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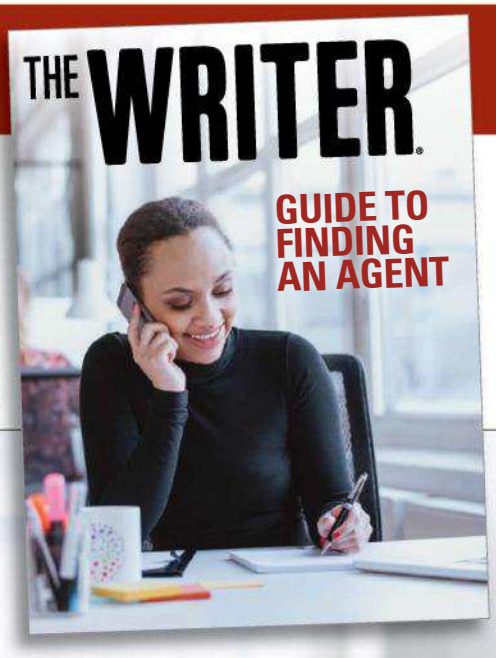

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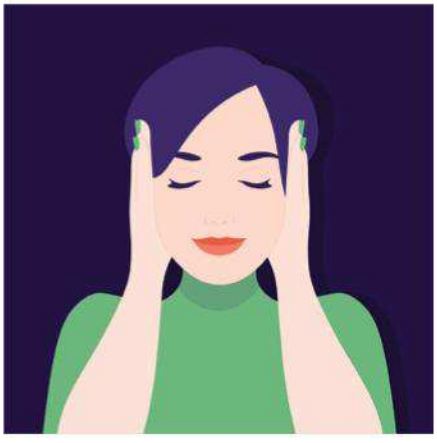
FEATURES



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DEPARTMENTS

IN EVERY ISSUE

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FROM THE EDITOR

Readers, I think it's high time we had a conversation about rejection.

Rejection smarts. It stings. It makes us all lash out in unbecoming ways, because it is so wretchedly difficult to separate a rejection of our *work* from a rejection of our *selves*. Every single time we put pen to paper, we are imprinting a piece of ourselves upon the page. We work and we anguish and fret and sweat over a body of work, and then we choose to ship it off to perfect strangers with the vague hope that they will love it as much as we do.

But here's the thing: No one will *ever* love your work as much as you do. No one else dreamt it, shaped it, and bore it to fruition. Others may champion it, but no one else can be its creator. The key to preserving your sanity and self-worth as you navigate the maddening querying process is this: *Rejection is less of a damnation of you and your talent than it is a sheer mathematical certainty.*

You *will* be rejected, dear reader. You can be the most talented wordsmith ever to command the English language, and you will still be rejected. The ratio of writers to publishing opportunities is staggeringly unfair. To wit: If an editor receives 500 pitches a day, but only has a daily budget to publish five stories, his acceptance rate is a whopping 1 percent. The amount of manuscripts a typical agent receives in a year could fill three train cars, but the amount she accepts will fill a tidy desk drawer – and she'll successfully sell even less. This is the game we're in, writers. This is the way of it. You will pour your thoughts and dreams into an elephant and then try to cram it through a pinhole.

Luckily, there are things you can do to improve your odds: You could write about something topical, which creates an urgency to publish your work sooner rather than later. You could deftly incorporate humor, which is something many (though not all!) editors say they want to see more often. You can study the market to identify what's doing well in your field. And, instead of tossing your work to the wind willy-nilly, you can target select agents or editors with a proven track record of publishing the kinds of work you like to write.

Lastly, you can resist the urge to fire off a snippy email to your rejecter. Like eating an entire sleeve of Thin Mints in one night, it will feel satisfying in the moment but will leave you with a stomachache and a nagging feeling of shame in the morning. Instead, take a minute. Acknowledge your feelings. Remember the odds game you're playing. And then move onto your next query. Turn each rejection into a stepping stone and clamber upon it. As you keep growing, those rejections will turn into feedback – and then invitations to submit future work – and, finally, sweetly, that elephant of yours will make it to the other side.

Keep writing,

Nicki Porter
Senior Editor

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✳ **"The writer must write. It is a sweet and demanding necessity; without the printed word, he does not exist."** —Nolan Miller

I wrote. I am writing. I will write.

Read the **first-place winner** of our "Your Writing Life" essay contest.

BY CHANTAL MEEK

It is almost one o'clock in the morning, and I am the only one awake. The house makes its nocturnal groans as the water softener flushes, the dishwasher kicks into the final cycle, and the refrigerator attempts to pull the internal temperature back down after a day of leering kids holding the door open – in hopes that the grocery fairy had inexplicably stocked it with more appetizing snacks than they found five minutes before. The dogs are irritated that I am on the couch, as I am betraying our unofficial agreement that they not get on the furniture in my presence. The 20-pound orange cat, who keeps the three dogs and four kids abreast of his penultimate position in the hierarchy (second only to me), snores like the grouchy old man I envision he would be as a human.

Down the hall, one of the girls has spoken something indiscernible to all wakeful ears, understood only by those of the other sleeping daughter, who responds with an equally gibberish phrase. The only other sound is the tapping of my keyboard, as I type the thoughts and stories that have been anxiously waiting to jump from the cyclone in my head.

The older characters, the ones who are a part of the novels that have been marinating for years, know that they must time their exits as if they are hopping into a round of double Dutch, watching for the moment that will keep the rhythm and allow the game to continue. The newbies, the ones who hit me through the day and begin as a short note jotted on a scrap of paper or in a notes app on my phone, often cut to the front of the line. They tend to be louder and less likely to allow sleep until they have been given a place on a page.

I have made four humans who breathe, eat, cry, and love. They are additions to a population that is changed because of their existence. One may create technology that saves the planet from climate change, whether the politicians deem it valid or not. One may make art that draws crowds of fans and haters but sparks necessary dialogue, no less. One may be the greatest love of another soul and the biggest heartbreak of another. One may endure hardships that no mother would wish on a child but grow stronger and smarter as a result.

Those are the humans I made last month. They are the largest part of the reason I consider four hours of sleep a long night of rest. Also, I have four kids who were birthed the more traditional way, over the course of 15 years, who carry my genes and keep my daylight hours in constant motion. These humans will continue to grow and need less assistance from me, eventually moving on with their lives. They will take small bits of the guidance I have tried to provide; they will make decisions that disagree with my hopes and desires for them. They will fill my heart and then break it, and I will let them. I will have to stand back, watching as they find their paths and create futures I could never have predicted.

So, I write. I have always written, and I always will. I wrote when my parents fought, my 6-year-old self begging them to love each other again. I wrote when I first believed that I was in love, and again when I knew that I wasn't. I wrote in the depths of my drinking, hoping to recover bits of myself that were lost at the bottom of a bottle. I wrote to my oldest son every day that I didn't have him in my home as I fumbled and scratched at my "rock bottom." I wrote when I got sober. I write when my 2-year-old tells me not to help him, because the characters who do still need me help ease that ache in my chest. I write when my body is spent, but my mind didn't get the memo. I will write if the man who is sleeping in my bed decides that the package that comes with me is too big, and his wanderlust is too strong to stay forever. I will also write if he discovers that he cannot, in fact, live without this chaos, and we end up sitting on the

porch of our farm; hand in hand, growing old, watching our goats. I wrote, am writing, and will write.

Even when my fingers are not moving, the stories do not understand inertia. I fear that they will eventually die if I don't pay them reliable attention. Just like the genetically related humans, if I do not feed my stories, they get agitated. They will get louder and less reasonable until I toss them some nourishment. Also like children, if the stories are neglected for too long (though, thankfully, I do not know this from personal experience), they will wither and fail to thrive.

I have people in my head in various stages of completion. There are characters whose lives I have crafted from birth to death. There are those who are simply husks; the slightest glances of passing strangers that I see in my periphery. Some of them comforted me in my loneliest hours, when I didn't feel I was worth the time of people in this plane of existence. Others have shown strength that I only found after learning from their examples. I collect those people and their stories, allowing them to live inside me until I make the time to let them out.

Some days, the Writing Gods shine on me. The baby takes a nap without a fight, the laundry isn't threatening to animate, and I don't fall asleep as soon as my body stops moving. The insomnia of night seems to have an evil day twin that is closely related to narcolepsy. When the evil twin is sleeping on the job (so to speak), and I have a chance to write during the day, I seem to have more energy for the remaining tasks. When my everyday life stretches and spreads into each available minute, I know there will be a battle between my need to rest and my need to write.

It is a need. It didn't start out that way, but writing has become enmeshed in my existence. I chose my life as a mother, but I believe that I was born as a writer. My children have each added to my purpose; my spirit has grown because they allow me to witness their stories on a daily basis. Writing was there from the beginning; it grows within me. It has cast tendrils into each of my senses, changing the ways in which I perceive the world, so that those perceptions can be used to create my stories.

There are stories to be written with every person I meet, the places I find myself, and each time I am met with pressure or resistance from the Universe that seems to push or pull me from the direction I thought I was heading. An assumption can be made that everything can be used in a story. Sometimes I pick up little details that I store in the back pocket of my mind, though I don't find them until I'm sorting through words and one falls out of the pile: washed, dried, and ready for use. Larger concepts bounce around, fueled by my intention to catch them before the energy is lost and they roll to a corner: spent and deflated.

I take notes when I am waiting in the infuriating line to pick up my girls. I consume the words of authors who write with such ferocity, it makes my mundane angst thirst for more fire. I take in the phrases of my spiritual gurus when I have the same argument, for the hundredth time, with the father of my daughters. I use their words to understand the recurring issues that I will draft for my characters, who one day may encourage me to have a different argument for a change. I remember parts of my past that I tried for decades to discard, so things could be different for that little girl. I can rewrite heroes into those scenes, fashioning a parallel universe with a different timeline, and wondering how much we would still have in common in my changed history.

I get to be angry, to love, to get endless mulligans for things I regret. I can create worlds that require characters to have strengths that I will never possess, and whose faults are much deeper than my most shameful moments. It is cathartic and empowering to embody all of the vicarious lives shaped by my words. I can shine light on all of my skeletons, let them dance in the sun, and then march them back to someone else's closet because they are no longer tied to me.

The worlds that come from my stories do not diminish the importance of my comparably droll and patterned life. Rather, they provide me the opportunity to find the novelty and magic in everyday moments. I can focus on those little snippets of life and living that may otherwise be overlooked, because they may end up being very significant to a character's development or journey. Writing enhances every moment and every emotion that I experience because it creates, replicates, and morphs those same moments and emotions for my characters.

I have argued with my dead mother and my estranged father, having never actually uttered a word out loud. I have expressed love for a man long lost to me. I have received apologies I have never heard with my ears. I have rushed to the aid of a friend quicker than I ever have in my sometimes selfish life. I am a better person through the people I write.

This is not an option, this writing thing. It is a way of being. It is the air that is breathed – parts of our lives that we inhale, take what we need, and exhale those bits and pieces back into a blanket of new life. It cannot be understood by those not marked by the curse of ink. It is nothing and everything, and it is something that I have always done, am doing, and will always do.

—Chantal Meek lives in Idaho Falls, Idaho, though Colorado will always be home. She bartends to support her four kids, menagerie of pets, and writing habit. She hopes to publish many delicious books in this life, and plans to spend many years watching baby goats with her perfect boyfriend who is likely a serial killer.

"Sometimes when I'm stuck, I really do need that cup of tea, or that chocolate, or a break, or a walk, but in most cases what I actually need to do is make myself keep writing until it flows again." —Liane Moriarty

WRITERS ON WRITING

Meg Howrey

Meg Howrey is a Los Angeles-based author of three novels: *The Wanderers*, about three astronauts training for a mission to Mars; *The Cranes Dance*, about a New York City ballet dancer; and *Blind Sight*, about the teenage son of a TV star. She is also the co-author, writing as Magnus Flyte, of *City of Dark Magic* and *City of Lost Dreams*, both of which were *New York Times* best-sellers. Howrey's nonfiction has been published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Vogue*, and elsewhere. Prior to becoming an author, she was a dancer with the City Ballet of Los Angeles and the Joffrey Ballet. (To read Howrey's thoughts on finding the heart of her novels, see "Soul searching" on page 26.)

WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT WRITING?

I have to answer this by talking about something other than writing.

A story from my dancing days: Once I had a ballet teacher – one of a number of sweetly terrifying Russians – who was coaching me through a solo. There was a sequence of steps within the solo that I felt very uncomfortable with and always danced rather badly. I thought these steps exposed my worst weaknesses as a dancer, and they filled me with shame. One day, after I had moped my way through the dreaded part of the choreography, my teacher stopped the pianist, walked over to me, and shoved me in the chest. "No. Bad. Why you do like this?" she asked. "You tall girl. Dance like tall girl. Do again." I knew she was right but I was embarrassed and frustrated and 15, and my public response to self-loathing was sarcasm. I decided to prove how dancing like a tall girl was only going to make everything worse and amplify my awfulness. When the pianist picked up the music, I danced the steps like a monster of epic proportions. I gave my teacher the Russian equivalent of Godzilla, a total thrashing, stomping, clobbering version. I nearly knocked myself into the piano. My teacher brought the music to a halt and I waited to get the gulag. I do think she considered it, and certainly I deserved it. But my teacher was an artist and very wise. She gave me a full moment of punitive and terrifying silence and then she laughed. "See? Is not so hard," she said. "Good. Now we make nice." Well. Even I could recognize that it was the first time I had actually danced those steps. My previous attempts had only been a mixture of faking and thwarted ego. And even though I had just danced the steps in a ridiculous way, I'd *done* them. They weren't beyond me after all. I even got interested in trying to go and make them nice, which I needed to do because the ballet was not, alas, about the destruction of Tokyo, and also Russian Godzilla was off the music.

HOW HAS THAT HELPED YOUR WRITING?

