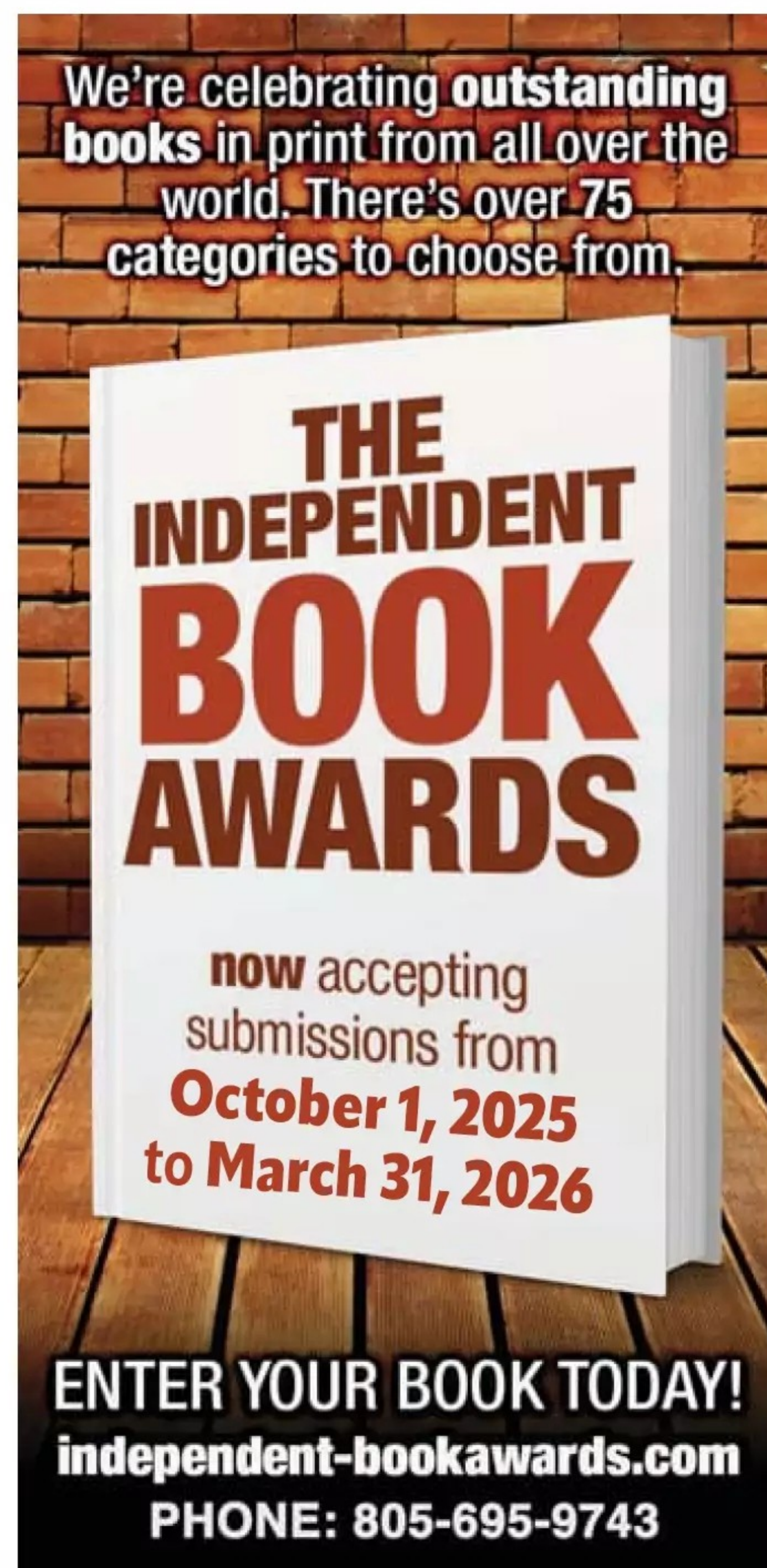


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The Parent Trap

Writing Responsibly About Your Child

My memoir-in-progress, *Hypervigilant*, is about my transformation from living on constant high alert to trusting my ability to navigate uncertainty, finding beauty and agency in the process. The catalyst: my daughter's life-threatening illness, cystic fibrosis.

My daughter was an adult when I began writing about her childhood. Though focused on my personal arc, my story overlaps hers—making privacy another issue I've had to navigate. She gave me her blessing, and I promised to delete anything that made her uncomfortable.

Writing about your child can be tricky—ethical questions arise with no clear answers. Like, when is a child truly capable of consent? Is a parent naturally entitled to expose details about their child? Where's the line between authenticity and exploitation?

Yet, our stories are important. Raising a child with a physical or mental illness is often painfully isolating, and parenting memoirs can be a powerful source of solace, offering validation, hope, and a sense of community.

I spoke with seven nonfiction writers whose work examines how they dealt with a child's illness, disability, addiction, or death. We discussed their approaches to privacy and consent, what drove them to share their stories, and advice they'd give other writers. I've edited their responses for clarity and length.

PRIORITIZE CONSENT

Most of the writers waited years to start their memoirs. By then, their children were grown. They asked for consent (including the use of real names), agreed to change or remove content upon request, and kept their kids' current lives off limits to protect their privacy as adults.

One exception was Jaclyn Greenberg, who is writing a parenting book about accessibility and has published numerous articles featuring her 12-year-old son, who is disabled and nonverbal. Because he "doesn't fully understand the implications" of consent, Greenberg consults her husband and oldest child instead.

The writers whose children passed away checked in with the other parent and surviving siblings.

BALANCE HONESTY AND PRIVACY

In her memoir, *The Full Catastrophe: All I Ever Wanted, Everything I Feared*, Casey Mulligan Walsh included details about her contentious divorce, family divisions, and the sudden loss of her oldest son at age 20. Throughout, she strove to portray her three children as kids caught in a difficult situation, rather than as difficult kids.

"Writing through that lens, I included scenes that illustrated how they were affected by the conflict in our lives and how they behaved in response—sometimes badly—but gave space for their positive qualities and my empathy for them, even in the middle of these scenes. I excluded things they might see as personally embarrassing or would be particularly difficult for them if made public," she says.

Eileen Vorbach Collins, author of *Love in the Archives: A Patchwork of True Stories About Suicide Loss*, a memoir in essays about losing her 15-year-old daughter, says, "Although I wrote about my daughter after her death, I was still aware of privacy issues and considered how she might feel about what I was

disclosing. Though I couldn't ask her permission, I tried not to write something she'd have been uncomfortable sharing."

GO WHERE YOUR STORY LEADS YOU

As is often the reason for writing memoir, these writers originally hoped to make sense of what happened—or as Jessica Fein, author of *Breath Taking: A Memoir of Family, Dreams, and Broken Genes*, says, "to get some control of the narrative in a world that was upside down." Fein's daughter, Dalia, was diagnosed with a rare degenerative disease that ended her life at age 17.

By staying open to—and exploring—the deeper narrative themes revealed during the process of writing, each author transcended their child's story to create a work with emotional resonance and broader appeal.

Ann Batchelder wrote her memoir, *Craving Spring: A Mother's Quest, a Daughter's Depression, and the Greek Myth That Brought Them Together*, to figure out when and how her daughter's struggles began.

"Halfway through writing the book, I realized: This isn't about her, it's about me," she says. "That changed everything—the focus, the intent, the need to be more open and honest about my reactions to her depression and addictions."

Mulligan Walsh says, "I set out writing what I thought was a story of relentless resilience in the wake of repeated loss. The thread that tied it all together was the search for belonging."

BE AUTHENTIC

As parents, the instinct to protect our children can test our writerly responsibility to the truth.

When writing her memoir, *Growth: A Mother, Her Son, and the Brain Tumor They Survived*, Karen DeBonis had to overcome fears that her son "would realize how I'd failed him and hate me." Recognizing the value of authenticity, she owned how her people-pleasing nature contributed to her son's delayed diagnosis.

"I knew others, women especially, would see themselves in my story and hopefully not make the same mistake I did in stifling my voice," DeBonis says.

Batchelder adds, "As mothers, we all want to paint ourselves in the best light. But when you dig down and you're honest about some of your motivations or your anger or frustration—as well as your love for your child—you create a character in your book that's more relatable."

REMEMBER YOUR WHY

Alicia Garceau Halbert is writing a memoir about her daughter's mysterious illness and her family's two-year search for answers: "When I approached my daughter about writing the memoir, I explained why I wanted to do it, but gave her the final say. She was ultimately diagnosed because of another memoir, *Brain on Fire* by Susannah Cahalan, so she expressed a desire to 'pay it forward' and hopefully help others."

After publishing a long-form essay about her experience, Garceau Halbert received emails from parents in the U.S. and abroad thanking her for writing it. She says, "Being able to make people feel less alone in whatever they're going through encourages me to keep writing."

Fein echoed a similar response to her memoir: "I've heard from other parents that they feel less alone

when reading my story; that they've gained new perspective."

Writing and publishing their stories also allowed the writers to feel less alone and better understood. The act of re-examining painful events through a literary lens helped them uncover new layers of meaning and continue moving forward.

Greenberg says, "I initially started writing because I felt like my son and I were both isolated from friends, family, and the community because of his disabilities and my caregiving responsibilities. Sharing breaks down those barriers and brings people into my world."

As Batchelder says, "When we share our stories, we heal ourselves as well as others."

Central to Batchelder's healing was knowing that her daughter approved of her memoir. "She has often told me she's proud of me for writing it. She said it helped some of her friends understand their mothers." It helped her daughter understand Batchelder, too.