I had to relearn that lesson as a writer. Same old problem in a slightly different costume. Luckily, self-doubt and being ashamed of one's work is a boring problem, and it's possible to lose your enthusiasm for maintaining it. Also, I came to see my version of it as essentially insincere. (More faking and ego.) If I really thought I couldn't write, why was I writing almost constantly? What I needed was to conjure up my own inner sweetly terrifying Russian. What I'm talking about here is stuff that happens around the act of writing, but I hope I am getting closer to crashing into pianos on the page as well. I want to write a little bit more like a monster. It requires some practice in finding the right beasts to deploy. It takes a village of Godzillas.

—Gabriel Packard is the author of The Painted Ocean: A Novel *published by Corsair, an imprint of Little, Brown.*

Mark Hanauer

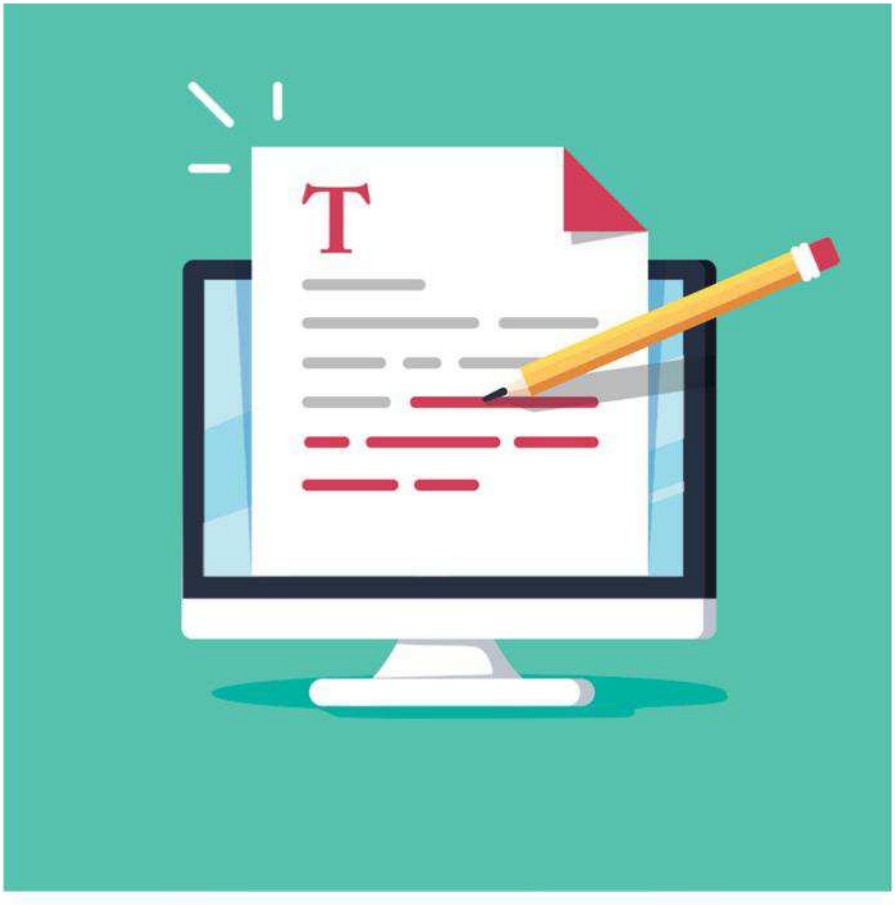
BY GAIL RADLEY

Nominalize that!

Recognizing and making nominalizations work for you.

Ordinarily, we think of things called *nominal* as small or without substance. Not so the multisyllabic nominalization. It corresponds with the definition, *noun-like.* Nothing wrong with a noun, of course; it's that troubling suffix *-like* that should waggle our antennae. Why? Because too many of these common masqueraders can clog your writing faster than stuffing panty hose down the drain.

A nominalization takes a lovely adjective or lively verb and turns it into a noun, a thing. Sometimes writers use them to make their writing sound highfalutin – a bad idea. It is the language of bureaucracies, stuffy academics, and others who like to obscure meaning by trotting out big vocabularies. Here are a couple of examples:



The misuse of nominalizations can obscure otherwise vivid language.

Can you pick out the nominalizations? (Yes, there are two.) The first is *misuse*: a perfectly serviceable verb in other sentences, but used as a noun here. The second is *nominalization* itself: it turns the adjective *nominal* (using the noun-like definition) into a noun. So, without the nominalizations, the sentence might read: *Dexter misused nominal words, turning otherwise vivid language obscure.*

See what happened there? We not only have substituted the stronger verb *misused* for *can,* but we also have a person doing the action. (If you *want* to hide Dexter's blunder, perhaps you'll keep the original.) We needed two words – "nominal words" – to return *nominalization* to its adjective role or to its verb *nominalize.* Why not keep *nominalization,* then, and save a word? A reasonable point; hold that thought for the time being.

Let's try another clogging example:

The description of the horse's jump provided a surprise to the owner and a show of the skill of the trainer. (21 words)

Our nominalizations here are *description, jump, surprise, show,* and *skill.* Notice the abundance of preposition phrases: *of the horse's jump, to the owner, of the skill, of the trainer.* They make me feel like I'm galloping along on that horse! Here's a (mostly) de-nominalized version with no prepositional phrases:

The trainer described how the horse jumped, surprising the owner and showing the trainer's skill. (15 words)

In this sentence, we know who described the action, and the horse (now appropriately acting as the noun it is, rather than as an adjective) actively *jumped.* We also eliminated that dull verb *provided,* adequately handled by the present participles *surprising and showing,* which feel more active. We might have stuck with verbs by creating two sentences:

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The trainer described how the horse jumped. It surprised the owner and showed the trainer's skill. (16 words)

If you noticed we're left with one nominalization, *skill,* bravo! We might have returned it to adjective status with something like *showing how skillful the trainer was,* but that would have been wordier. (Keep holding that thought.) Moreover, we reduced the original lumbering 21-word sentence to a 15- or 16-word one.

And one more: *Ivan's expression* (nominalization) *was one of annoyance* (nominalization) *in the query* (nominalization) *he sent about the delay* (nominalization) *in the publication* (nominalization) *of the book* could become *Ivan expressed his annoyed feelings when he queried about why publishing the book was delayed.*

While you may have noticed some of the morphed verbs and adjectives above, often these nominalizations don't pop out at us. A tip to recognizing them: They often end with *-ance, -ence, -ery, -ment, -ness, -sion, -son, -tion,* and more. (Notice some of these above.) Additional examples include assurance, deliverance, prudence, discovery, argument, carelessness, comprehension, comparison, creation – all nominalizations. Of course, exceptions abound: analysis, belief, clarity, failure, and other examples you've just seen. Then there are sneakier nominalizations that look the same as their verb and adjective forms. Take *decrease*: *Angelica decreased* (verb) *the number of commas* versus *Angelica sought a decrease* (nominalization) *in the number of commas*. Clearly, the first is best. Other such nominalizations include *attempt, cause, increase,* and *need*.

Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup offer some typical patterns that often produce nominalizations in their book, *Style.* First, when you're cruising for lifeless verbs to eliminate, such as *be, have,* and *seem* verbs, notice that there may be a nominalization as its subject, as in *The judgement* (nominalization) *of the group is that the article should be published.* A nominalization may also come after such a verb: *Nasreen proceeded in the edit* (nominalization) *of the book*. (Notice that while *proceeded* isn't a *be, have*, or *seem* verb, it is vague, an action hard to visualize.) A third pattern involves the subject delayer phrases *it is, there is, there are.* Example: *It is the feeling* (nominalization) *of Enrique that the facts need to be checked.* Another pattern involves one nominalization as subject of a weak verb followed by another nominalization: *The editor's belief* (nominalization) *is that the research (nominalization) was carelessly done.*

Finally, one pattern that doesn't involve weak verbs: two or more nominalizations connected by prepositional phrases. For example, *Tameca's examination of the organization of the manuscript was helpful.* Williams and Bizup suggest we might retain the second nominalization in this sort of sentence: *Tameca examined the manuscript's organization.* They also suggest that sometimes we can return nominalized action words to their verb state using a *how* or *why* clause. Here's how that might work: *Tameca examined how the book was organized.*

By now you may be throwing up your hands, asking what is wrong with *edit, publication, query, research, organization,* and many other nominalizations we use all the time? Absolutely nothing. They are concepts, a sort of shorthand, that *can* streamline language. There are other beneficial uses as well. Sometimes we use nominalizations to name something in the previous sentence: *Jolene accepted the award gracefully. Her acceptance* (nominalization)...

And as we mentioned previously, occasionally nominalizations can actually create less wordy sentences. For example, they can route out wordy expressions like "the fact that." Consider *The fact that Kai succeeded…* versus *Kai's success…*

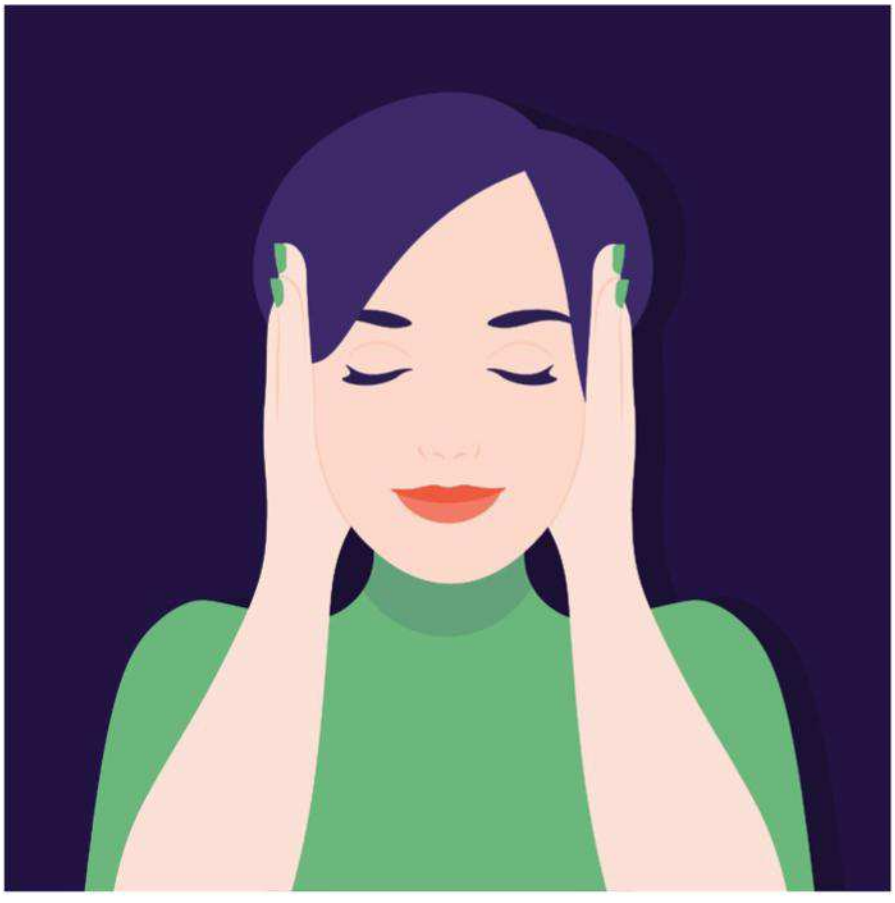
So, nominalizations aren't all bad. They're in the language for a reason. Imagine if I had eliminated all the "nominalization" nominalizations in this article, replacing them with "adjectives" or "verbs turned into nouns." The point is to actively *choose* them, not accidentally fall into their use. That's what artistry – and editing – is about, isn't it?

Gail Radley is the author of 29 books for young people and numerous articles for adults, including, most recently, "The Devil Knocking" from the December 2017 issue of *The Writer.* Recently, she stepped away from teaching English full-time at Stetson University in order to devote more time to freelance writing and editing. She lives in DeLand, Florida.

BY PETE CROATTO

Eyes on your own paper

Ditching your career timetable and ignoring others' accomplishments is hard – but absolutely essential to your sanity.



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I don't put much stock in a timetable. Plenty of writers do. Head to social media after a publication unveils its "40 Best Creative Talents Under 40" or some other age-related list and behold as writers suffer emotional crises that turn your Twitter feed into a Philip Roth rough draft. A 25-year-old critically acclaimed novelist fills a worrisome lot with the urge to fill out law school applications or take up a career in cobbling.

There are healthier ways to measure success than via self-flagellation based on the accomplishments of a few shining stars. To me, making a living as a full-time freelance writer is something to celebrate. You've done what many want to do, but they lack the commitment or the courage or the stamina to start fresh. Bask in not having to listen to your co-worker's interminable rundown of last night's *The Big Bang Theory*. Rejoice in the absence of office holiday parties held on December 23rd. Slam dunk all those pleated dress pants and unforgiving brown shoes in a trash bag and strut down to Goodwill.

Aside from working on your terms, you're doing something you love. Even if the gigs aren't emotionally satisfying, the germ of writing is present. Using that as your base, you can then determine if *you* – not the wunderkind who keeps appearing in *The New Yorker* – are on the right path.

Everyone's measurements are different. Personally, I look for a healthy ratio of the work I want to do vs. the work I must do. If 50 percent of my assignments are done out of obligation, that's excellent. That means half the time, I'm feeding my soul. The other assignments subsidize those passion projects, such as movie reviews and interviews, that pay less-than-desirable rates. Right now, the ratio stands at 80 "for me" and 20 "for them," which is tremendous – but unsteady. When the days turn sour, I do what I can to make myself happy. That means having leisurely, homemade lunches in front of the TV and taking afternoon naps without feeling a tinge of guilt. Tomorrow is another day.