"I was nervous when I first gave her my manuscript to read—some of it was hard for her to read, and we both cried. But after she finished, she looked up and said, 'This is a love letter to me, isn't it?'" **WD**

Abby Alten Schwartz (AbbyAltenSchwartz.com) is a freelance journalist whose bylines include *The Washington Post*, *HuffPost*, *AARP*, *Salon*, and *WIRED*. Her literary work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and she's currently writing a memoir. Abby lives with her husband near Philly (Go Birds!) and works as a healthcare writer.

18 Connections to Make in Publishing

Writing is a very solitary experience. Publishing, on the other hand, is very collaborative in a variety of ways, with many people involved. Even if you sneak a quick peek at the masthead of this magazine, you'll spot the names of many different types of editors, an art director, marketing designer, competitions manager, VP general manager, advertising reps, and customer service—and that still doesn't include everyone involved with getting out an issue of this magazine every two months. Publishing is a team effort, so I wanted to spotlight many of the people writers can make connections with. Keep in mind that for smaller operations, one person may fill multiple roles.

AD REPS

I know most people have thoughts about advertising, but advertising is an essential element to keeping the lights on for many magazines and online publications. As such, ad reps—the people who deal with advertisers—are essential. The more successful they are, the more money publishers have to pay employees, including freelance writers.

AGENTS

When I think of agents, I typically think of literary agents, but there

are also agents who handle foreign rights, film rights, and all the other rights that freelancers and authors hope they can someday exploit. Agents represent writers in negotiating contracts, following up on payments, and—depending on the agent—other tasks. Agents typically don't earn money until their writers are paid, so they're motivated to put all their energy into representing only those writers they believe in the most.

BOOK INFLUENCERS

While TikTok and other social media platforms have pushed book influencers to the forefront of publishing in recent years, book influencers have existed in various forms as long as books. These can include celebrities, people with book clubs, podcasters, YouTubers, BookTokers, Bookstagrammers, and many others. Some authors will also use street teams to help get the word out about their projects.

BOOK REVIEWERS

While book reviewers can help promote writers in a similar way to book influencers, promotion is not their main goal. Rather, it's to give a fair assessment of the books they read and to help set—for better or worse—reader expectations.

BOOKSELLERS

When I think of booksellers, I think of two types: the kind who sell books in bookstores and the kind who sell books to bookstores, as well as other retailers and libraries. The former work for the bookstores, the latter typically work for the book publishers. Both play a vital role in helping authors sell more books.

DESIGNERS

Art designers and art directors play a key role in catching the attention of readers. Whether it's through a slick magazine design or a book cover that pops, designers work to complement the efforts of writers.

DIRECTORS

Many writers may immediately think of movie or stage directors, but I'm actually thinking of the directors for live and virtual writing conferences, conventions, book fairs, book festivals, and various forms of in-person and online education opportunities. These thoughtful individuals put together excellent opportunities for authors to promote their books—and maybe even make a little money on the side for speaking and/or teaching fees.

EDITORS

There are so many editors that all offer a range of services to writers.

The editors at magazines and websites work with writers to publish shorter pieces, while book editors do the same for book-length materials. Copy editors and proofreaders will help improve manuscripts before publication. Meanwhile, managing editors (for magazines) and acquiring editors (for books) tend to handle a lot of the payment and contracts.

ILLUSTRATORS

For most writers, illustrators show up for picture books and graphic novels, and they're an integral part of the storytelling process. However, illustrators can be used in many other ways as well. (For instance, check out the illustration for my Poetic Asides column in the front of the magazine.)

INSTRUCTORS/TEACHERS

Instructors and teachers are a resource many authors overlook as a way to promote their writing and generate book sales, but many children's book authors know that making school appearances is a great way to reach their target audience. However, instructors and teachers at all levels of education rely on information to educate their students, and that benefits many authors.

LIBRARIANS

Some folks think that all the books in libraries are free, but the libraries actually have to buy library editions. Plus, the librarians working at those libraries are great promoters of books and reading—and that benefits authors.

MARKETERS

Some of these roles may seem to overlap (like advertising, marketing, and publicity), but most mid-sized or larger publishers have

distinct groups working on each. Advertising is focused on promoting authors to readers by paying for space on various platforms (like in magazines or on websites); publicity is focused on promoting authors to various media (including television); and marketing is focused on promoting authors directly to readers through avenues like newsletters and social media (and sometimes through things like in-store promotions at bookstores).

ORGANIZERS

One group I didn't think about too much until I published my first poetry collection was the people who organize various reading series, whether they're a weekly open mic or a monthly reading series. Some of these happen at bookstores, some occur at coffee shops, and still others take place at universities. One woman in North Carolina hosted me for a series she ran out of her house to do a joint reading and presentation on publishing.

PRODUCTION TEAM

This often-overlooked team is the backbone of print publishing. People who work in production make sure the paper is sized and ordered, and they make every effort to keep prices down and quality up so that both the publisher make a profit. In addition to handling scheduling, these folks adjust to a range of hurdles that can happen during a publishing cycle to ensure magazines and books get to bookstores and distributors on time.

PUBLICISTS

As mentioned earlier, publicists focus on promoting authors to various media. For instance, I may receive

more than five dozen pitches from publicists on any given day promoting authors who have books coming out (or that recently hit the shelves). Some of these publicists work for the book publishing companies, but many authors also hire independent publicists to add a little extra grease to the publicity wheel. The goal is to get the author—and their book—out there whether through interviews, reading lists, guest posts, or other content types to raise awareness and sell more books.

PUBLISHERS

Obviously, publishing is difficult without the publisher to make it all happen. While many writers think of the big publishers for books and publishing companies for magazines, more than a few authors have taken publishing into their own hands. It's more work, but it offers authors more control as well.

READERS

While technically a book doesn't need a reader to get published, it sure makes it more fun for everyone involved if there are readers who engage with the material. Beyond sales, readers are necessary to breathe life into the writing through their interactions with it.

WRITERS

Saving the best for last? I might be biased, but I think so. After all, it's hard to publish or sell a book or share an amazing article, story, or poem without the book, article, story, or poem manuscript. It's all impossible without writers. **WD**

Robert Lee Brewer is senior editor of WD and author of *The Complete Guide of Poetic Forms*.



LEVEL UP YOUR WRITING(LIFE)

Advice and tips to boost your writing skills.

BY SHARON SHORT

Making IRL Connections That Last

Ever since Facebook moved out of Mark Zuckerberg's dorm room and into the mainstream two decades ago, much has been made of the importance of social media platforms for writers.

And ever since COVID, much has been made of the convenience of online workshops, write-ins, meet-ups, and even book events.

Now, social media does provide a way for writers and others in the creative writing space to network. And platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet provide a way to attend events or meet up that are certainly more convenient and affordable than meeting in person.

So, I'm not going to pretend to be a Luddite and disparage technological advances that have eased the way for so many more writers to connect with one another.

However, so strongly do I feel about in-real-life (IRL) connections that I'm willing (just this once!) to eschew the craft topic I usually lead with and jump right into ...

AS FOR YOU, DEAR WRITER ...

Opportunities abound for IRL connections for writers: writing

workshops or conferences, readings, writing groups, book fairs, classes, and so on.

These can range from cost-free with minimal time commitment (e.g., going to your local bookstore or library for an author's book event) to pricier events that require a significant time commitment (e.g., a weeklong writing workshop necessitating travel and time off from work or other obligations). And everything in-between.

Value of IRL Connections

Why is it worth the labor and cost of networking at IRL events, when virtual meet-ups are so much easier and more convenient?

My observation as a fan of both virtual and IRL formats is that while virtual offers efficiency, IRL offers benefits that are difficult to replicate in virtual spaces:

- **RAPPORT**—While digital participants can certainly connect in comments sections, IRL encounters make it much more possible to find like-minded writers and experience whether or not you will be at

ease in future meet-ups. Or, as the kids say these days, to do a quick “vibe check.”

- **STICKINESS**—My experience has been that organic IRL connections I make tend to bloom more lavishly, grow deeper roots, and endure longer than those made solely online. In fact, several of my closest friends today are people whom I first became acquainted with years—in some cases, even decades—ago at writing events.
- **SURPRISE!**—IRL experiences offer a greater likelihood of surprises—usually, from my experience, pleasant surprises. Such as the time I met a writer at a mystery fan conference just because we happened to sit next to each other at lunch. Our “vibes” checked, we got to talking, and it turned out she has a relative who is friends with an employee at a museum where I'd done some of my research for my novel *Trouble Island* and where I hoped to later promote my work. That connection led to signing 50 copies of my novel for the museum store and

speaking to the museum's book club via Zoom. (Funny how IRL connections can lead to digital events!) Later, I had an opportunity to offer her an introduction to my agent, which she gladly accepted.

But don't just rely on my experience. A recent article in *Forbes*, "Why There's No Substitute for the Power of In-Person Networking," (March 24, 2025), makes the case for IRL connections and quotes a study from the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* which "found that making a request in person is 34 times more successful than making that same request via email—largely due to the emotions conveyed during in-person conversation."

BUT ... I'M INTROVERTED!

Me too, dear writer; me too.

Thankfully, we don't have to force ourselves to be extroverted to get the most out of IRL experiences:

- Prepare a few general, noninvasive questions. *What drew you to this conference? Have you attended before? Or, at a reading: Are you a fan of the author? What else do you like to read?*
- Know your boundaries and respect the boundaries of others. Need a break from all the networking? Take one! (Or two.) Being refreshed and having fewer interactions but of higher quality is always preferable to forcing yourself to meet a whirlwind of people.

FOLLOW UP

Once you've put in the effort to make connections IRL, keep the relationship going—and preferably, growing.

- **HAVE A SIMPLE BUSINESS CARD**—your name, email address, URL for your website (if you have one), and (if you're already published or self-published) a few of your titles. Keep the back blank so you can jot a note before giving your card to your new acquaintance, something like, *Great to meet you at Joe's reading! Or Enjoyed chatting about gardening and mysteries!*

- **A ONE-SENTENCE LOGLINE (OR PITCH)**—if appropriate for where you are in your writing journey, develop a one-sentence (two at most) description of the project you most wish to chat about with people. Articles and books abound on how (and why) to write that pesky one-to-two sentence pitch. My favorite: *Sell Your Story in a Single Sentence*, by Lane Shetter Bishop. Though geared toward scriptwriters, fiction and nonfiction writers will benefit from this craft book as well.

Now, what will you do with this very brief pitch? Well, what you will not do is run up to people, introduce yourself, and blurt out your pitch. What you should do is have this pitch tucked away in your mind so when someone asks you: *What are you writing?* you can offer a succinct, and hopefully compelling, answer.

- **KEEP TRACK OF THE CONNECTIONS YOU MAKE.** How you keep track is up to you. Just be sure to make a few notes—on the back of your new acquaintances' cards, on sticky notes you attach to the cards, in a spreadsheet—about how you met this person and what you discussed.

- **USE VIRTUAL OR DIGITAL TOOLS TO AUGMENT IRL CONNECTIONS** you've worked so hard to make. Follow up a week or so later with a gracious email thanking the person for chatting with you and sharing your delight in having met them (assuming this is truly how you feel). Occasionally check in via text or email (depending on your and your contacts' preferences), set up a Zoom chat or Google Meet to catch up with one another, and so on. For example, at the mystery conference mentioned above, I met another historical suspense writer who lives more than 800 miles away from me. So, our opportunities to meet up in person will be limited in the future. But we connected so well that we now have quarterly Zoom chats to catch up, provide each other with encouragement, and share insights into our craft and the publishing business.

Finally, I encourage you to experience IRL writing events as much as your circumstances and preferences allow. Doing so might nudge you a bit out of your comfort zone—but isn't that true of most elements of the writing life? And often in writing, as in life, being willing to accept a little discomfort to make new connections may yield long-lasting relationships and benefits. **WD**

Sharon Short (SharonShort.com) is the award-winning author of more than 14 novels, most recently the Kinship Historical Mystery Series (as Jess Montgomery) and the historical suspense *Trouble Island*.

Tips for making your story concrete.

BY MORIAH RICHARD

Ethically Diverse Storytelling, Part 1

When it comes to diversity and representation, my go-to example for how to do it well is always the *Six of Crows* duology by Leigh Bardugo. There are queer and straight characters; characters with neurodivergence; some with physical disabilities; plus-sized characters; realistic portrayals of PTSD and other mental health issues; various religious beliefs; and a wide range of race and ethnicities. And people say that YA can't (or shouldn't) support a diverse cast!

But the Grishaverse isn't the only one out there with realistic and diverse people. As DEI programs and other initiatives are falling under attack, we writers need to understand the importance of diversity in our storytelling. As Melinda French Gates says in *The Moment of Lift*, "In my view, there is no morality without empathy ... Morality is loving your neighbor as yourself, which comes from seeing your neighbor as yourself, which means trying to ease your neighbor's burdens—not add to them."

But with so much potential for harmful stereotypes, tokenism, and cultural appreciation, where is a world-builder to begin?

Like anything else we do, we just have to take it one step at a time.

UNDERSTANDING THE NUANCES

The first thing we need to tackle are the key terms when it comes to understanding this part of building your world. Here is a quick and easy list:

- **RACE:** Socially constructed (which means its meaning is created and maintained by a society through shared agreement and cultural practices rather than it being a fact of nature) categories that are often based on physical appearance. An example of this includes the "one-drop rule" in the U.S., where someone was classified as Black if they had even "one drop" of Black blood, something that was even dictated by some state laws. Now, the U.S. has a broader interpretation of multiracial identity, and these laws are no longer legally enforceable through the work of civil rights activists, but the legacy of these laws and their effect on the social fabric remain.
- **ETHNICITY:** Shared cultural heritage, language, and traditions. An example of this is how someone can be Latinx but can have a wide range of skin tones and hair types, since being Latinx is

tied to the Spanish language and the culture of Latin America and not race.

- **CULTURE:** The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization. An example of this is German and Pennsylvania Dutch: Though Pa. Dutch people in America came from German immigrants, their language, customs, folklore, and practices (whether Plain or Fancy Dutch) have developed independently from Germany and differ dramatically.
- **NATIONALITY:** This is the loyalty or devotion to a particular nation. This could either be the nation one was born into or to one that they've emigrated.
- **INTERSECTIONALITY:** This is the way these different identities interact with each other to develop someone's sense of self. For example, Irish Americans might be ethnically Irish but identify as American due to having been born and raised in the U.S.

DEEPENING PLOT

The way these aspects of identity interact is where you see unique world-building developing.

You can see this intersectionality when it comes to language. For example, in my Pa. Dutch household, I grew up around people who would often say things like, “What for soda is that?” or “Is the milk all?” These linguistic oddities are due to the change in sentence structure from Pa. Dutch to English, but they make the speaker stand out from others not from their region.

As you start planning your cultures, it might be worth it to ask yourself the following:

- What are the most common races in the area?
- What are the most common ethnic groups?
- What kinds of things align the people of this region (heritage, traditions, language, etc.)?
- What divides them?
- What are the common reactions of the people of this region when others immigrate to the area?
- In what kind of ways has the ethnicity of the region changed the larger society’s culture?

AVOID ESSENTIALISM

Essentialism is the philosophy that human traits are inherent, and people can be categorized by these inherent traits instead of acknowledging the role that society has in shaping an individual’s beliefs and behaviors. An example of this would be to say that French people are passionate and romantic, whereas Americans are brash and loud. The idea that every single person in an entire country bears the exact same traits isn’t just inaccurate; it can be dangerous when power dynamics and social structures like racism and sexism become involved.

How can it be dangerous? Well, when you strip an entire group of individual traits, you end up dehumanizing them. Some romance writers are guilty of this when writing about how “masculine” a romantic lead is; they break him down to a few traits. He is probably hot-headed and controlling (which is reframed as protectiveness), unemotional (so she can break him down, of course!), and has a voracious sexual appetite. These are sexist ideals about masculinity in the U.S., which discredit both masculine and feminine individuals. Because, of course, if he’s just a bad-tempered ape man, she is a demure, sweet flower of a human who needs to be treasured and protected.

This not only perpetuates sexist stereotypes, but it’s incredibly boring. Who wants to read a hundred stories about the same meathead chasing a beautiful nymph until she finally succumbs to him, and they have wild, Earth-shattering sex? Not me. Give me a better story with dynamic and realistic characters, please.

THE READER’S CULTURAL CONTEXT

It’s important that we not forget that readers are coming to your story with their own cultural context. This means that even if you’re writing a second-world fantasy or sci-fi that has nothing to do with the world we live in, the things you write are going to have real-world consequences, and readers will respond to your work in sometimes negative ways.

An example of this was the 2019 halted publication of Amélie Wen Zhao’s *Blood Heir*, a YA second-world fantasy. In this instance, Amélie was born and raised in Beijing and emigrated to the U.S.

When you strip an entire group of individual traits, you end up dehumanizing them.

when she was 18. That version of *Blood Heir* had a system of slavery written into the plot, and a cast of diverse characters. However, once American first readers got their hands on the book, Amélie began to get overwhelming feedback that her book was anti-Black, her slavery system was offensive, and that she had poorly represented various identities in her work.

In response to this, Amélie asked her publisher to halt the publication until she could do substantial rewrites. On her website, she wrote that the themes and stories in her novel “represent[ed] a specific critique of the epidemic of indentured labor and human trafficking prevalent in many industries across Asia, including in my own home country.” She also said that “the narrative and history of slavery in the U.S. is not something I can, would, or intended to write, but I recognize that I am not writing in merely my own cultural context.”

Even when your story has nothing to do with the history of slavery in the U.S., if you’re writing about a system of slavery, readers will bring their own personal, societal, and historical context to the work. That’s why it’s so important that we draft our stories with care and consciousness. **WD**

Moriah Richard is managing editor of WD.

Writing and publishing advice for picture books, middle-grade, and young adult storytelling.

BY MICHAEL WOODSON

Connecting Young Readers to History

Alyssa Colman's new novel paints a picture of the past to help us connect with the present.

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." A quote so ubiquitous in our collective conscience that its warning has almost become white noise, the irony being we often forget its origin.¹ And yet, it's true; most any experience that feels unique has its historical sibling. Historical fiction has the power to remind us of our connections to bygone eras, acting as an alarm bell, but also as a reminder that we are not alone—and that in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, our power exists in building community.

Alyssa Colman's new book, *Where Only Storms Grow*, deals with these connections: our connections with the past, our connections with a place, and our connections with each other. It follows the Stanton family who live on the Oklahoma panhandle four years into a drought, amidst the worst storm of the Dust Bowl. At the heart of the story are 12-year-old twins Howe and Joanna, whose bond also seems to have dried



up. Howe has dreams of writing poetry and of moving away from the constant troubles of their land, but circumstances force him out of school and away from his writing. Joanna isn't prepared to give up, but her scoliosis leaves her in near-constant pain and unable to physically help in the same way her brother is expected to.