Time is a wonderful ally, because it breeds perspective while adding scar tissue. Persistence and sheer stubbornness succeed when speed fails. I was 29 when I ditched my full-time trade magazine job and decided to freelance. Six years later, I started writing for national publications regularly. I was 39 when I signed with my literary agent. I just landed my first book deal. I am 40 years old, well past the age of being young and trendy — but the last time I checked, writing doesn't have an expiration date.

It took 11 years (and three stints slinging books) to reach this point. A few financial catastrophes and hundreds of rejections later, I'd rather write advertorials in my socks than have a weekend dismantled by a squawking police scanner or walk a trade show for eight hours in a stifling full suit functioning as a human crock pot. I get to eat lunch with my wife and serve as a regular presence in my daughter's life. I've won even if I all I did was write white papers and ghostwrite e-books on various nutrients.

The prelude to the current chapter was long and tedious. An editor would attack the pages in red pen before burning them in a dumpster. No one should waste as much time as I did. For a healthy portion of my 20s, I voluntarily planted myself in the shadow of my younger brother, Dave, a talented comedy writer. He got an internship at *MAD* at 18, following that up with another at Michael Moore's TV show, *The Awful Truth*. Meanwhile, I landed interviews for internships at *Premiere* and *Entertainment Weekly* – and whiffed at both. For good measure, I shrewdly declined an internship at *Rolling Stone*, because it interfered with my schedule of classes. By 22, Dave was an editor at *MAD*. At 24 years old, I was a newspaper reporter flame-out managing a sputtering used bookstore in suburban New Jersey.

Using someone else's career as a guidepost is a lousy navigation system for your own life.

Each passing day I was morphing into a young failed creative stereotype. (Yes, I had a bad goatee.) Dave was also thriving socially. He rented a spacious apartment on the Upper East Side that was something out of a 90's sitcom: funny roommates; a Golden Tee console adjacent to a bar. (All that was missing was a fire pole that dropped you into the living room and sexy female boarders across the hall.) He was living a life that could have been mine if only I had tweaked a few things. *Jesus Christ, why did I turn down* Rolling Stone? *What if I had gotten a job in New York City?*

What if?

What if?

What an exhausting, corrosive way to live.

At some point, I realized that comparing myself to Dave was a journey without a destination. We had different objectives; we were different people. I had to focus on what *I* wanted to do. If I continued looking to Dave to measure my personal or professional happiness – no matter how much I love and admire him – I'd permanently cast myself as the runner-up. The opportunities I've enjoyed in recent years would have vanished if I remained consumed with having someone else's career.

We crave answers, whether it's how to make the perfect apple pie or if we need to wear a jacket tomorrow. It's easy to forget that careers aren't things we can achieve with a trip to Google or asking Alexa. Using someone else's as a guidepost is a lousy navigation system for your own life.

Trust yourself. It's easy to do. *Remember*. Remember that feeling of writing a perfect sentence; that rush of finding the clearing and taking a piece home. Remember getting the check that pays your taxes early. Remember the pride of getting a pitch accepted or asking the right question to land that perfect quote. Those are your references points. It may not lead you to fame or six-figure book contracts or fawning magazine profiles, but it's all yours.

And the best part: It lasts. W

Pete Croatto (Twitter: @PeteCroatto) lives just outside Ithaca, New York, with his wife and daughter. He's currently working on a basketball book for Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster.

THE AGENT-AUTHOR RELATIONSHIP

HOW TO CREATE AND CULTIVATE A SUCCESSFUL PUBLISHING PARTNERSHIP.

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN

Illustrations by Viktoria Kurpas/Shutterstock

Writers who dream of signing on with a big publisher know that the first step in the process is finding the perfect literary agent to represent them. But once an agent and author decide to partner up, what then? What are the expected roles and duties of each person? What factors go into creating a successful long-term agent/author relationship? We asked a handful of authors and agents to weigh in.

THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT AGENT

For many writers, finding a literary agent can be a test in patience and persistence. Roni Loren, award-winning and best-selling romance author of more than 15 books, was no exception. She got serious about writing during the *Twilight* craze. While her son napped, she wrote a YA paranormal manuscript and queried it. When she didn't get any bites, she developed a contemporary romance manuscript and sent it out to 15 to 20 agents. While waiting for responses yet again, she completed a third book, an erotic romance titled *Crash Into You*. Through a referral from a blogger friend, Loren sent sample chapters to Sara Megibow with KT Literary Agency.

Megibow loves the romance genre. While reading the opening scene of Loren's erotic romance, she burst out laughing. "It was hilarious, real, and sexy. Roni is truly one of the most outstanding authors I have ever had the privilege of either reading or working with," she says. "The sexy banter in Roni's books has always been over-the-top outstanding. I knew right away, even within first few pages, that I wanted to represent Roni."

Before finding an agent for her newest picture book, children's book author Denise Vega had to let go of her current agent. She wanted a new agent who represented novels *and* picture books. "Because she was great and she was my first agent, it was hard," Vega says. "At the same time, we both knew it was the right decision. It turned out to be a really nice conversation."

After having the same agent for 10 years, Vega sat down and thought about what she really wanted. She came up with three criteria: First, the agent had to be part of an agency so she could bounce ideas off other agents. Secondly, this agent had to have solid connections with subrights agents. Lastly, she needed to be an editorial agent who could help Vega grow as a writer.

Query Tracker, a website designed to help writers find literary agents, led her to the Andrea Brown Literary Agency. While serving on

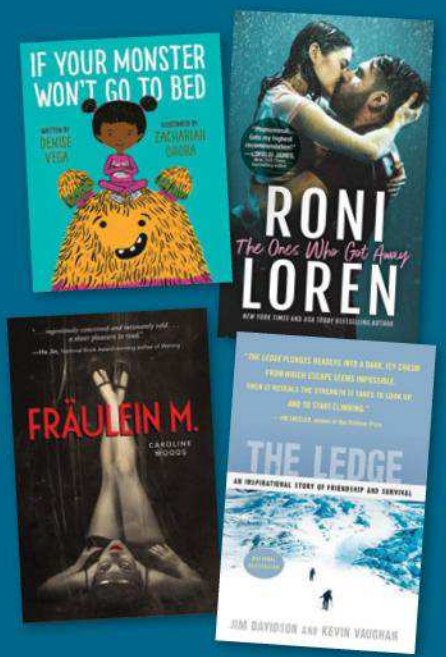
AUTHORS & THEIR AGENTS

DENISE VEGA
Children's author of seven books, including her most recent picture book, *If Your Monster Won't Go to Bed.*
AGENT: Lara Perkins, Andrea Brown Agency.

RONI LOREN
Romance author who is a two-time RITA Award winner and a *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author with 15+ published books and novellas, most recently *The Ones Who Got Away.*
AGENT: Sara Megibow, KT Literary Agency.

CAROLINE WOODS
Cambridge, Mass.-based author of the historical fiction novel *Fräulein M.*
AGENT: Shannon Hassan, Marsal Lyon Literary Agency.

KEVIN VAUGHAN AND JIM DAVIDSON
Co-authors of the *New York Times* best-seller *The Ledge: An Inspirational Story of Friendship and Survival.*
AGENT: Dan Conaway, Writers House.



the faculty at a conference the agency hosted, Vega connected with Lara Perkins, one of their agents. Perkins had previously been a co-agent and was just beginning to take on her own clients. They hit it off, and Vega submitted a query and sample pages to her. During their initial phone call, Vega felt that Perkins really understood her work and her vision. Vega was thrilled when Perkins asked to represent her. "She has been beyond anything I could have expected in terms of how she handles herself as an agent. As an editorial agent, she is phenomenal in helping me grow as a writer," Vega says.

When historical fiction writer Caroline Woods felt she had gone as far as she could with her novel, she began her quest for an editorial agent who could help her polish her work before sending it to publishers. She created a tiered list of agents and agencies who had been successful with historical fiction and queried them. Woods received a few rejections before Shannon Hassan of Marsal Lyon Literary Agency – one of her top-tier agency choices – reached out and asked to schedule a phone call.

Caroline Woods photo by Anastasia Sierra

Hassan says it was Woods' voice and beautiful writing that caught her attention. "I loved her take on the era. It was a little bit different from other [WWII] books you see," she says. "Characters are a big thing for me, and she has amazing, compelling, vivid characters that really spoke to me." Hassan knew as soon as she read the manuscript she wanted to work with Woods but wanted to confirm by talking with her.

During the phone call, Hassan asked her three questions: *Are you willing to do the editorial work?*

How active are you going to be as a partner in marketing the book?

What else are you working on?

"Once I asked her those questions, it was clear to me we would be great partners. It is a relationship, so personalities have to match, and through our conversations, I felt we would work well together. I offered her representation on the phone that day," Hassan says.

Woods felt the same way. "I wanted to work with someone who wanted to stick with me through a writing career. I had a good feeling after the call, like we would work really well together, and I appreciated Shannon asking those questions. It showed me she was taking this seriously," she says.

Kevin Vaughan, an award-winning journalist, met author and motivational speaker Jim Davidson at a writer's conference where Davidson was the keynote speaker and Vaughan was a presenter. Vaughan was intrigued by a past event in Davidson's life, in which he plummeted 80 feet into a crevasse while mountain climbing and then had to climb out with minimal gear. Vaughan wanted to write about it for the newspaper he worked for. "After the publication of the series, 'The Crevasse,' about the accident on Mount Rainier, Jim and I began discussing working together on a book based on his experiences," Vaughan says.

Through a contact of Vaughan's, his piece ended up with Dan Conaway, a literary agent at Writers House, who became interested in their book project. "Jim and I agreed to go forward with Dan representing us. Jim and I both hoped to land an agent who was as into us and our story as we were into him," Vaughan says. "We definitely found that. At the same time, I know from the experience of many friends that we had a lightning-strike situation. I know many people who spend months or years trying to find an agent and have a difficult time. In that sense, we definitely feel very lucky."

OK, WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER. NOW WHAT?

After all the paperwork was finished and signed, Megibow asked Loren if she could turn *Crash into You* into an erotic suspense because there was some traction with that genre at the time. Loren tried, but they soon discovered this was not a good fit for her. With Megibow's help, Loren returned to the original concept of erotic romance and developed the characters and storyline more. "It was some work," Loren says, "but it was more about how we were going to position this to publishers."

Authors Jim Davidson (front right) and Kevin Vaughan (back right) with agent Dan Conaway.

Megibow says authors don't always initially see the importance of a publisher's relationship with their distribution channels. Writers may discuss agents or self-publishing or eBook prices, but agents, editors, and publishers are discussing Barnes & Noble, Amazon, indie bookstores, libraries, Target, Costco, and book clubs.

"So when Roni says we spent that time 'positioning,' that is the piece that makes an author money," says Megibow. "Someone who has written something utterly brilliant, but it is a YA science-fiction-fantasy-romance memoir – it doesn't have a place in the distribution channel, so they are not going to get an agent. Whereas with Roni's writing, we looked at [it] through the lens of romantic suspense and then through the lens of contemporary erotic romance and decided on contemporary erotic romance, and within a couple of weeks had an offer for it."

Megibow considers herself a strategic agent and not an editorial agent. Her focus is on the best plan for the success of the book. Some agents are very involved in the editing process; however, she is not. Her relationship with Loren is now at the point where Megibow doesn't even see the book until it is published.

"When I am trying to sell something to publishers, I need to be able to present to them why I believe this book has opportunities in their distribution channels and in subsidiary rights (translation deals, audiobooks, Hollywood deals). That's my job," she says. "I have to find something I will fall in love with and then have a solid strategy for selling."

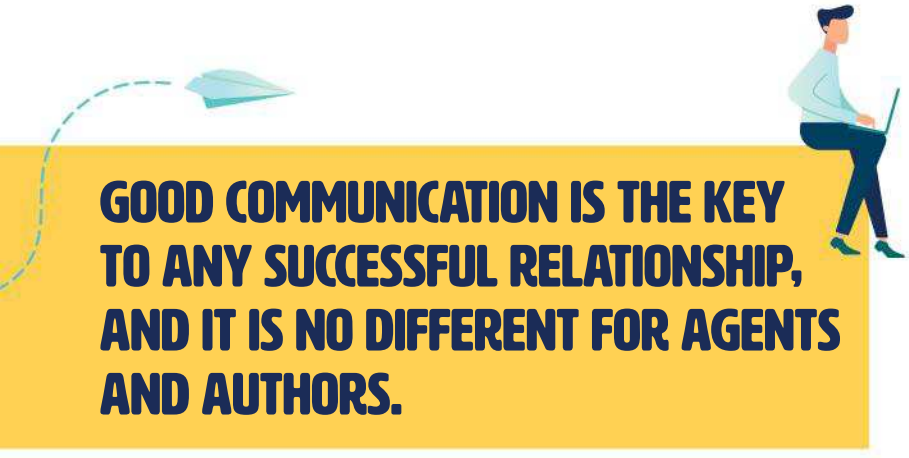
Vega signed with Perkins in June of 2013. She says, "She sold a picture book for me, *If Your Monster Won't Go to Bed*, in October of 2013. We are now in 2018, and I haven't placed anything else yet."

It hasn't been for lack of submitting or preparing. Perkins tries to sell a few of Vega's books each year. The picture book market is competitive, and publishers are being very selective. "I've had a few get really close. They went to acquisitions meeting and just couldn't quite sell it to the marketing team or the sales team," says Vega.

It's definitely not because of Perkins, Vega says. Not everything she submits to her agent goes out because Perkins is focusing on the needs of the current market. "She'll tell me in her wonderfully sweet way, 'Maybe this needs to go on the back burner right now.' I am fine with that. Even though things aren't happening, that doesn't dampen our enthusiasm," Vega says.

Once Hassan signed on Woods, she sent her editorial feedback on the manuscript, and Woods reworked it until it was ready to go out. "I crafted my pitch letter," says Hassan. "Put my list of editors together and went out with the pitch. We received some feedback and some 'revise and resubmit' requests."