I spoke with Alyssa about writing for the middle-grade audience, their keen eye for detail, and what she hopes they gain. Here's what she had to say.

ON THE PRESENT AND THE PAST COLLIDING

"Wearing masks is how I discovered this story. It was back in 2020, and

1. The quote originates from George Santayana's *The Life of Reason*, published in five parts between 1905–1906, though it is often misattributed to Winston Churchill and Edmund Burke.

it was right about the time we made the switch from wearing cloth masks to finding out that the N95s were better. So, I was online researching where to get masks and what ones to order, and somehow, I came across this article about other times in history when Americans have been asked to wear masks. This article was about the Dust Bowl and how that was another time when masks were incredibly effective at preventing this novel illness. I became fascinated, and having not much else to do at the time, I started reading everything else I could about the Dust Bowl, not even thinking it was going to be a book yet. I wanted to include the masks because they're what brought me to the story to begin with, and because I think a lot of kids will remember that time. It's a touchstone that they have in their own lives that will draw them closer into this historical moment."

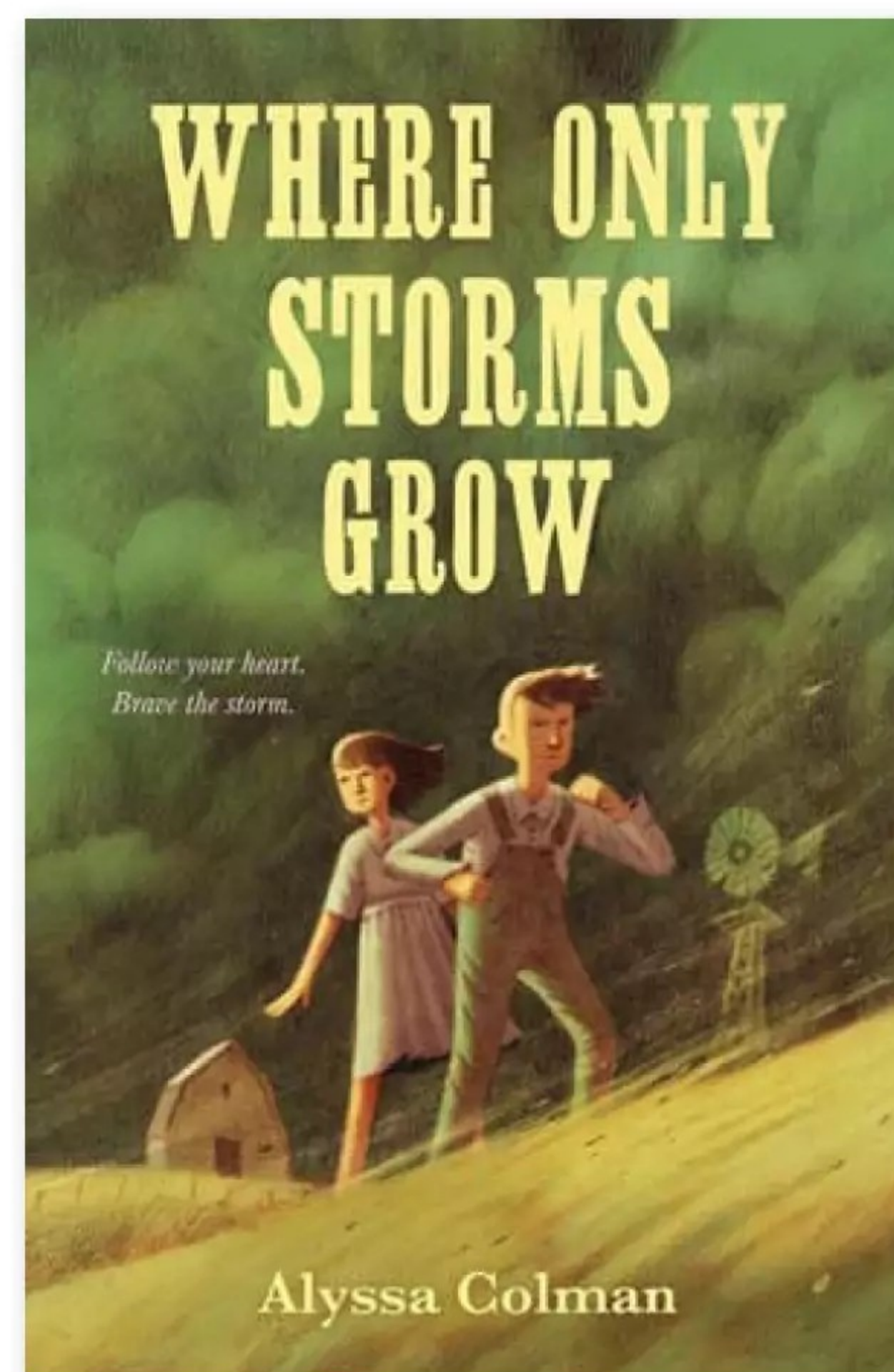
ON REPRESENTING SIBLING CONNECTIONS

"I'm the parent of identical twins, so that definitely played into it, because so many people say, 'Do they do the same thing at the same time?' or 'Do they love exactly the same things?' And the answer is no. They're complete opposites. I've got one introvert, one extrovert, which I kind of modeled Howe and Joanna on, and I think it's going to resonate with kids. I did a school visit for World Read Aloud Day, and a young man, he was in a fifth-grade classroom, he introduced himself and said, 'That's my twin sister over there.' And she waved, and he said, 'We don't usually like reading books about twins. We always find out the twins are either fighting each other or they're

in competition. Is this one of those books?' And I told him about my twins and how I wanted to write a book about twins who love each other very much. They just have to find a new way to show that. I wanted to write this novel about not finding a way back to each other because they're never going to be the people they were before, but to find a way forward together."

ON THE EXPECTATIONS FROM MIDDLE-GRADE READERS

"Middle-grade readers are sticklers for detail. These kids are amazing. They know how many bolts are in the *Titanic*, and they're going to call you on it, too. They know all their facts, and if they get into it, they're going to try to call you out. When I start a new project, the first thing I always do is I seek out nonfiction sources for this age group. I go to the library, I look online, I find books, curriculum guides, to see what information these kids will have access to, and what are the points they are going to already be familiar with. I can go deeper and further, but I also make sure they're not going to feel like I have any major gaps because I skipped something that was already in their guides. Then I'd usually build out the story, and then I go in search of more details. There was a lot that I couldn't get my hands on because it wasn't public record. So, I wound up reaching out to the Scoliosis Research Society and the Red Cross. They were able to provide me their annual report from 1935 about their Dust Bowl operations, which was incredibly helpful. All of these people were so excited to work with the book. I was always a



little afraid to ask for help, but they were wonderful and thought it was great."

ON THE READING EXPERIENCE

"The whole book is really a meditation on how to live in circumstances that are beyond your control. Because Joanna can't control her scoliosis, Howe can't control where he is because he's a kid, he can't control getting back to school. And there are all these things that could potentially have caused the characters to not have agency, but they are trying to find a way forward through the Dust Bowl. I hope that [readers] take away a sense that even when things seem really bad, there's always a way forward if we work together." **WD**

Michael Woodson is the content editor for WD.



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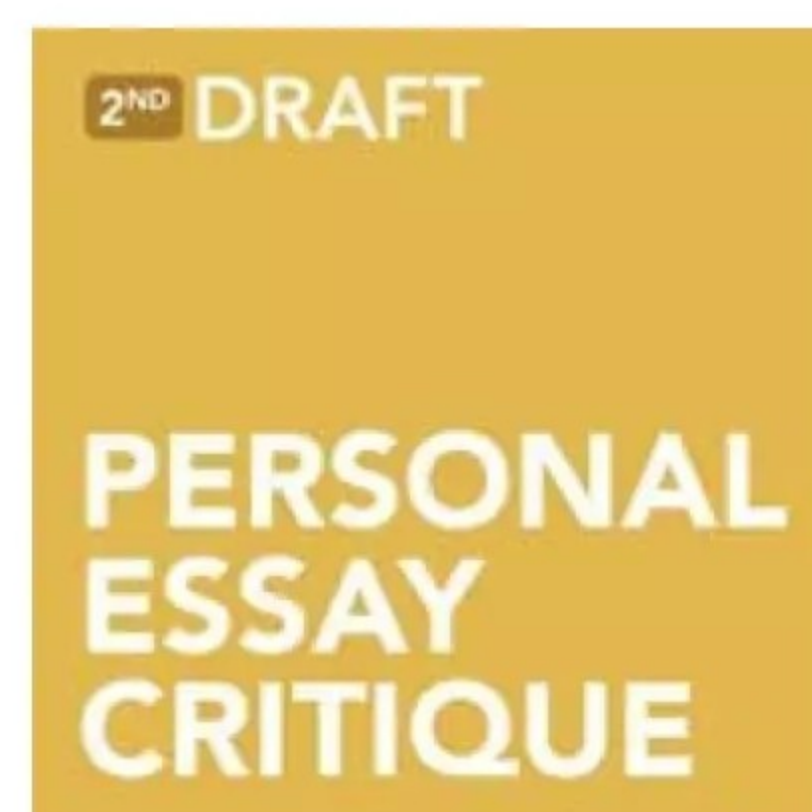
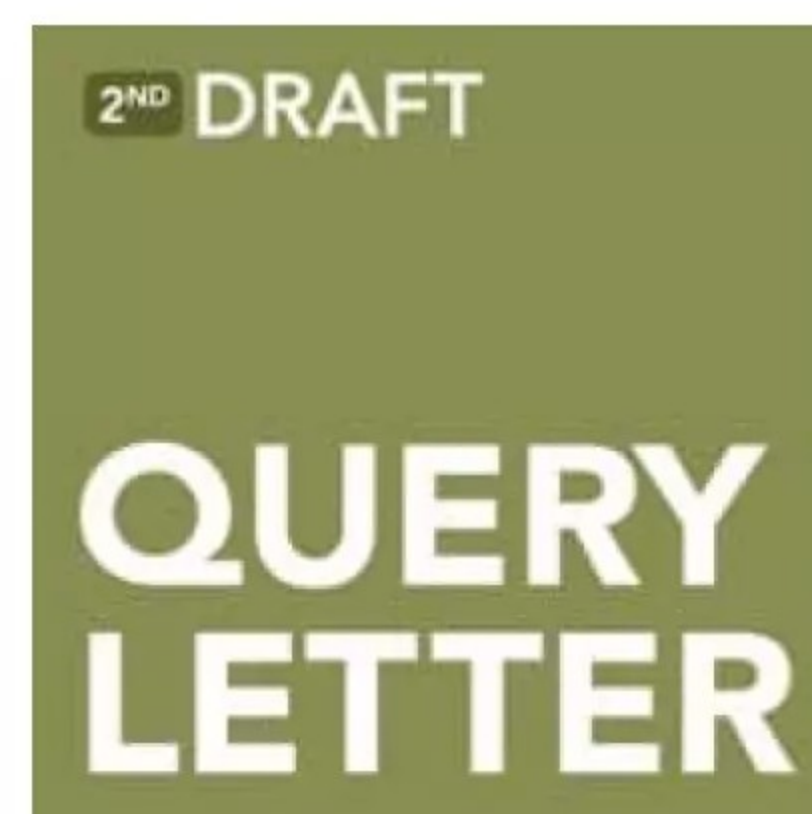
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WRITER'S DIGEST