Before making any changes, "we talked a lot about whether or not something was someone's taste or something that should be fixed in the manuscript," says Woods. Once they agreed on what revisions to make, Woods fixed it up and Hassan took it back to publishers.



GOOD COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY TO ANY SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP, AND IT IS NO DIFFERENT FOR AGENTS AND AUTHORS.

One year from initially signing on with Hassan, Woods got an offer for her historical novel, *Fräulein M.* Hassan then had to negotiate the deal and the contract.

"There are a lot of things behind the scenes that people don't think about," Hassan says. "The devil is in the details. What rights are you giving away? Do you want to hold the foreign or translation rights and have one of your associates try to sell those? Audio rights are a big deal and need to be considered." Hassan says her job is to get the best deal for her authors and maximize the benefits of those rights.

As with most authors, Davidson and Vaughan hoped to secure a publishing deal and have a successful book. They signed with Conaway in late 2008 and spent the next few months crafting a proposal for the book.

Once an agent is secured, it doesn't mean the work is done. Davidson says, "Dan expected us to work hard, to listen to the input of our editor, and to do as many revisions as necessary to make the work its very best. We worked hard to meet those criteria, including meeting all our major deadlines on time. It was an enormous amount of work, but with everyone expecting a lot out of each other, we feel that we put out a good piece of work that is a credit to the entire team."

Conaway consulted with them frequently, including each time he had a conversation with a publisher. After getting an offer from Ballantine, Davidson and Vaughan had a decision to make because they had planned to have an auction for the book deal. "Dan talked through the pros and cons of doing that versus accepting an offer that was on the table," says Vaughan. "Jim and I were enamored with the Ballantine crew, so that helped our decision."

In November of 2009, they accepted the offer from Ballantine, and in the summer of 2011, *The Ledge: An Inspirational Story of Friendship and Survival on Mount Rainier*, was released and became a *New York Times* best-seller.

MAINTAINING A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

Loren and Megibow have worked together for eight years now and have even developed a friendship.

"When you first sign on with an agent, you are not sure how formal you need to be," says Loren. "What's OK to talk about and what's not? With Sara, it is a very comfortable relationship. I can call her about anything. She is my advocate."

Vega says Perkins is very keyed into the industry. "She has a great balance of helping you make your story better while also thinking about its marketability. Her insights into my writing are valuable. Sometimes I can be all over the place about what my story is really about, and she can help bring me back in."

As with any relationship, you want someone who is willing to stick around even when it gets tough. Woods really

appreciated Hassan's support and commitment. "She was a teammate and somebody else who loved the book the way I did. It didn't feel to me like she was rushing me into changing it just so it could get published. There were things that both of us really liked and didn't want to change. Having that backup was really reassuring," she says.

Davidson and Vaughan say they enjoy working with Conaway because he is very hands-on and a great writer and editor. "He was involved in our book every step of the way and actually even helped with an edit of our first draft after our regular editor became ill and had to take some time off. While we ultimately worked most closely with our editor on the final language, cover, photos, etc., Dan was involved in each decision," says Vaughan.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Good communication is the key to any successful relationship, and it is no different for agents and authors.

Loren says she needs high communication because she has high anxiety. Megibow keeps her informed with weekly emails even when there's no news to report. "She is also good at keeping me calm because I can get a little wound up. She mellows me out and says everything is fine. She is good with my personality," Loren says. "I have lots of writer friends that have had agents who they didn't mesh [with] personality wise. It wasn't a match, so they left those agents and found different agents."

"If someone wants a lot of communication and their agent is less communicative, that's going to be frustrating," Megibow says. Conversely, if the author wants more space and the agent wants to do more editing, that may be frustrating. So a lot of it has to do with personality."

Woods says Hassan is a great communicator who responds quickly, promptly, and effectively. "I know that she is doing that with editors, too, the foreign rights agent, or the film rights agent," Woods says. "Shannon is also a good editor, so she has been able to help me artistically as well.

I am working on another book, and when I have ideas, I can send her those, and I get really good feedback. It has been a good ongoing process."

As with most agents and authors, much of their interaction is by email or phone, but Woods and Hassan feel lucky because they've had the chance to meet in person a few times. For example, a week after they received the book offer, they enjoyed a celebratory lunch together in Boston.

Davidson says that because agents are handling many books and projects at once, their availability ebbs and flows significantly. "We learned to be clear about when some issue was 'hot' and we needed Dan's input fast, versus when another item was not critical, so that he could focus on something else that needed his attention more urgently. As always, clear communications and diligent professionalism go a long way in working relationships, including the author-agent collaboration."

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE — AND A NECESSITY IN THE PUBLISHING WORLD

Something everyone we spoke to seemed to agree on: The publishing world does not move fast.

Megibow hears from writers all the time that the hardest part is waiting. "My emails to any of my clients during this time is, 'don't worry, this is normal. I don't have any answers yet," she says.

"Frequently there is this perception that agents should just be able to call up anyone and get an answer. That's not how it works. The editor reports to the publisher, who reports to the sales director, who reports to the sales reps, who are checking on the distribution channels, who's looking at subrights, etc. There is a lot of red tape."

Loren says the longer you are in the business, the more you realize it is a game of patience. "That is the other side of traditional publishing some writers don't realize. You sign your first book and it doesn't come out until a year and a half later," she says.

Hassan agrees that it is a lot of waiting. Hassan's advice to authors is to start working on your next project. "Keep busy. Publishing is a very slow process and you have to have patience. But when you get that call that someone loves it, it is so joyous and wonderful."

FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

- Megibow advises writers to avoid comparing your career and or book with anyone else's. It's easy to wonder how come that author got this or that, but you'll never see the full story behind the scenes.
- Loren was grateful she had a slow build. "I didn't come out the gate and hit 'list' and get all the attention, but slowly I have built my career to where I am in a good place now. Being patient can sometimes pay off," she says.
- Vega has talked to writers who are so excited to have an agent…and then don't think beyond that. It's essential to consider the relationship: how you work, how you like to communicate, and how you like to receive information is so important.
- Hassan says not to take rejection personally. An agent may already have something similar to your project on their list or they are not looking for the type of book you proposed. It doesn't necessarily have any reflection on your writing. You have to cast a wide net and keep trying.
- Woods says, "go for it! Writers shouldn't hold themselves back thinking their work has to be perfect. You have to get out there and meet a lot of agents. Connect with a lot of them, and that's how you find your perfect advocate. Don't be shy! Expect rejection, but go in with an optimistic spirit."

Kerrie Flanagan is a freelance writer from Colorado, writing consultant, and author of eight books under her label, Hot Chocolate Press. She is also the author of the book *Guide to Magazine Article Writing*. Web: KerrieFlanagan.com & HotChocolatePress.com

IN THE PATH OF LUCK

An interview with award-winning author Mira Bartók.

BY REBEKAH L. FRASER

Writers often look for a GPS to guide their way from obscurity to success. Author/illustrator Mira Bartók has enjoyed the kind of success many of us only dream may be ours. Her memoir, *The Memory Palace*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2012. In 2015, with only a quarter of the first book written, Bartók found her middle-grade novel series, *The Wonderling*, in the midst of a bidding war that resulted in a six-figure advance from Candlewick Press and a seven-figure movie deal. It would seem that she put herself in the path of luck, and in so doing discovered "an invisible map of songs" (to steal a phrase from *The Wonderling: Songcatcher*, which came out in 2017).

Yet to follow Bartók's career is to travel a circuitous route. The child of a single mother with schizophrenia, Bartók eventually had to distance herself from home and take a pseudonym for safety reasons. She enjoyed relative success as a writer/illustrator of multicultural books for children before a car accident left her with a traumatic brain injury. How did this artist go from tragedy to success? We spoke at length about her process, the trajectory of her career, and her advice for hopeful writers at all stages of their careers.

Photo by Doug Plavin; typography and texture by jumpingsack/Shutterstock

Before your success with *The Memory Palace*, you wrote nonfiction titles for children and translated picture books. What was the first work of fiction you published?

In 1998, I published an illustrated book of folk tales I had collected while I was in Norway. These were stories that were told orally by Sámi (Lapp) elders in the village. I wrote them down and illustrated them. They're only published in Norway; I haven't yet tried to publish it in the U.S. At some point, I might. It's called *Fox Has Its Day; Tales from the Far Far North*.

After *The Memory Palace*, you wrote a book about wonder but put it in a drawer. Are there other books you wrote and cloistered? Do you envision publishing any of these someday?

I have the first chunk of a novel. It's a literary thriller that's set mostly in Norway and Svalbard. It was the first novel I tried to write, but it was clear that my brain wasn't ready to take on a novel after my car accident, so I went to short stories and essays. I don't know if I'll finish it. I have so many other things I want to do.

I have a book of short stories that I'm slowly working on. At some point, I want to take a year and finish it. I published a handful of little "storyettes" from that collection in *The*

Massachusetts Review before *The Wonderling* came out. Those are for adults. I have very little fiction published. Most of what I've published is nonfiction.

I have a book I'm collaborating with my friend Jedediah Berry on called *The Forgotten Island*. That might be the next project after this. Then I [started] a trilogy called *The Echoers*, but it seemed so daunting. *The Wonderling* was going to be my practice book. Sometimes that's a good tactic. If you say this is going to be the great American novel, that's a setup for disaster. It takes the pressure off if you just say "it's for practice. It's not real."

How did the sales process differ between *The Memory Palace* and *The Wonderling*?

What was similar is my good fortune of having people interested and having more than one publisher interested right away. With *The Memory Palace*, I had a complete manuscript. I would never advise anyone to put out a partial memoir or a partial novel unless they have street cred or are kind of famous already. With *The Wonderling*, I only had like 100 pages. It was an insane set of circumstances. My agent thought she could sell it. She had interest right away. I talked to several editors. An auction was set. Two weeks before the auction, she had a meeting with these Hollywood agents about another client's project. They happened to see my drawing of [main character] Arthur on her laptop, asked to see the manuscript, read it overnight, and then four days later, there's a bidding war in Hollywood over it. It was crazy; this stuff doesn't happen.

Hollywood agents saw Bartók's illustration of Arthur and became immediately interested in her work.

But [children's book author/illustrator] Jane Yolen talks about putting yourself in the path of luck. For me, that meant making the right decision about who I wanted as an agent. I had another agent before that was not right for me. She was a nice person, but she only did nonfiction, and she wasn't in New York. She didn't do fiction. She didn't do children's books. She hated her job. All these things were red flags, and I ignored them. For fiction, I want a New York agent, personally. When I found a different agent, my good fortunes began.

Did you have a say in who would direct or write the movie? Will you have any say in casting choices?

It's two Fox studios collaborating. Fox Studios are the money people. The production company is Working Title Films.

I did say that I wanted a strong confirmation from Stephen Daldry [to direct]. They've asked my opinion on just about everything from music to actors. I gave the screenwriter notes about the book, what will be in Book II, things to look out for and make sure to include in the first movie, because these things will be important in the second book, too.

The book is going to be a Broadway musical. How did that come about? How involved are you in the process of developing the story for the stage?

They bought the rights to do several movies and a musical theater production for Broadway and the London stage. The theatrical part of the contract is what held it up for a year. It doesn't mean it's going to happen. If the first [film] does well, great, they'll do another. The reason we wanted Daldry is he has experience with musical theater and the London stage as well as film, and that was really important to everyone.

Hollywood is very fickle. That said, I have had constant, really great contact. I've developed really great relationships with these people over the last two years. I email people; I hear back from Fox studio heads within [between] two minutes and two hours.

Once we have a script that everyone's happy with, then the director will look at his schedule and start talking to actors. I was brought in on conversations about this stuff early on. I gave my input. A) It doesn't mean those people are available, and B) it doesn't mean they'll listen to me. But they've asked my opinion about music, composers, they asked about the kind of music I've heard. I've been really happy with them.

You have a different agent for the book than for the movie?

I've got two movie agents, I've got a literary agent, I've got a literary lawyer, an entertainment lawyer, I had to get an accountant and a bookkeeper. Because you can't screw around. I had to take it seriously.

How does the financial process work?

I got a chunk of money in about a year, and over half went to taxes. The advance for the movie (they didn't option it; they bought the rights) – they pay that amount within 10 days of shooting the film, so that probably won't come for another couple of years. I have a pretty good contract thanks to my movie agent at CAA and the entertainment lawyer. I get a percentage of plushy animals, video games. I just hope to god they don't do a Happy Meal, but there you go.

I feel like you have to assume nothing's ever gonna happen anyway. Once I see the movie happening in a physical way – you know they're really casting it, they're starting to shoot, I'll go on the set – then it'll seem a little more real to me. Until then, I really have to just focus on the book.

You've said your writing process starts with drawing. Is this the case for all of your work, or just for *The Wonderling*?

Sometimes I just hear the first line. I

Illustrations by Mira Bartók

Bartók's illustration of Arthur and his friend Trinket from *The Wonderling*.

have a folder of really good first lines. Sometimes I just get an image in my head, a really striking image. Sometimes it's a sketch. Sometimes I just get some very strong story idea from walking in the woods or experiencing something profound in a museum. Often, like 90 percent of the time, my first ideas come from a very visual source, whether it's something that's a strong image in my head, or something I see, or something I draw.

In the case of *The Wonderling*, I was making sketches, but I was also rereading and listening to audiobooks by Dickens. So that was going on as well as all these things in the real world – the refugee crisis, the horrible stuff that was going on pre-election and post-election. The state of affairs feels very much like the worst of the industrial revolution during Dickens time. It's a confluence of things.

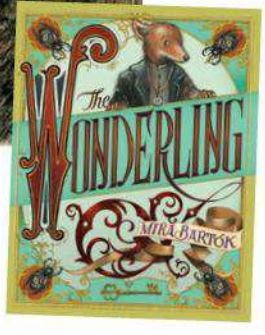
How else do you get yourself in the state of creative flow?

I always walk, and I don't like to walk with people. I find they annoy me if I'm walking in the morning. It's different in the afternoon. If it's after 3:00, I'm totally up for a walk. But the morning is my thinking time. If I'm drawing, it's a little different, but if I'm writing I don't want to see anyone. When I was a gallery artist, and I was not in the writing world, and I lived in an artist building, I'd have lunch with people. I was always looking at people's work, and there was this great exchange with other artists.

Writing, you don't want anyone around – at least I don't. It takes much more intense concentration from a part of my brain that was damaged from my accident. It's also a much more introverted activity. I have to start Book II [this year]. I'll keep my commitments and see a couple people, but I don't want to see anyone for weeks.

My best way to dig in is to get up, go on a walk, read during breakfast – things that either are related to what I'm doing research-wise or will inspire me for the project I'm working on. I go on a walk and think and write in my head, and then I come back, and I work. But when I did an even better job focusing, when I was not on social media, I would come back from my walk and play my violin for like half an hour.

I think that, because I've let music go for the last year, that probably will be a very good thing to do, because my little creature, my main character, is going to start taking music lessons in Book II, so he's learning about music himself. So I thought that would be a good opportunity to get back into that.



How do you develop your characters?

I think there's so much about cause and effect. So you have this main character. I knew there was going to be a villain. It's just an organic process. Originally, I thought, "Miss Carbunkle," my villain in Book I, "is going to be the bad, evil headmistress. Very two-dimensional. I'll just use her as a tool."

Then I realized, "Ahh! She really needs to have a backstory. You need to have a little empathy for her eventually. Damn. I guess I have to write a three-dimensional character against my will,

and that's a better idea. It makes the book richer."

Some characters pop up because you need another character to carry the plot to another point, or as an obstacle, or as a helper. In this book, if you look at the classic Joseph Campbell mythic hero's journey, this book – without my [intending] it – I think it falls into those sort of classic tropes – the reluctant hero. Someone comes along and offers the character the quest. At first, the character refuses the quest but eventually accepts it. Different characters he meets along the way kind of fit those archetypes, and I just didn't realize it.

I think it makes it more humanistic and more real because if you think about people in abusive relationships…

They stay! They stay way too long. Yeah, so I think in some ways, my book is very realistic.

It seems as though in the last two chapters, you are setting up the reader for what's to come in Book II. Can we expect to see more of Quintus as a detective? Will he find Goblin and Squee? And will more be made of Belisha's idea that the sky is an invisible map of songs?

There are a lot of clues that I've been dropping [in Book I], some very subtle. Yes, you will see Quintus. He plays a big role. A couple minor characters will play a larger role. The man with white gloves is basically a psychopath, and he will play a really huge role in Book II. There are other little clues, like in Pinecone's house, around the big oak table, there's this ancient language of trees carved along the edge. You will find out more about that.

You have to go after a story or an essay like a pit bull with a piece of raw meat, and you cannot stop. **You cannot let anyone get in your way.**

Part of my character development, I think, comes from reading a ton of myths and folktales and having taught those subjects as well. I taught for years at the Field Museum of Natural History, and I taught about indigenous cultures through their stories.

I think one of the hardest things is having some of your characters transform a little, grow. What causes that? They're offered choices. Arthur meets his little friend Trinket, and she offers him a way out of this horrible orphanage. In my first draft, he goes "Oh yeah, let's go. Come on!" Well, it's more poignant that he goes, "No. I don't think I could leave. I don't think I could do that. It's too scary." He has to see his place in a deeper way after Trinket shows him the wonders of the greater world. He has to see how he will always be stuck there and how horrible it is. But he doesn't escape right away. I've been criticized for that, but I stick to it.

So you really had to outline both books before you started writing.

I wrote a synopsis for three books. When you write a synopsis, it's like, "Yeah, maybe this will happen." Because things change, but you write it to get the book deal. Every publisher I talked to said it should be two books. So it became two books. I have the beginning, and I have the ending. I always write the beginning and ending. I know how everything ends. It's the middle that's the problem. The challenge with Book II is that it was initially meant to be three books. I have to merge those two, and I'm not sure how I'll do that yet. I guess I'll figure that out because I've got to dig in really soon.

You say you know the ending. Does it ever change? I wrote my first novel and knew the beginning and knew the ending. I always said, "Nothing is precious; I will do whatever it takes to serve the story, but I will NOT change the ending." Then I hired an editor, and she suggested I change the ending. In the context of her notes, I find that it makes sense. I think I am gonna change the ending.

MB: UH-OH! It's a slippery slope.

Well, not change the ending, but end it sooner.

Well, that's different, Rebekah. Ending it sooner is different than changing the ending.

The thing is, [I knew] Arthur saves the day, [but] I didn't realize he would need to return to that horrible place of his origin in order to save the day. I was trying to write a chapter where he would have to make a choice; what would he do? It was an early draft. I had kid readers. It's their input that made me change the setting. They said, all of them: "Oh my gosh, what's gonna happen to the groundlings at the orphanage? He's gonna help them, right?"

You think about your reader, especially writing for kids. In a first draft, I don't think about my reader at all. I don't care about my reader until I'm digging into another draft. This was the point where I had to. With middle-grade kids, you can even kill off some characters; it's fine that they get lost in the shuffle, and you never see them again. We all know some bad things happen, but in *this* case, it would be so upsetting for kids. Every kid told me they really had to find out that these creatures would be OK in the end. That's not to say that the groundlings in Gloomintown are okay. I have to wrestle with that in Book II. But those

characters you don't get to know as well. You spend less time there than you do in the beginning of the book; plus, there's the hero's return. It kind of all makes sense in the grand, mythic cycle of things. It makes sense to have him return.

So, I didn't really change my ending; I just changed the setting of it. Initially, he was going to stop Miss Carbunkle's horrible plot to destroy all the music in the world, and that was going to happen in a factory in Gloomintown. But why would the factory be there anyway? It makes much more sense to have the factory at the orphanage. And it raises the emotional stakes for him to realize he's not just saving music, he's saving friends. So you always have to go for the deeper emotional story.

That's great advice. What else would you tell aspiring writers who are just dipping their toes in the world of fiction? How can they become stronger writers?

To be a good writer and get somewhere, I think it takes pretty much two things.

1. You have to be a really incredible reader. I can't say that enough. You have to read all kinds of things and really think about them and take them apart. Ask why are they working. Challenge your assumptions and get outside your comfort zone.

2. You have to be obsessed. If I'm not working on something – either writing or drawing – for more than two weeks, I am just a pain in the ass to be around. You have to be compulsive; you have to be obsessed. You have to go after a story or an essay like a pit bull with a piece of raw meat, and you cannot stop. You cannot let anyone get in your way. You have to be ruthless. If you don't wake up and you're not annoyed that you have all these emails; you have these social engagements; you have all these things to do – if you're not annoyed with that because you'd rather be writing, then something's wrong with you. That's my feeling.

The thing is, for me, my drawing has so much to do with my writing, I can't ignore it. I have to hone my skills. You have to feed your writing, and that means doing other things that inspire you. If you're only reading and writing, that can turn you into a very boring writer. But you also have to show up at your desk on a daily basis.

Writers are often told to write what they know. How did you bring that concept into play in *The Wonderling*?

That's a ridiculous bit of advice. I never think anyone should just write what they know. They should write what they're curious about, period. That "writing about what you know" never made sense to me. It's silly. It's based on years of realism being the thing that people have elevated to some ridiculous level.

Yes, there are things that I know in my book. *The Wonderling* is definitely influenced by everything from being bullied a little when I was kid to watching other kids be bullied and feeling empathetic toward them and trying to help them, to my dreams, and other things that I know. But there's so much that I was curious about, so I researched that stuff. I think the nature of story is, "What if?" *What if* is mostly what you don't know. If you write just what you know, then you leave out speculative fiction, science fiction, and epic fantasy.

That's awesome. I've found that beta readers will look at my work, which tends to be very dark, and they'll be concerned that it happened to me.

It comes down to: does something sound authentic? Can you suspend your disbelief? You can write about anything if you're really good at it.

What advice would you offer more advanced writers, who are dedicated to the craft, are writing the stories that burn within them, maybe have a novel or two in a drawer and want to get their work published?

I think community is really important. I've had a writing group for a while, and we all share information. Community can mean different things. Some people find it online. The times when I've had the greatest opportunities is when I've put myself out there. I think the first time I really put myself in a position to be with editors and agents was when I went to Bread Loaf [Writers' Conference]. Before that, I only had published two little essays. One was at a very small press, the other was at *Kenyon Review*, and it got a notable in the *Best American Essays* series. But I didn't have any writing community; I didn't even know it was a good thing to get in the *Best American Essays* series; I didn't even know what that was. The first thing I did was apply to Bread Loaf. Some of those people I'm still in touch with. Some of those people are still my readers. In the early days, I would go to AWP [Association of Writers & Writing Programs] conferences. Now I go to smaller conferences that are more specific to my interests.

The first step is to apply for something. And then you get in, and that's pretty awesome. Other people are also trying to get their work published, and you meet editors and agents and so forth, and that leads to the next thing and the next thing, and so forth. Getting into a writing group where people are at your level or better is a good thing. If you spend all your time trying to be better than everyone, it just doesn't raise the bar. Raise the bar for yourself. Apply for residencies, fellowships. Put yourself in the path of luck.

Rebekah L. Fraser is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in trade and consumer publications throughout North America. Fraser is currently seeking representation for her first novel and developing her second book, an environmental romance. Fraser connects with other writers at conferences and residencies (Vermont Studio Center), through her writing group, and through the literary reading and talk-back event she created for local authors in southern Connecticut.

The unconventional query

HOW A RULE-BREAKING APPROACH MIGHT EARN YOU A SALE.

By Ryan G. Van Cleave

Whether you want to sell a magazine article, business book, or pretty much anything between, the formula is simple:

1) Send query letter.
2) Send manuscript.
3) Reap rewards.

But if you're like me, you're probably tired of the boilerplate, tried-and-true query letters that feel stilted, stuffed, and stuck in the 1980s. Can we ignore the "rules" about having to use the plug-and-play query structure? Can we ever bring a little creativity to it?

Absolutely. Here are just a few ways that your query can stand out and still get you the deal.

Size matters

After meeting an acquisitions editor at a conference in 2001, I followed up with a query and proposal combo for a poetry-writing textbook that was… wait for it…1½ pages long. Not the standard 20-30 pages most proposals click in with. And despite the compact size of my submission, I still included a query letter as well as a full TOC with competing titles, proposed contributor list, and marketing ideas. In less than two pages! That translated a few months later into a deal for *Contemporary American Poetry: Behind the Scenes* (Longman, 2003).

Years later, I asked my editor why she bought the book. She said, "In all my years of being in publishing, I've never seen someone pitch me something so succinctly."

Humor works

Despite having 20 books under my belt, I found myself between literary agents this past year. So I queried prospective new agents with an email that began with this line: "It seems that searching for the right agent is a lot like speed dating, so here's a zippy 411 on me." It went on like this:

My Turn-Offs:
**Boring query letters
**One-and-done authors

It had other sections like "What I Like About You," "My Dream Date," and "My Recent 'Relationships,'" which detailed my last five books.

I got a 95 percent response rate from the two dozen I sent, and nearly all responders praised my approach, saying it was the most attention-grabbing email they'd seen in a long time and/or that it gave them a good laugh. Quite a few invited me to send them something new anytime.

The non-query query

Ask any editor or agent how many queries they get per week or during the course of a single conference, and

The goal in your querying is to showcase your creativity, sure, but it's equally important to prove that you're a professional.

you'll immediately see their visceral reaction. A typical agent or editor receives an avalanche of queries that often blends together into a stew of requests so large that they're actively looking for reasons to say "No!" just to trim down the volume.

So don't ask. Don't query. Refuse to participate in those mass rejections.

At writing conferences, I don't query or pitch on the spot. Instead, I strive to have a good time when I meet publishing pros. Then later, I follow up and reference the good time. ("I was the one who swapped *Star Trek* one-liners with you outside Starbucks!") And I still don't query or pitch. I just thank them for doing a great job at the conference on their panel or during their workshop. Then I keep in touch.

Once in a while, our email exchange grows to the point where they say something like this: "By the way, do you have anything for the June issue on fashion?"

BOOM. You're in. You didn't query them – *they* queried *you*. You simply flipped the tables by not doing what every other conference attendee did.

This can work even without a face-to-face meeting to initiate things. A robust social media exchange or other excuse to send occasional pithy emails can create a relationship where the outcome is the same. They need something and you hear about it – or get offered – the opportunity first.

Matching voice and vision

Award-winning author Ruth Spiro shares the following about her unconventional querying experience:

"When I began pitching my 'Baby Loves Science' series, the books were such a departure from traditional board books that I knew I'd have to make sure my submission accurately conveyed just what they were about. Each 'manuscript' came in at 85-100 words, so there was a good chance that my query would be longer than the actual text.

"Rather than using a traditional query letter, I crafted a one-page 'Project Proposal' and wrote it with the same voice and humor I'd used in the books. It had three sections: 'What?!' was followed by a three-sentence description of the series; 'Are you serious?' answered what I imagined would be the next question in the reader's mind; [and] 'Is there a market for this?' offered suggestions of who I thought would be interested in the series. I submitted this document along with the text for three possible books.

"While I received many rejections, nearly every editor and agent replied to my submission. Some commented that my proposal was helpful in communicating my vision for the series, and a few wrote how much they enjoyed reading it. (Of course, the most important opinion is that of the editor who acquired it!) I wouldn't recommend writing an unusual query just to stand out, but if there's a valid reason that works in tandem with your manuscript, I think it makes perfect sense to give it a try."