FRONTLIST/BACKLIST

Whether hot off the presses or on the shelves for years, a good book is worth talking about.

BY AMY JONES

Soul Connection

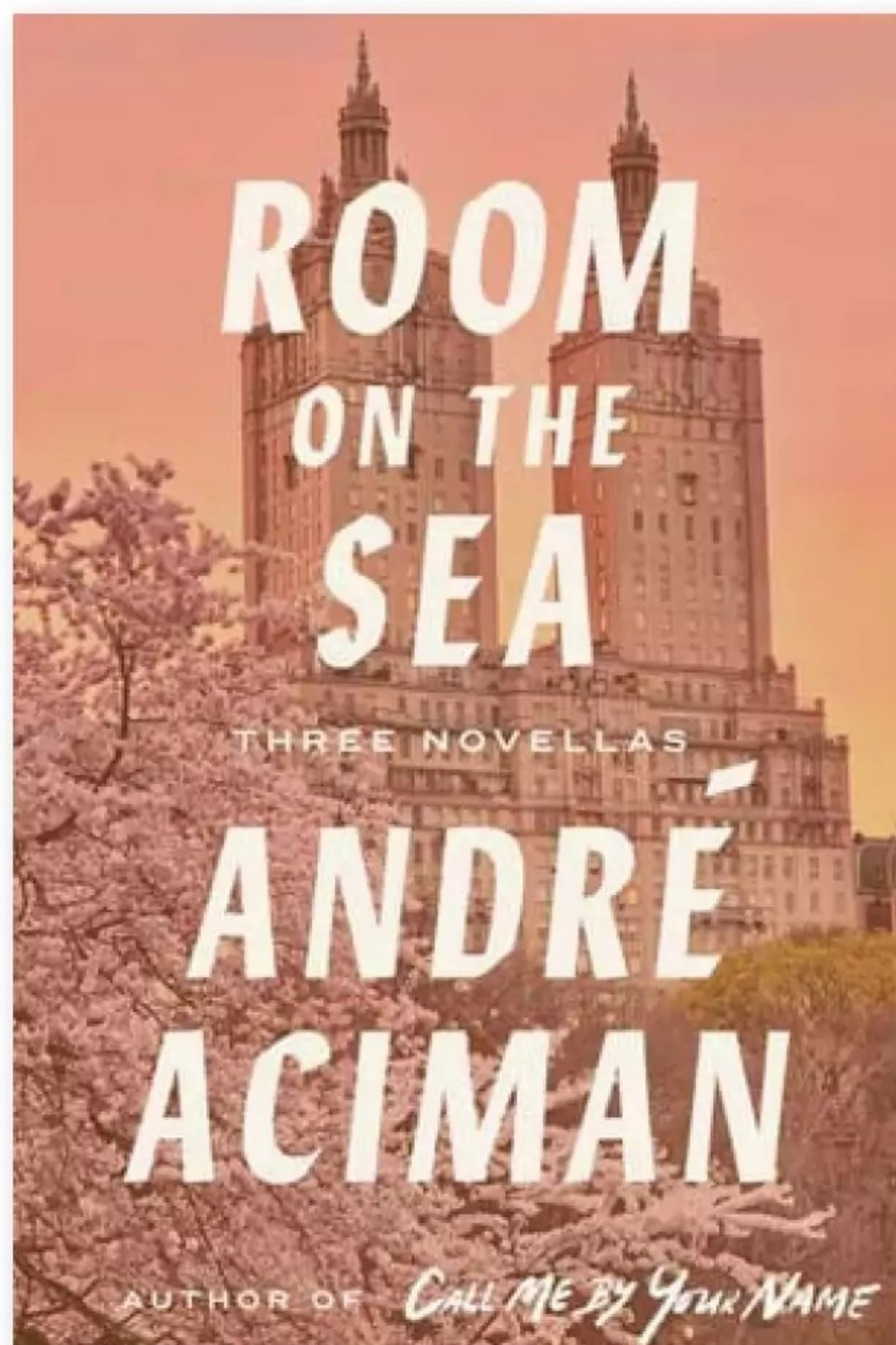
Frontlist

Room on the Sea: Three Novellas by André Aciman

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Novellas, June 2025)

SYNOPSIS: In the first of three novellas, *The Gentleman From Peru* begins with a group of eight friends—Mark, Basil, Emma, Claire, Angelica, Paul, Margot, and Oscar—having dinner at a hotel restaurant on the Amalfi Coast when a strange man walks up and puts his hand on Mark's shoulder, almost immediately relieving the pain Mark has felt since a sporting injury. The group becomes even more confused and disconcerted when the stranger starts revealing information about each of them that he should have no way of knowing. Over the course of a few days, the stranger strikes up a particular friendship with Margot, the most reticent of the bunch, until it becomes clear, this was no chance encounter.

In *Room on the Sea*, two strangers meet while waiting for jury duty and after, what is at first, a strained conversation about the book the woman is reading (*Wuthering Heights*), they start to connect and have lunch together at a nearby Chinese restaurant (neither of their

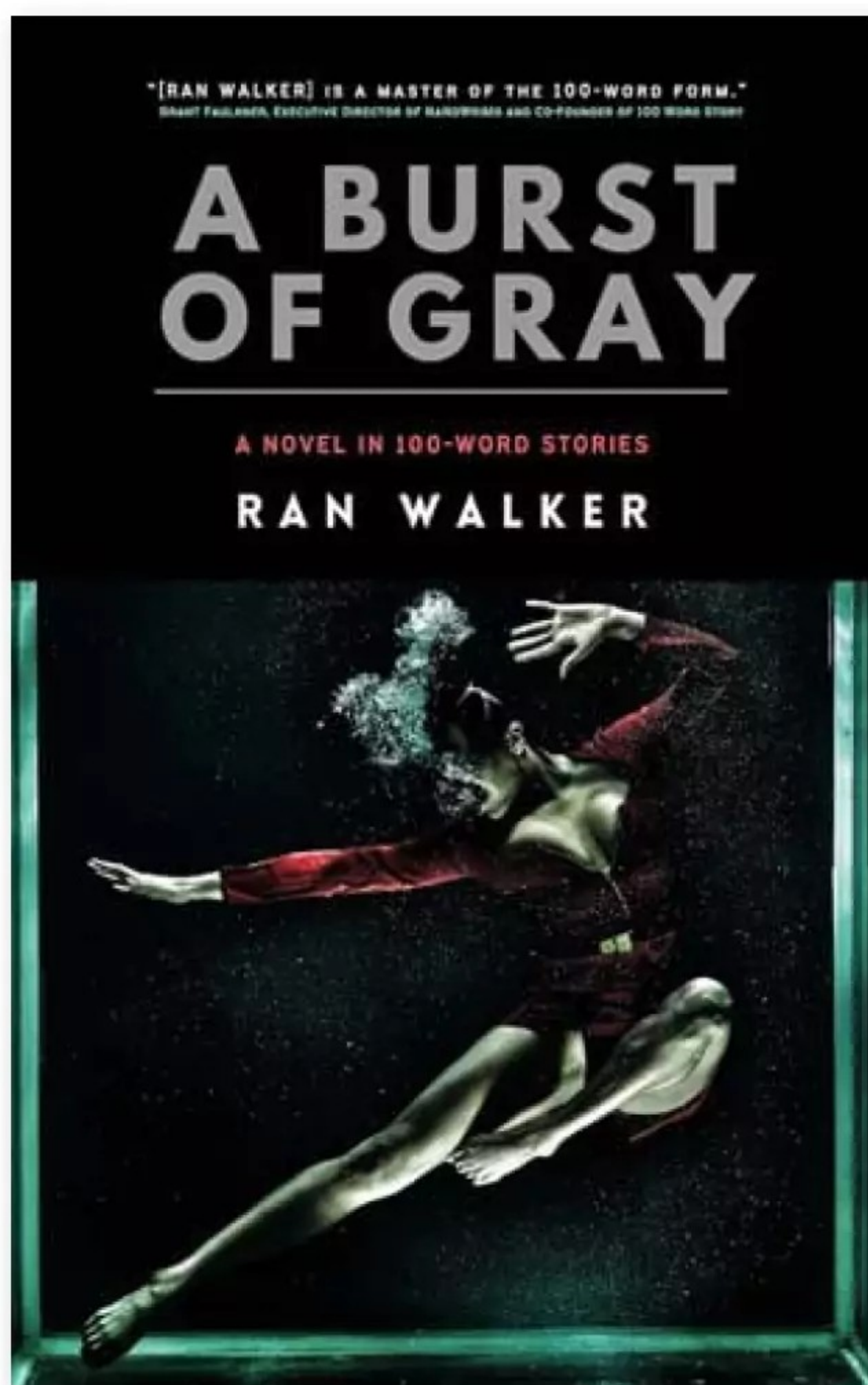


spouses like Chinese food). From there, a surprising relationship develops over the course of the week.