• • •

Finally, a word of caution: We've all heard about horror stories where "creative" *why-the-heck-not?* queries went wrong:

- The New York book editor who opens a FedEx package and finds a note: "This building will explode in 30 minutes…unless you wire $1 million to this account." When the bomb squad finally gives the all-clear, the editor realizes it was simply a pitch for a thriller manuscript.
- The writer who sends a birthday cake to a literary agency…with a query written in frosting.
- The writer who slides a manuscript to an editor in the next bathroom stall.

Those are gimmicks. They're stupid, silly, and unseemly.

The goal in your querying is to showcase your creativity, sure, but it's equally important to prove that you're a professional. If you really want to get noticed? Consider querying unconventionally in a professional fashion. Just fully consider the possible outcomes of your creative-yet-appropriate pitch. If you see more opportunity than downside, go for it. What have you got to lose? Just remember the following advice:

1.) Run your unconventional query plan by a trusted writer friend to ensure you're not the likely star of a future Don't-Do-This anecdote an editor or agent shares at a conference.

2.) If there's more than a 1 percent chance that the cops will get involved, it's a bad idea. Period.

Finally, if you decide to do something totally crazy and it works – or it totally goes down in a Hindenburg-flaming-BOOM – please share that story with us at tweditorial@madavor.com. We'd love to share it with fellow querying readers in the magazine.

Ryan G. Van Cleave is the author of 20 books, and he runs the creative writing program at the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida. Web: ryangvancleave.com


SOUL
Finding the heart of your story or novel.

SEARCHING

BY JACK SMITH

Writing fiction requires a process. At some point in the throes of drafting, revising, and fine-tuning, as you struggle to see your way through the fog of potentialities of character and plot, you may gain a sense for your story's essence: what it's about, where it's going. This essence – or we might say its "heart" – grasps something important, something universal about your protagonist's lot, about the human condition…at least it had better, or why write the story in the first place?

Maybe you won't know its essence until you finish the story. Maybe it will take writing the story to discover it. It won't be a tidy little moral, unless you want to write didactic fiction (which, for most writers, isn't recommended). Probably it's more like a clearance in that fog – perhaps a partial illumination regarding your character's overall arc, his or her coming to some sort of knowledge – something you as the writer now glimpse with more clarity. But it's likely still a little hazy and indecipherable, because the best writing doesn't reveal or tell all to either author or reader. Different readers will come away with different takes, different interpretations – within a reasonable range – and that's good. That's what you want.

But maybe that haze is still a little thicker than you'd like it to be, and you're not quite sure how to identify your story's soul. What do professional writers say about grasping this "heart" of a story or novel?

Identifying the essence of your story or novel

First, it should be noted that writers conceive of this matter of "aboutness" (to borrow a term from other disciplines) in different ways, in different terms. For some writers, the word *heart* isn't the right term.

According to Peter Selgin, novelist, short story writer, and memoirist, it's "too metaphorically and sentimentally loaded." He prefers instead "thematic core or center."

Lise Haines, author of the novels *When We Disappear* and *Girl in the Arena*, points out that "works of great fiction have at least *two* hearts to keep blood pumping in many directions."

For Meg Howrey, author of the highly acclaimed novel *The Wanderers* and two other novels, *spine* is a better word. "The spine is the thing to which other things – like hearts, or metaphors, or plots – can attach," she says.

Word choices aside, what does this key substance consist of?

For Peter Nichols, author of *The Rocks* and several other books of fiction, the unifying element – as with most literary writers – is character, not plot. "I am initially attracted to a situation around a character, or characters, which resonates with my own emotional experience. I see that person or people, but not clearly or completely," he says.

Plot, for Nichols, comes out of character: "Often I have only the haziest idea of plot and may not discover the heart of a story until I'm well along in the writing of it. I find only by going where to go."

For Haines, a plot-driven story lacks richness and complexity. When she asks her Emerson College students what a particular story is *about*, she hopes "to hear several different answers." Receiving just one answer, says Haines, means "the story has fallen flat and that often means a plot-driven or idea-driven story that only had one lightweight purpose in mind. I'm intrigued by the kind of fiction that delivers meaning over time, even to the author."

Nichols experienced this very thing after his novel *The Rocks* was accepted for publication. "When it was bought, and my editor took me to lunch, I asked her what it was about, and she told me what she thought. She told me things about the story, themes, I hadn't seen," he says.

The pre-writing stage

Should you decide in advance of drafting exactly what your story or novel will be "about?" Should you nail down as well as you can your characters, storyline, and thematic ideas? How much should you know in advance, and what's the best way to get into your story or novel: by reason or by intuition?

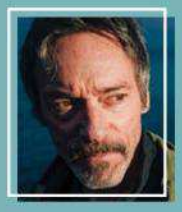
For Howrey, the spine of her story usually comes about more intuitively than rationally.

She tends to begin with a "central question or group of questions," which amount to "some curiosity or problem or preoccupation that makes me want to write a book." Then, as she "mulls this question," characters or a story idea will "begin to emerge."

Her process is one of being open to her characters, who become like real people she is conversing with. "[It's] mostly a matter of sharing the problems with my characters, and we all try to figure things out together," she says.

In the case of her most recent novel, *The Wanderers*, which deals with astronauts on a mission to Mars, Howrey had several pre-writing questions in mind. These questions were all related to the subject of "simulations" – which, early on, she grasped as key to her novel: *What makes an experience "real?" In what ways are all of us living in simulations? How do we carve out space for ourselves, and what price are we willing to pay for this space?* Pondering these questions created a much more intuitive approach than using reason and analysis to form a story idea.

Tips on discovering the essence of your story or novel

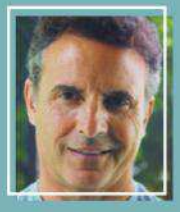


Peter Nichols: "Write what you fear to write, what is unresolved in you, what you may not know but want to. What you may want to revisit. Throw away analytical, intellectual thought and concept. Grope your way ahead. Follow your albeit dim but persistent vision, and see where it takes you. Don't play it safe. Then your heart and eye will reveal themselves. What do I know? But this is what I'm trying to do."

Rebecca Chace: "I think that continuing to ask yourself 'What is this story really about?' is very helpful, and to keep asking yourself that question. The answer is not a synopsis. Ask yourself why you need to tell this story, and give yourself permission not to share the answers to either of these questions with anyone. These questions and their answers can become a secret engine to the novel, and secrets are powerful tools for a novelist."

Lise Haines: "I recommend that young authors go into a place of fascination with and curiosity in their subjects and characters. Posing an overarching question can be a way to learn where they want to take their stories. I would avoid preconceived ideas about how stories are created. It's more fun when each one surprises the writer and the reader."

Meg Howrey: "Ask yourself what it is you want to examine by writing this book. And then don't handcuff yourself to that. If the questions are real for you, you won't be able to prevent them from appearing in your work. They will fight to get in there. Just leave the window open."



Peter Selgin: "I think it helps to be on the lookout for metaphors and analogies. So, for instance, recently a student of mine wrote a story about a recurrent customer in a restaurant whose at first arguably charming behavior turns creepier and creepier over time, until it crosses a line into harassment and becomes frightening to the waitress, who is the story's protagonist. The title she chose for her story-in-progress was 'Three Napkin Roses,' based on the fact that this customer makes three roses and leaves them with the protagonist's tip on the table. The title and the objects they allude to suggest the uncomfortable union of roses (a symbol for romance) and napkins – something used and then disposed of, diametrically opposed to roses in being among the least 'romantic' objects. Based on her own title, I suggested that the student explore that uncomfortable juxtaposition more deeply within the story itself. In this case, she had the title but hadn't fully realized its implications."

Photos by (clockwise from top left): Frank Zauritz Fotograf, Mark Hanauer, Katinka Neuhof, Sienna Haines, Nina Subin

Rebecca Chace, author of *Leaving Rock Harbor*, an Editor's Choice in the *New York Times Book Review*, uses a similar approach. She begins with a question she thinks is "both emotionally compelling and complex," and then begins to further complicate it. This process yields both a narrative and characters that are "in service of answering the question."

In the manuscript she's currently working on, she posed this question: *What would a person do if she was unable to contact or see the person she had devoted her life to when he needed her most?* She then "built outward from this question." Her story revolved around a 20-year-long secret affair. To trouble the water, she brainstormed as many questions as she could related to her central question. These questions served as a method of inquiry: She was acting in a discovery mode instead of a decision mode.

It's all about discovery, says Selgin. "To use a painterly analogy since I also paint, it's like going into the studio knowing, or thinking you know, exactly which colors to put where on the canvas. You get a result, sure, but the result is as dead as a painting by numbers," he says. Switching metaphors, Selgin states: "As useful as it might be to have a formula (one part intuition to one part intellect), writing a novel or story isn't like making a bowl of soup or a martini; you don't start with a recipe and ingredients. At some point, you have an idea. Who knows where ideas come from? They may grow out of an experience, or they may be handed to you in a dream."

The drafting process – early and late

But what about the various stages of the drafting process itself, and, especially in the revision stage, what about that cold, critical eye? Some writers emphasize the intuitive approach, especially in early drafts, and some even in revision.

Regardless of stage, Nichols works mostly by intuition, "trusting that a path/scene/event in the story will reveal itself to me when I sit down at my computer, or go for a walk, or read a book, or chop vegetables."

In *The Rocks*, a story idea came to him in the process of writing. "I saw this, vividly: two elderly characters – a man

and a woman, who had once been married when they were very young – meet and, because of the unresolved anger between them, have an accident that kills both of them – at page 6 in the novel," he says.

The novel was at an end in a half-dozen pages – so what to do? He was perplexed: "I had no idea what their problem with each other was, what had happened between them, and of course they were dead, so the story was finished."

But he wanted to know more about them, and so he wrote his way into their lives, following them "backward in time." He knew the ending, but he needed to find out the beginning.

"I wrote the novel, chronologically backward, to find out," he says.

Nichols normally doesn't make a habit of writing a story in this particular way, but he does trust his instincts, and this means letting the story tell itself and watching it all being revealed scene by scene, story segment by story segment. That's how he finds out what it's "about."

Symbolism isn't something you can force. It must come out of the power of the image itself, and from its dramatic context, or it won't work.

He describes his process in this way: "Like someone with macular degeneration trying to make sense of a movie from only a few scenes. I see it vaguely, bits of it. I try to let my imagination, my subconscious, unspool the movie, and then I write down what I see. I try to see scenes that are coming. I try to find some liminal place between waking and dreaming, where the story can play out, and I can see it. I have to have faith that it will show me where it is going."

For Haines, too, the core of a story may not be apparent until she is finished. In a story entitled "The Missing Part," recently published by *AGNI*, Haines dealt with the real-life abduction of Robin Ann Graham, a young woman who had disappeared from the Santa Monica Freeway in 1970, possibly kidnapped by one of Charles Manson's gang.

The nonfiction story served as a starting point. In her fictional version, the young woman who disappeared is named Jane. Her former boyfriend, Jim, and a female companion he meets at work set out to find Jane's remains.

"They have both suffered major losses, and the lines between their tragedies overlap. But I didn't realize until after I had completed the story that I was writing about more than shared loss or the need to know what had happened to Jane. I began to see that the couple who search the California hills both believe in some essential way that they might have prevented the events that haunt them. Curiosity is the way to discover how a work of fiction speaks to us, and the way to discover it anew," she says.

For Haines, the process of revision is "a mix of the analytical and intuitive, and I would add the work of the unconscious." She explains: "Each story has its own demands and involves a variety of craft issues as well as the need to explore character more deeply."

But even in the revision stage, says Haines, "I am not focused on unifying images or the overall thrust of the story. I am looking for characters to find their way as the story deepens."

Stories do, of course, have unifying devices – key metaphors, symbols, the title – but the question is, should you work or rework these as you see the need? And if so, when?

Chace depends on a method of indirection with metaphors "as a way of getting at emotions of the characters, working intuitively not analytically." When it comes to revision, she also tries to avoid an analytical approach.

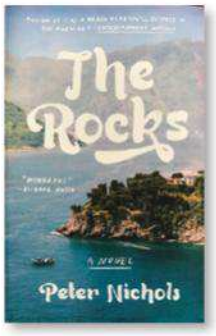
"While I do look for mechanical issues such as repetition, and overall plot and structure, I try to approach the revision process with intuition as well, even as I hone down the final draft. I never want to leave intuition outside the door when writing at any stage of the manuscript," she says.

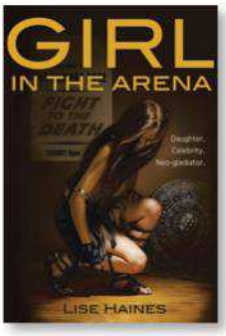
For Howrey, in the drafting stage metaphors need to be arrived at intuitively. "The really joyous part of writing is that things like unifying images will feel like they are emerging quite spontaneously. There's a risk of making your work overdetermined if you force that. If you're thinking about the people of your book and the situations that they are in *all the time*, then the subconscious will do its nice thing and start spitting connections at you," she says.

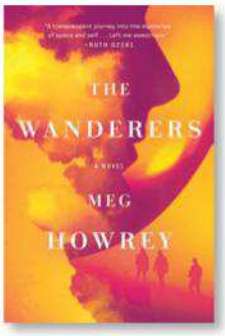
But the revision stage for Howrey is a different matter. Everything, including metaphors, is fair game for rigorous analytical editing. "What's the Hemingway adage? 'Write drunk, edit sober?' I think I write intuitively and edit analytically. I am a constant reviser, though, so this can happen within the same writing day," she says.

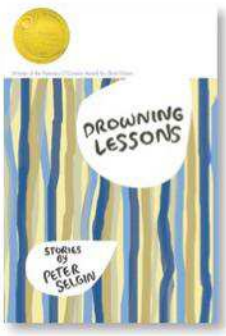
What about symbolism? A symbol can certainly crystallize a novel's overall meaning. Think of the Mississippi River in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or the classic green light in *The Great Gatsby*. A symbol (versus allegory) radiates various possible meanings.