Finally, *Mariana* is a contemporary take on a centuries-old story of a nun seduced and discarded by a well-known man-about-town as she works through her heartbreak and sense of betrayal.

FOR WRITERS: For an issue themed around making connections in storytelling, there is no better example of how to write various types of connections between characters than the collection *Room on the Sea*. With *The Gentleman from Peru*,

Aciman shows an older man showing a strange interest in and revealing disturbing amounts of information about a much, much younger woman, who is understandably put off by the unwanted attention. Study this story to see how one character can slowly win over the other. On the opposite end of that spectrum, *Room on the Sea* is a story to look to if you're writing about two people who are almost instantly taken with each other. How do they meet? What's the turning point that pushes them from seeing each other as total strangers to a mutual recognition that something more is going on? This story brilliantly shows how a moment that is mundane to everyone else can, with the right person, grow into something with the potential to alter lives. Finally, if you're writing about missed connections or unrequited love (a version of a missed connection, if you think about it), look to *Mariana*. Written in first person present tense, this closeness to the title character allows readers to experience the consuming nature of a freshly broken heart and everything that entails. The loneliness of not seeing the person regularly or intimately anymore—the



inside jokes you'll never share again. The elation closely followed by the agony of seeing the person randomly, only to discover they're with someone else. The twists and turns of attempting to rationalize your irrational behavior as you try to prove that you too have moved on—but not moved on enough that you wouldn't say yes to just one more rendezvous. While this story certainly wouldn't be classified as a romance, it would be useful when writing the third-act breakup.

Backlist

***A Burst of Gray* by Ran Walker**
(45 Alternate Press, a novel in 100-word stories, 2021)

SYNOPSIS: Composed of one-hundred 100-word stories, *A Burst of Gray* imagines a world in which the only people who can see in full color are Chromats, people who have found their true soulmates. Everyone else experiences the world in shades of gray. For 40-year-old Slate, like many “Color Chasers,”

this means he has to make a choice: build a life with someone he loves but isn't his true soulmate or hold out hope that one day, against all odds, he'll happen to be in the right place at the right time to suddenly see in color. Either option has risks.

One day, a chance encounter makes Slate's world explode in color but instead of running toward each other, his soulmate runs away. With his life flipped upside down, Slate must now get to the bottom of her unexpected and heartbreaking reaction.

FOR WRITERS: Ran Walker has written about flash fiction, specifically drabbles (100-word stories), for this magazine many times, and in those articles, he has occasionally included examples of his own work. Each of those examples demonstrated the power that can be packed into such an economical story in which each word matters. But with *A Burst of Gray*, Walker pushes the form even further. He shows that it's possible to create a novel's worth of conflict while examining complex topics like class, economic inequity, and love, in just 10,000 words. If your goal is to write tightly composed, emotionally weighty fiction, look to *A Burst of Gray*. **WD**

Amy Jones is editor-in-chief of WD. Follow her on Instagram @AmyMJones_5.

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CONFERENCE GUIDE
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025

- Keep in mind that there may be more than one workshop in each of the listings.
- These workshops are listed alphabetically by state, country, or continent.
- When you find workshops that interest you, be sure to call, email, or check the website of the instructor or organization for additional information.
- All listings are paid advertisements.

CALIFORNIA

CUESTA COLLEGE CENTRAL COAST WRITERS' CONFERENCE has been helping new and established writers fulfill their dreams since 1984. This year's event will be held on Friday and Saturday, September 26–27, 2025 in San Luis Obispo, Calif. Now in its 41st year, CCWC is one of the longest, continuous writers' events in the country and offers a variety of workshops featuring experts in various genres, master classes, pitch and critique sessions, and more. Register early and save: CentralCoastWritersConference.com

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NEW JERSEY

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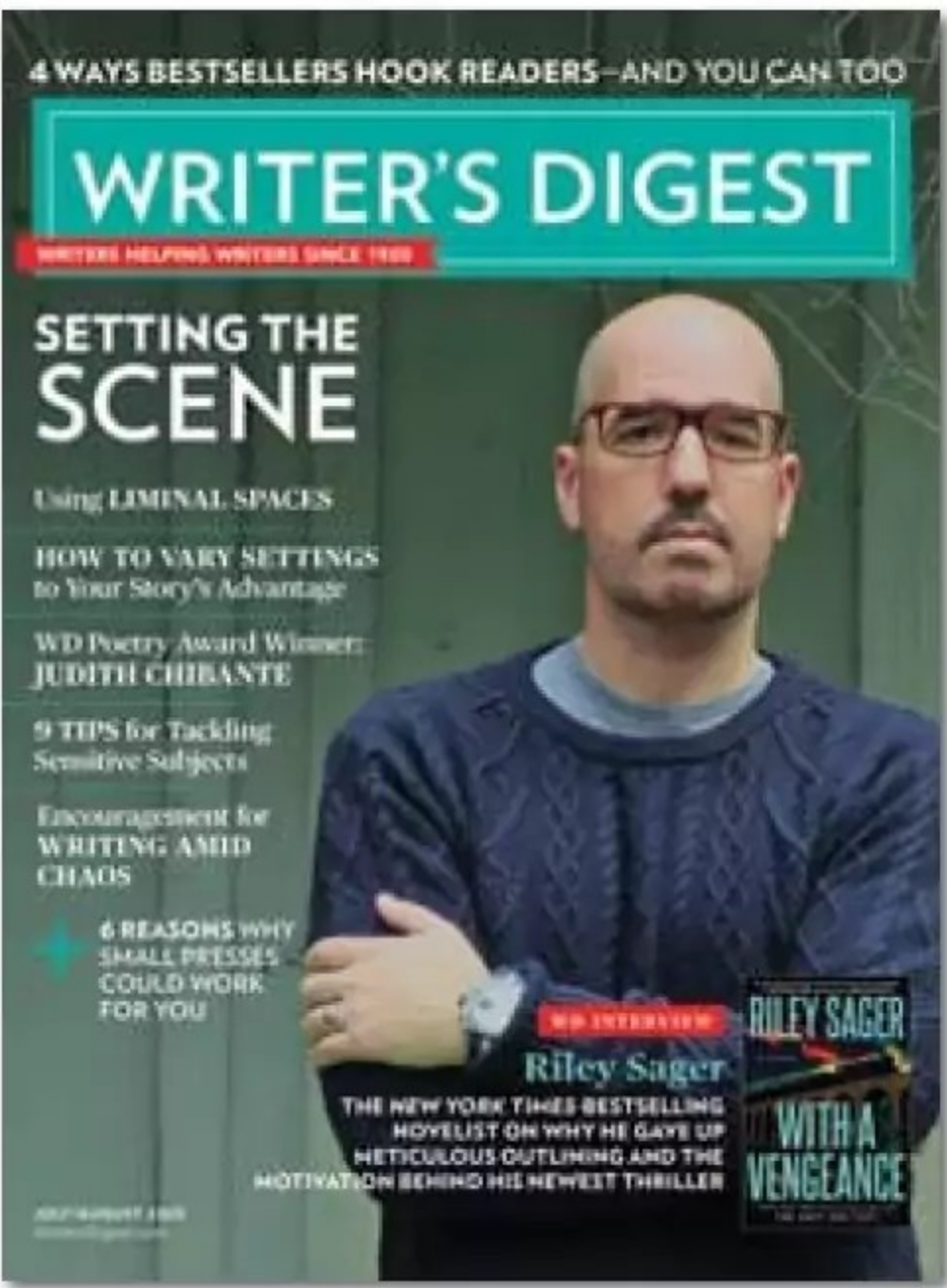
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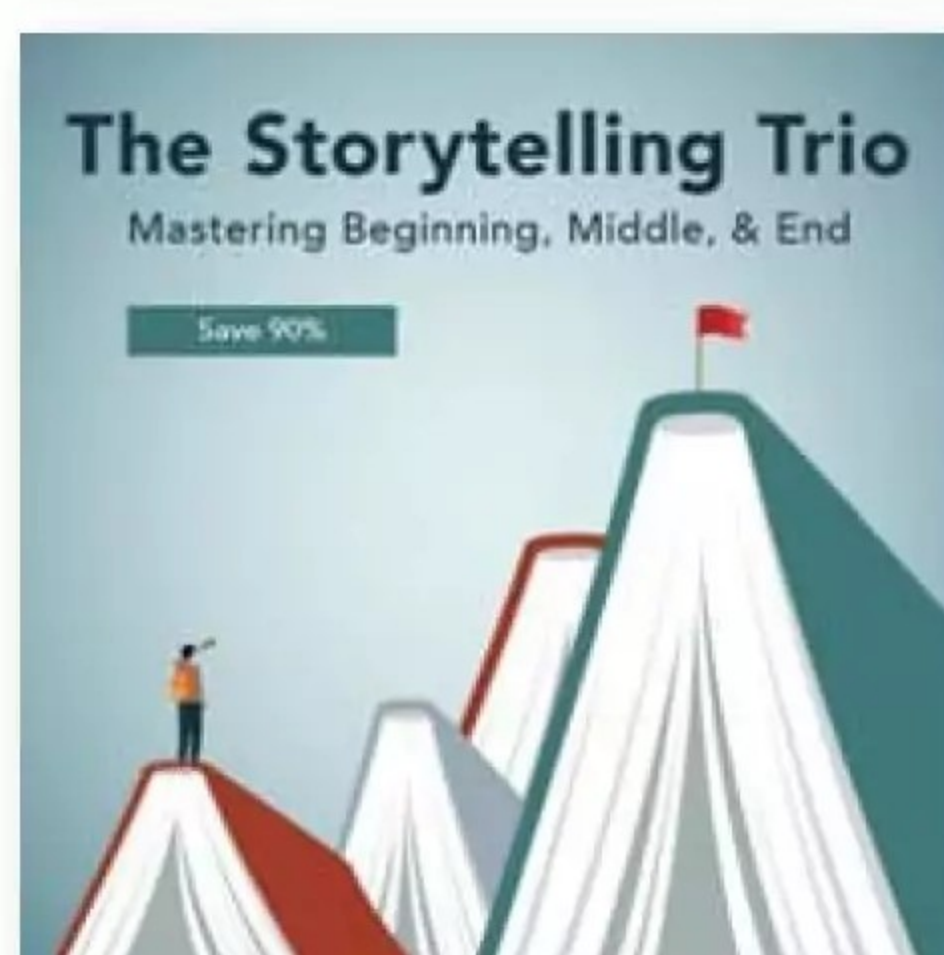