"What does the green light stand for?" asks Selgin. "Money? Envy? The green rawness of youth? Naïveté? Who knows. Who *cares?* The point is the image resonates; it carries more than its weight. Long after you close *The*









Great Gatsby, the afterimage of that green light clings to your retinae."

The lesson here? Symbolism isn't something you can force. It must come out of the power of the image itself, and from its dramatic context, or it won't work.

Titles can provide another unifying element in a story or novel, functioning as "extremely useful indicators" of the core or center of the story, says Selgin, or in a story collection as well. He sees a working title as a convenient starting point for constant revaluation. In his Flannery O'Connor Award-winning collection, Selgin noticed that by and large, his stories "had water in common," so he entitled the collection *Bodies of Water*. But "thematically it was wanting."

It wasn't until he had read through the collection once more that he realized his stories had another, more substantial unifying element. Each story, in some way, had to do with his characters "drowning in their own uniqueness." He then changed the title to *Drowning Lessons*.

The logline

The "logline," a term borrowed from the film industry, has made its way to novel writing as well. It's a means of summing up your completed story's or novel's major thrust. And you will likely need it for the infamous query letter, which calls for tight, concise language. But when do you write it?

It isn't something Nichols concerns himself with in the drafting stages. "I would have no idea how to do this. Except perhaps to say: 'Two old people – once married when they were very young – meet, argue, fall off a cliff, and drown.' Then we go back through their lives to find out why they're so pissed off with each other and how this shaped the whole of their lives and everyone around them. This is a reductive kind of movie logline and wouldn't be of much help to me while writing the book." Save loglines for once the novel is completed, he advises.

For Selgin, loglines can be helpful in the revision stage. "Anything that helps us to identify, hone, or focus the core theme or premise of our work is helpful, whether it's arriving at a title or describing our novels or stories in a sentence," he says.

The downside? Loglines are notoriously difficult to write.

"I do it *very* badly," Howrey admits. "Many writers are terrible at doing this for themselves. Happily, many writers are quite good at doing this for *other* writers."

Her advice? "Hand your book over to another writer and ask them to come up with a logline for you, and then take them out to dinner or give them a nice bottle of whiskey, and promise to do the same for them."

The logline is an "elevator pitch," says Chace, who finds it "very difficult to come up with a high-concept description of literary fiction." She does offer advice for it as a marketing tool: "My only advice would be to brainstorm with trusted readers/your agent who may have more perspective on the book and perhaps more of a gift for it." Writing a logline, she says, is like writing "flap copy, and if one has any friends in publishing with experience doing that, they may be helpful."

Haines also sees its value in the marketing stage. "It helps in the process of writing to agents and editors when promoting a novel to state in a succinct way what the novel is about. Editors are not anticipating that the novel can actually be summed up in a sentence. It's a matter of creating intense interest."

She offers some advice on creating a logline: "I tend to write out a one-page description, a one-paragraph description, and finally the one-sentence description. Reading flap copy and backs of novels is one way to understand how this is done."

Finding the aboutness

Your story or novel has to be *about* something. It's probably not something so trivial as "they moved to Los Angeles, took jobs, raised a family, had their ups and their downs." No, it's something that penetrates much deeper than that. It's something *about* them, about that life in Los Angeles, about their jobs, their family – something waiting to be revealed. Something that captures the essence – below the surface level – of their ups and downs, something universal. Surely this essence won't be readily apparent and may require a search. But spend enough time with your story, and you will surely discover the heart, spine, and thematic core of your story. W

Jack Smith is the author of four novels, two books of nonfiction, and numerous articles and interviews.

Playing on all 88 keys

The prose playbook of PHILLIP LOPATE.

By Keysha Whitaker

IN GRAD SCHOOL, WHEN I PICKED MY INSTRUCTORS, I OFTEN DID SO ON THE BASIS OF THEIR BIOS. THAT'S HOW I WOUND UP IN PHIL LOPATE'S NONFICTION WORKSHOP IN 2010.

Back then, his credits included three personal essay collections, two novels and two novellas, three poetry collections, a memoir, a compilation of his movie criticism, and "an urbanist meditation," *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan*. Princeton University had just published his critical study *Notes on Sontag* in 2009.

His essays had been widely anthologized and awarded. He'd edited several anthologies, and one of them, *The Art of the Personal Essay,* was calling my name.

In the workshop, Lopate impressed me, not because of what he said but what he didn't. He listened more than he talked. When he wrote comments on my work, it seemed that he listened then, too, between the lines, and heard what I was trying to say.

He often gave verbal comments and suggestions to a student weeks after their piece had been workshopped. He seemed more concerned with the internal development of a writer rather than an immediate goal of getting published.

He was in it for the long game.

Eight years later, he's still on the field.

A Mother's Tale, published in 2017, is a story unearthed from a recorded interview with his late mother. In addition to a reconstruction of her life, the book is a dialogue between him and her.

"Well, it's actually – if you want to use a word that doesn't exist – a 'trialogue,'" Lopate says, "because it's my mother and I talking, and then it's me, now, talking to the two of them and sort of analyzing, 30 years later…how it [all] strikes me."

Lopate, who's written about

Dudi/Shutterstock

relatives before, says the writer is always in danger of exploiting the family member or co-opting their story. When he listened to the recording, he immediately knew that it was good material: "hairy, raw, messy stuff" that didn't need to be altered through an authorial narrative.

So for just over the first half of *A Mother's Tale*, the prose is mostly in her voice.

"Instead of treating my mother as a character, I was going to let her have her say," Lopate says.

In this book, as well as in much of his other work, Lopate uses the second person point-of-view, a direct address to the reader. He says this approach stemmed from reading and liking 18th- and 19th-century literature in which authors expressed an "off-the-cuff quality of establishing a relationship with the reader."

"I thought that it was a way of being playful. And one of the things that I relied on again and again in my writing is to be mischievous or to be playful in some way," Lopate says. "So the direct address to the reader – partly because it was seen as something that was antiquated and you couldn't do it anymore – provoked me into thinking, 'Well, I'd like to try it again.'"

Lopate says he came to the conclusion that the tradition of the essay was a conversation between the writer and the reader…and one between the writer and their own mind.

"You're trying to track your thoughts," Lopate says. "You're trying to figure out what you think about something."

While talking to the reader, Lopate says, the conversation exhibits a "stop-start quality."

"Just as you're going along, you pull yourself up short, and you anticipate the reader's objections, like, 'I know you're probably thinking that I'm an asshole now,' or whatever," he says.

The game of anticipating, addressing, and "cutting the reader off at the pass" drew Lopate further into the technique.

"Showing that you're aware of the dangers you're in and the game you're playing – it's taking the reader into the process and making the reader complicit with you, in a way," he says.

"I want some of those words that will jump out. I don't want everything to be flattened out. I want some words that will snag the reader's eye."

In *A Mother's Tale*, Lopate writes: "I am well aware that I am not succeeding in making my father come alive on the page, turning him into a three-dimensional character, or simply giving a proper account of the man."

Lopate says by asking questions like *"I wonder what this all means?"* or "*That may be very well and good but how does it connect to my original thesis?*" a writer is really challenging themselves to fail in front of the reader's eyes, which creates suspense and engages the reader more directly.

"It's not the same as fiction, where you encourage the reader sometimes to enter a dream and to go along as if it's really happening," he says. "[In the essay] you're tugging at the reader's sleeves, and you're jabbing the reader sometimes, and you're waking him out of that dream, but you're also making him be part of your conversation."

One way Lopate draws readers into his conversation is by using a colloquial expression.

He mixes the vernacular with more formal – or even obscure – language. In *A Mother's Tale*, phrases like "being manipulatively mawkish," "petty vituperations," and "wonderfully schmaltzy tearjerkers" were my round-trip tickets to Dictionary.com.

Lopate calls the technique "playing on all 88 keys," and it's reflective of our own diction that changes when in conversation with different people, moving between the formal academic, the colloquial, and slang.

"I feel like you should be able to use all of these tonalities, not just speak in one register," he says. "So it's, again, it's fun to be able to shift gears from one register to another."

The move makes a writer more trustworthy as a narrator, he believes.

"They see there's a human being there," Lopate says, "not just a kind of a 'stuffed shirt,' let's say."

He does offer a piece of advice for writers who want to try code switching: Don't force it.

"[When writing,] I'm relaxed enough to invite my thoughts, and sometimes those thoughts speak to me colloquially and sometimes they speak formally," he says.

He even uses words "that are a little bit out of reach."

"Every once in a while, I'll put in a word that I myself am not quite sure the definition [of]," he says, "but I've always wanted to use it or have seen it."

He believes the vocab variety gives the prose "texture."

"If you were to look at a page of prose without reading it, but just let your eye drift across the surface of the page, you would see certain words that would jump out at you," Lopate says. "And so I want some of those words that will jump out. I don't want everything to be flattened out. I want some words that will snag the reader's eye."

Lopate explains that he's writing for an array of readers.

"One reader I'm writing for is somebody that is more intelligent than I am," he says, "but I hope forgiving and will understand what I'm trying to do."

He jokes that "it's like writing for the great dead. They're watching me."

Some of those smarter and hopefully more understanding souls are writers he calls ancestors, like Montaigne or Virginia Woolf.

"I do think that one of the aspects of essay writing that I've noticed is it's kind of imprinted with writing from the past," Lopate says. "One of the ways that you show that you're a real essayist is that you exhibit traces of the tradition. You show that you've read all the stuff. That you're not inventing the wheel."

Another reader who he writes for is closer to home.

"In part [I'm] writing for myself, to amuse myself," he says. "So if I read something that I've written and I can laugh or chuckle afterward, then I think, 'Okay, it's good.'"

Using diction that's "archaic or anachronistic, as well as contemporary" is a way that Lopate speaks to a reader from the past and a contemporary one, remaining aware that certain contemporary readers might have ethical concerns, especially if he's saying something provoking.

"It's not that I always have to stay within the so-called politically correct range, but I have to know when I'm going outside of it," he says. "Because that's where the address to the reader really comes in, is when you're moving outside of a conventional position and trying to be a contrarian. Or trying to bring something new to the discussion."

Essayists hoping to be more adept at poking the bear with a purpose should start with reading great essays, then turn their focus inward, learning to distinguish their own opinions from others'.

"So you have to be able to listen to your inner voice and intuitions, your inclinations, your prejudices, and work with them," Lopate says. "So that you're not just spouting the conventional lie. And what it really comes down to is being attentive to your own ambivalences."

But voice is often elusive for newer writers, who may feel disadvantaged because they haven't found "the one."

The search, he implies, may be the problem.

"I don't think that a writer has a voice; I think a writer has *voices*," Lopate says. "And different projects will solicit different voices."

In fact, he faced the challenge of wrangling a new voice when he switched from primarily writing essays to working on *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan*, a research-heavy project.

"I was overwhelmed by the voices of the experts who knew so much more than I did," Lopate said. "And I would quote them at great length, and people who read it would say, 'No, we've got to get back to your voice. Regardless of how much they know, you're going to have to put this through a filter and make it your own.' So I had to learn a) how to do a tremendous amount of research, and b) how to transmute it into something of my own voice."

And though he's grown as a writer since his early days, he wouldn't change any of his work, rejecting Yeats' notion that he would rewrite some of his letters and poems.

"My idea is that, essentially, my work is additive, which is that every one of them is imperfect, but they all add up to something that's larger than the sum of its parts," he says. "I thought, 'Let them understand that this is what I wrote when I was 26. This is what I wrote when I was 36.' I don't want to pretend that I always had the same level of understanding."

He's learned something from all of his books, such as his first commercial one, *Being with Children*. He thought he was just writing about his experiences working with kids as a writer in schools; he then realized he was really writing a collection of essays.

"I had to develop a plausible voice on the page that people could trust," Lopate says. "I certainly learned a lot from that. And I'm still learning.

"Now, I'm doing an anthology, again, of the American essay, and I'm reading everything I can, reading through whole libraries, and it's thrilling to be able to learn much more than I knew in the form."

Keysha Whitaker's work has appeared in *The Writer*, the *New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*. She has an MFA from The New School.

Phillip Lopate on ...

Phillip Lopate and his cat, Tacey.

THE BEST AND WORST PIECE OF WRITING ADVICE HE RECEIVED

"I remember being told – I worked at the Metropolitan Museum [of Art] as a museum guard, and this other guard said, 'What do you want to do?' I said I want to be a great writer or a good writer. He said, 'Well, if you want to be good, you'll never be good.' He was a Buddhist, and everything had to be, like, paradoxical.

"You will meet various people along the way who are naysayers and who tell you to give it up. And so that was my worst advice.

"And my best advice was, 'Keep doing what you're doing.' It's interesting because I began as a fiction writer and a poet, and at a certain point when I was in my 30s, I fell upon the essay…And I started writing essays, basically taking some of my fiction training and some of my poetry training and merging them into the essay form because the essay form can be associational like poetry, and it can have a narrative like fiction.

"So a lot of my friends who were fiction writers said, 'Keep doing this.' I didn't know whether they were saying that meaning, 'Get off of my territory; you go over there,' or, 'No, this is something you can do.'

"But I did feel a natural affinity for the form. So persisting was really the best advice I ever got."

…WHY HE DESCRIBED A PICTURE IN *A MOTHER'S TALE* WHEN HE TELLS HIS MFA STUDENTS NOT TO DO THAT.

"I advise against, for instance, beginning a piece by describing a photograph of your family, let's say, because usually the writer brings more emotion to it than the reader can feel. The writer is getting all choked up, but you're thinking, '*What?*' And it tends to be sort of generic. It's always the same thing when people describe photographs. They think more is coming across than is really coming across.

"I'm aware of that kind of potential for sentimentality…like you're talking to a limited group, really, but other people can't feel that. And, so everything has to be prepared in terms of the emotions of the readers. You can't introduce a character and kill that character off on page two and expect the reader to care very much. You have to build up something, you know? So, in this case [in *A Mother's Tale*], I felt like I had built up enough, and I could get away with it. And also I could warn the reader…like, 'Watch out and see if this writer is going to get sentimental at this point.'"