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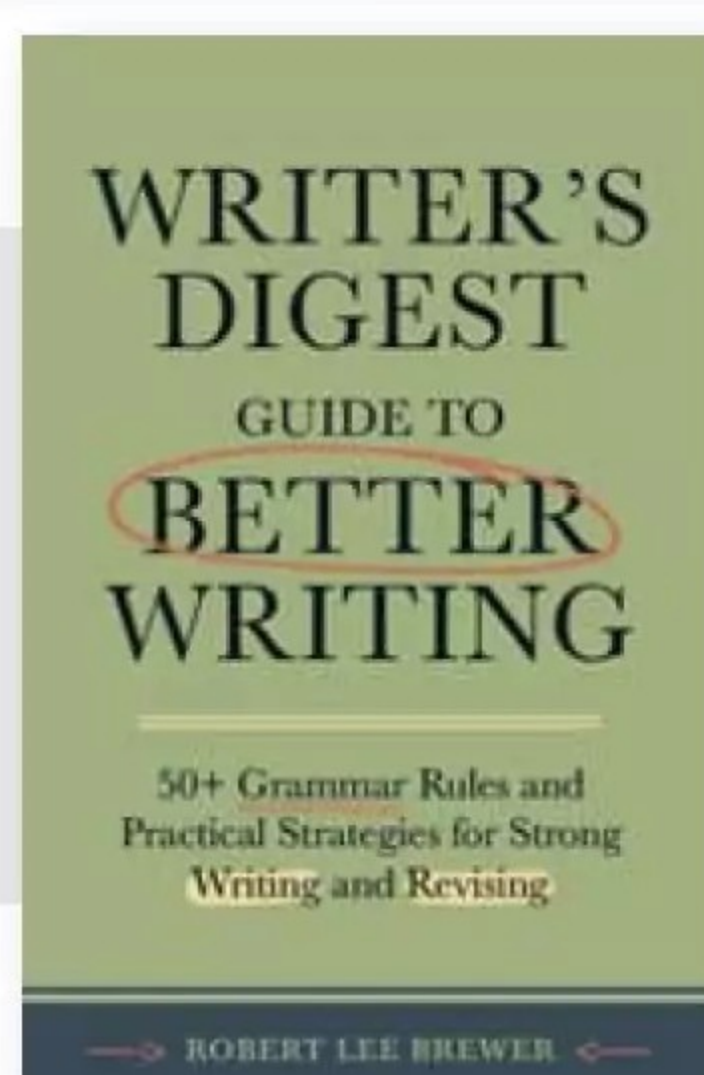
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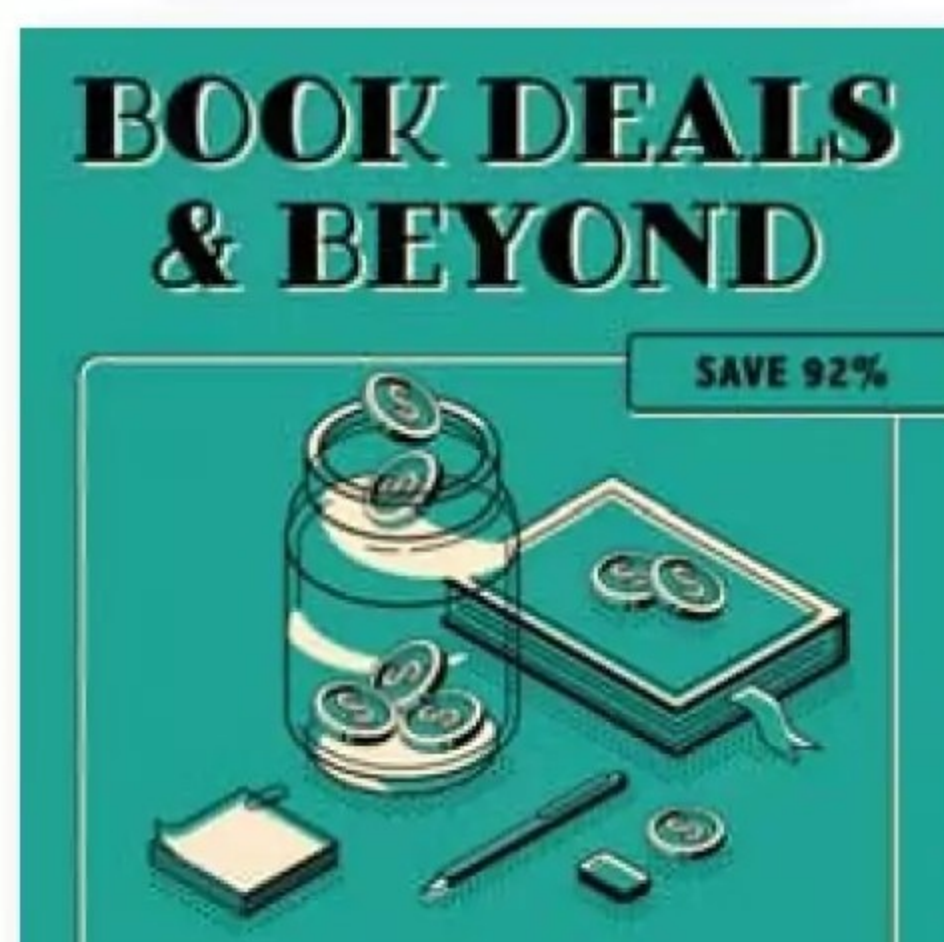
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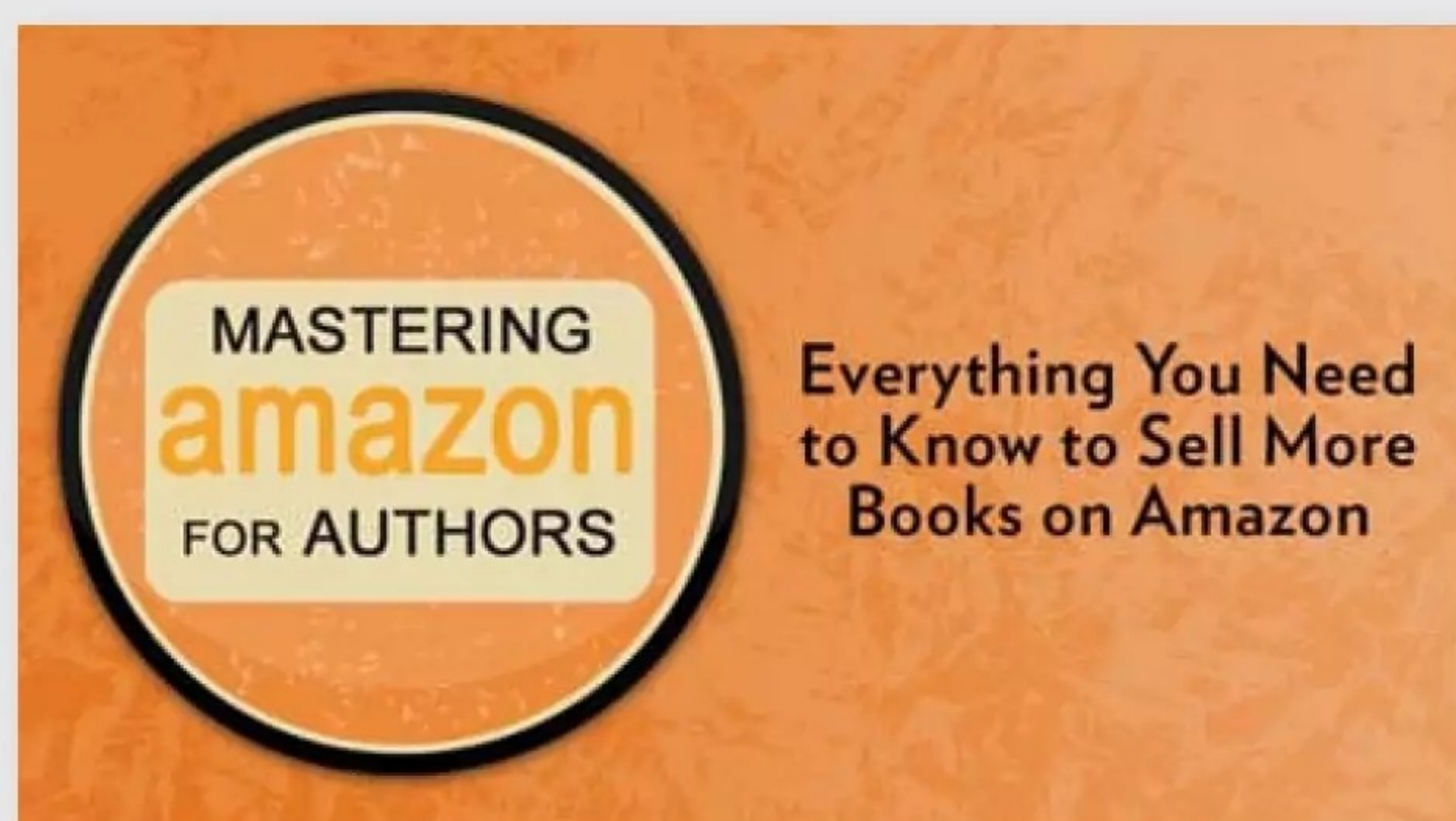
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Do you have writer's block?

YES

OF COURSE I DO

Do you have an internal dialogue with yourself (which sounds a lot better than saying I hear voices in my head)?

YES

Steal some of that and put some of the dialogue on the page.

NO

My muse and I are fighting.

Contact therapist for couples counseling.

Still not talking? It's time you had an intervention for your writer's block. You may have to organize it yourself.

Interventions should have refreshments & light snacks—pretty much what you have in a writing group.

I want to write but outside factors prevent me from being a bestseller.

OR

I keep receiving calls asking for 2028 election donations.

Set phone to mute and turn off the news.

OR

There's a new Wordle.

Cancel your NYT subscription.

I know my problem is procrastination.

OR

I start researching the Spanish-American War and instead find myself reading recipes for Spanish omelets.

You have Google Blackhole Syndrome or worse, Backstory Vortex.

Consult an editor, immediately.

OR

Go on a Google fast. Instead of researching stuff, just start making shit up. Fiction is always more interesting than the truth.

I never seem to get a comfortable arrangement of pens, coffee, notebook, and chair position. I've tried, I really have.

You are in a Desk Feng Shui Funk.

OR

Head straight to IKEA.

You may have OCD.

OR

Fiction writers: Give all your characters OCD.

OR

Nonfiction writers: Write a self-help OCD book.

Seek professional help.

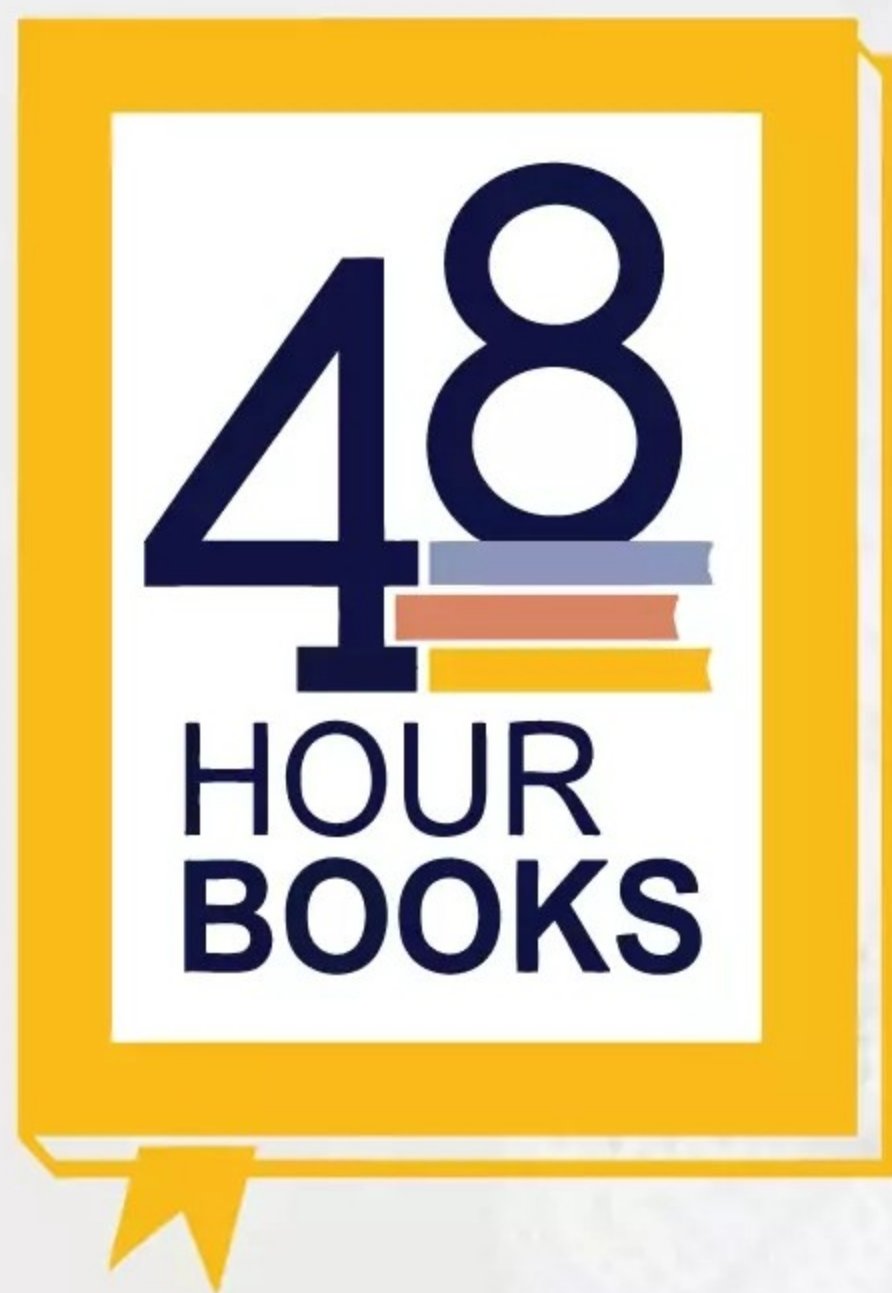
It's also too damn cold or too hot to write.

Dress in layers.

Illustrations: A cat on a keyboard, a person running, a Wordle game, a drop of ink.

Bob Eckstein's new book is *Footnotes From the Most Fascinating Museums*.

Mark Shatz wrote the bestselling humor writing book *Comedy Writing Secrets* (3rd ed).



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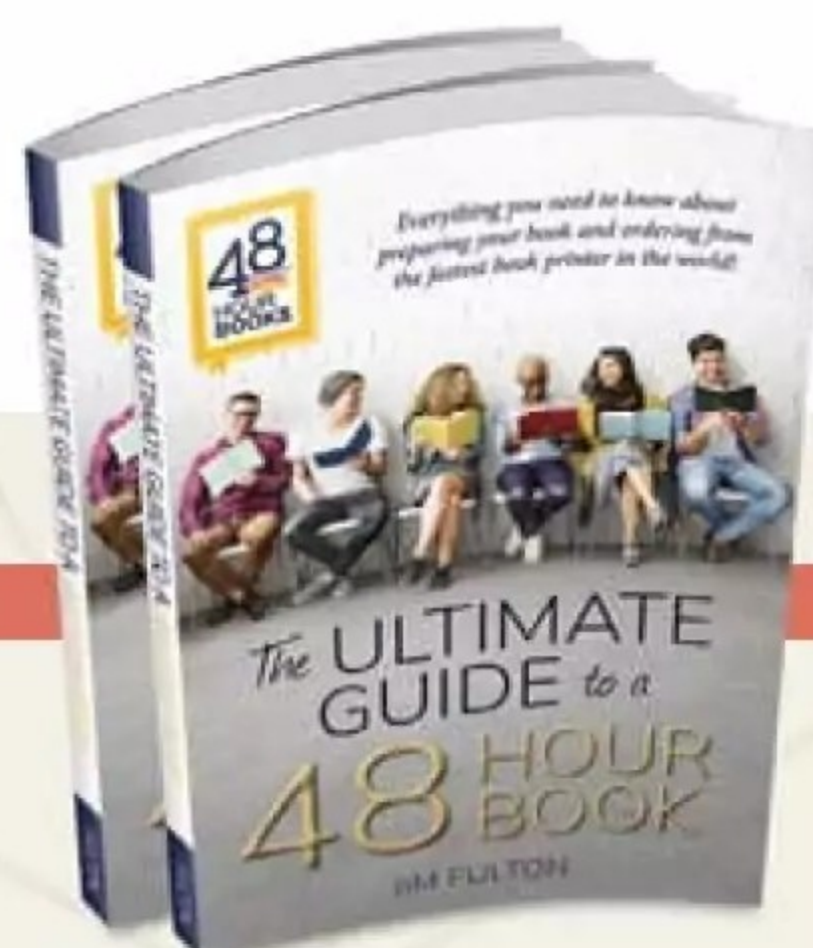
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