…WHAT MAKES A WRITER'S VOICE PLAUSIBLE.

"What makes for a plausible voice is in part that the reader trusts this person is leveling with him or her. And, part of leveling is admitting to flaws, admitting to mistakes, admitting to human pride, greed, whatever. You know? So some of that sense of complicity in the world stock of sorrow is something that will make a writer more plausible. What makes a writer more plausible also is not to be so self-righteous, not to be so locked into a self-righteous position but to be able to see that, to be able to see the other person's side sometimes. If you're just writing about how you were done wrong, or prejudiced against, or victimized, or something like that, the reader may resist you, even if it's completely true, what you're saying. In order to get the reader on your side, you may have to show that you are not such a naïve [person].

"And so, probably what makes a writer's voice plausible is what I would call worldliness. That you're not shocked or dismayed by things that you should know or characteristic patterns among people."

Barbara Mensch

Manuscript mistakes only first-timers make*

*And how to fix them.

BY TONI FITZGERALD

The first self-published book I edited was written by a longtime newspaper reporter. Seasoned and self-confident, he decided to set sources aside and pen a novel, his first work of fiction. He told me he didn't think he needed an editor, but a novelist friend had advised him to get another pair of eyes on the manuscript before self-publishing. Enter me.

The reporter's book demonstrated real promise: It had intrigue. It had romance and humor. It also had the main character's name spelled three different ways in the first 13 pages, some confounding narrative inconsistencies, and 642 adverbs (I counted).

I told the author the edit was going to take longer than expected. He was flabbergasted.

Alas, without an agent or a publisher, he had no idea how to self-edit his passion project. He succumbed to the same problems that ensnare other first-time authors, especially those in self-publishing, who often face fewer editorial hurdles in getting their work to print.

Here are nine of the most common mistakes editors see in first-timers' manuscripts. Turning a critical eye to your book can decrease these easy-to-avoid errors – and increase your credibility with your readers.

MISTAKE №1
OVERWRITING

Writers toil under the illusion "more is more" when it comes to words. You can address this easily through pruning. Repeat after me: One adjective is enough. Also, editors can identify a green writer based on the number of synonyms they use for "says," so please refrain from writing "she chortled," "she exclaimed," or "she exclaimed as she chortled," and stick to "she said."

"Effusive writing, heavily laden with adjectives and adverbs, is the hallmark of unseasoned writers and, if not corrected in the editing, will result in an amateurish book," says Betty Kelly Sargent, a veteran editor and CEO/founder of BookWorks.

MISTAKE №2
INCONSISTENCY

Is your main character's name Sara or Sarah? That may seem like a small edit. You can use search-and-replace to change all the errant "Sarahs" and be good to go, right? Not necessarily.

For inexperienced authors, inconsistency applies not just to spelling or grammar. It also extends to story. Many first-timers do not put the time they should into characterization and plotting. This leads to developments that strain credulity, such as plot points arising out of nowhere or a character doing a 180 without explanation. (See Toby Ziegler's inexplicable behavior on the final season of *The West Wing* for examples of both.)

"New authors often assume revision is all about commas and grammar, when getting a solid story onto the page should be the very first priority," says Lisa Poisso, a book editor and writing coach.

MISTAKE №3
DEPENDING TOO MUCH ON YOUR EDITOR

You may be surprised to hear me say this – I'm an editor, after all. But the editor is not the author. You need to lay out a creative vision for your work that makes sense. An editor can polish prose and weed out grammatical errors, but they cannot write the book for you or get your character from point A to point B.

"If you assume you'll simply hire an editor to patch over your problems, that's exactly what you'll get: A future of paying for someone else to fix the basic issues a professional writer should already have mastered. As long as you keep your editors scrambling in clean-up mode, you'll never reach the deeper levels of critique and feedback that make your writing richer and lead to real development," Poisso says.

MISTAKE №4
WRITING JUST ONE DRAFT

Would you try out for the Olympic team a day after your first swim lesson? Open a restaurant after baking one successful soufflé?

Well, no. You need quite a bit of practice before you hit the big leagues. Your manuscript is like that, too. "You should never submit a first draft," says Arlene Prunkl, a longtime editor who runs PenUltimate Editorial Services. "You need to work more on it, you need a second or a third draft. A third may be submittable."

MISTAKE №5
PUTTING ALL YOUR FAITH IN SPELLCHECK

Spellcheck is fantastic. It kept me from using "fantrastic" in that last sentence. But spellcheck has no nuance – and if it's the only thing between you and hitting "publish," then you have a problem.

Spellcheck won't flag overly formal dialogue or address plot pacing problems. If you think your job is done after you hit spellcheck, you're sorely (though not soarly) wrong.

MISTAKE №6
JUMPING FROM WRITING STRAIGHT TO PUBLISHING

Writing is like a pot of tea. It needs time to steep.

When you've been so close to a manuscript for so long, spotting its flaws becomes difficult. You need space. I recommend taking at least a two-month break. I tucked this article aside for four weeks before editing, and it's only 1,200 words long.

"When you go back to it with fresh eyes, you'll see all the places that can use finessing that weren't apparent when you were in the thick of it," says Kelly Sargent.

MISTAKE №7
TAKING TOO LONG TO GET TO THE POINT

Remember my first-time novel writer? His book included a lot of action, but none of it occurred before the third chapter. I advised him to cut the first two chapters. They contained lovely sentence structure, but they lacked narrative urgency. By jumping into the action, and moving the backstory further into the narrative, you grab your reader's attention faster.

MISTAKE №8
SO MUCH PASSIVE VOICE

Larger plot or narrative issues account for most manuscript mistakes. But one thing editors lament over and over from first-time writers, especially those self-publishing, is over-reliance on passive voice.

The ball was thrown by the three-legged duck. The coffee they were selling was infused with lizard appendix. The adult book store was owned by Dick Cheney. Not even the shock of the second half of those sentences can save the dull first halves.

Don't let the subject be acted upon by the verb (see what I mean?). Activate those verbs, and you will also slash hundreds of words from your manuscript.

MISTAKE №9
LEANING ON A LANGUAGE CRUTCH

All writers have a crutch – a word, phrase, or pattern we repeat over and over in everything we write, often without noticing it. For some, like my first-time author, it's adverbs. Another author I edited used the word "elucidate" in each chapter of his book. One "elucidate" is grand. Twelve is not.

Look over your past writing and identify your crutch. Then search your manuscript for examples. You may find dozens you breezed past in an early line edit.

Can you conquer these manuscript mistakes on your own? You bet. Writers tend to be their own worst critics – and in the case of a first-time author, that can only help you. The more you question, the better your final product will be…even if you have to remove all 642 adverbs.

Toni Fitzgerald is the copy editor for *The Writer* and a meticulous freelance editor who rewrote this bio 19 times before she was satisfied. She's always accepting clients for self-published and non-self-published books. Web: tonifitz76.com.

8 SOURCES TO HELP YOU MASTER YOUR FIRST MANUSCRIPT

This mix of books, podcasts, and websites are must-reads/must-listens as you plug away at writing that first book:

- Bookworks' discussion groups: bookworks.com/discussion-groups
- *Self-Editing for Fiction Authors*, by Renni Browne and Dave King
- *Woe is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*, by Patricia T. O'Conner
- *On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser
- PenUltimate Editorial Services' resource page: penultimateword.com/resources
- *Self-Editing for Indie Authors*, by Michelle Lowery
- Lisa Prossio's blog: lisapoisso.com
- Scribendi's *Editing Versus Proofreading* Podcast

DAME Magazine

This powerhouse magazine is on the hunt for bold, clear-eyed writers.

A glance at *DAME*'s online shopping page provides an excellent sense of the magazine's aesthetic. T-shirts sport logos that read "#Feminist." Tote bags show silhouettes of women, their fists raised, with the words "The revolution will be feminist." The front of a black infant onesie bears the message, "No sleep till matriarchy."

The digital publication's subhead reads: *"For women who know better."* With this readership in mind, Editor-in-Chief Kera Bolonik looks for dynamic and opinionated pieces exploring issues related to race, sex, class, gender, LGBTQ, reproductive and civil rights, disability, media, law, cultural trends, and politics.

"We are publishing so much exciting stuff right now that is really resonating with our readers – explainers, reported features, and even a new humorist we love," Bolonik says.

Tone, editorial content

DAME editors seek candid, provocative voices – strongly opinionated writers who can convey the urgency of a story to readers in fast-paced, evocative prose. They publish essays – first-person and otherwise – pegged to news stories, as well as reported features, interviews with celebrities and politicians, and trend pieces. One of these is Einav Keet's reported piece "When the Pussyhat Comes Off" (1/18/18), which examines U.S. political and social issues a year after the inaugural Women's March and begins, "Were we all just shouting into the void, or could our voices propel us out of this fresh hell?"

"We don't want pieces that join the chorus. We want stand-out pieces that start the conversation or move it in new directions, that make you see things and think about it in a new way."

Bolonik is grateful for *DAME* columnists including Lisa Needham, a policy and law explainer, and Robin Marty, who writes about reproductive justice. "They have their work cut out for them and make sense of the illogical," Bolonik explains. "They're brilliant warriors, all of our writers are, they're in the trenches and reporting back, translating the horrors in terms we can understand, while experiencing it like we all are. I'm really proud of what we do."

Contributors

DAME editors published Keah Brown's essay "Twitter, I Just Can't Quit You" (11/14/17), about how the social media site – despite the presence of racist and misogynist trolls – gives a platform and a place to find paid writing opportunities to people of color and those with disabilities. Brown writes:

> Twitter, despite its may failings, gives me a sense of community in my chosen identities Black, Disabled, and female. There is a group of people there that I can talk to about popular culture, books, movies, music, and cheesecake. More importantly, Twitter is where I make money.

Andrea Chalupa published "Why Russia Matters to our Democracy" (2/20/18). In it, she notes that the United States has massive imperfections when addressing its own corruption:

> Some critics like to dismiss RussiaGate as the hysterical political games of a desperate opposition, or an excuse for the Democratic Party not to own its many mistakes," she writes. "There's a determined, deep-pocketed, and pernicious enemy at the heart of the scandal – an international corruption ring that has an obvious ally holding the most powerful office in the world.

"These pieces are incredibly engaging and make sense of the chaos we're living in right now in a way that feels like you can get a grip on it, not on the situation per se (because how can you?) but at least on the constant onslaught of awful news," Bolonik explains.

"We want works that introduce new, thoughtful takes on stories that haven't gotten a lot of attention or analysis, and fresh perspectives on those that have."

ONLINE.

Genres: Essays, features, think pieces.

Reading period: Year-round.

Length: Varies.

Submission format: In the body of an email to the editorial address below.

Payment: Competitive; varies.

Contact: Kera Bolonik, editor-in-chief.
editorial@damemagazine.com
damemagazine.com

Advice for potential contributors

Interested in contributing to *DAME*? Bolonik urges writers to think about what they'd like to read that they're not seeing elsewhere. "What we want most is new, fresh angles on both essays and deeply reported pieces," she says. "We don't want pieces that join the chorus. We want stand-out pieces that start the conversation or move it in new directions, that make you see things and think about it in a new way. What makes what you have to say different from everyone else? That's a question to consider."

DAME editors prefer a one- or two-paragraph pitch with a strong sense of the story and its purpose. "If you can't describe what you want to do in a few sentences, you may need to strengthen the objective of the pitch," she says. "Come to us with a specific, well-thought-out idea. If it's not quite right, we'll work with you to help you get there."

She notes that editors get far too many submissions about television and films, stories about health care, and meditations on presidential impeachment. "The best advice I can give to potential contributors is really getting to know our magazine," she says, "and pitching things that fit in with the overall vision while bringing something new to the proverbial table."

Contributing editor Melissa Hart is the author of *Avenging the Owl* (Sky Pony, 2016) and the forthcoming *Better with Books: Diverse Fiction to Open Minds and Ignite Empathy in Children* (Sasquatch, 2019). Web: melissahart.com.

BY MELISSA HART

Literary Writers Conference

This Friday-Saturday conference in New York City offers a comprehensive primer on the publishing industry.

"Publishing is a process made up of multiple partnerships." This is the thesis that guides the annual Literary Writers Conference, sponsored by the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP) in New York City.

Executive Director Jeffrey Lependorf explains that the conference is entirely devoted to giving writers tools to maneuver the complexities of publishing, including insight into the relationships that authors have with their literary agent, editor, publicist, and bookseller.

"The people who attend this conference are those who have been through an MFA program or are completing one now, or have been out there honing their craft in literary fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry," he says of the two-day event held in December at the New School.

A Literary Writers Conference participant practicing his "elevator speech" in front of the crowd, with coaching from literary agents Adam Eaglin (The Cheney Agency) and Diana Finch (Diana Finch Literary Agency), led by CLMP executive director Jeffrey Lependorf.

What you'll learn

Attendees will learn how to submit work to literary journals and find funding and residencies. One of the conference sessions focuses on how to find the right agent for your work – a process Lependorf likens to dating.

"We offer tools to help you find the kind of agent that's best for you," he says. "Do you need one that will do a lot of editing on your manuscript or respect it as it is? Do you need more or less hand holding, a younger up-and-coming agent, or a well-established agent who may be retiring soon and who has amazing contacts?"

A session titled "Winding Up for the Pitch" allows writers to practice pitching a manuscript to agents in front of staff and participants. "You meet a whole bunch of agents and see how different they are as human beings, with different tastes and personalities," Lependorf explains. "But the purpose of this conference isn't to get an agent. It's to learn how to get one and what makes a good agent for you."

Still, Jennifer Kitses, author of the debut novel *Small Hours* (Grand Central, 2017), met her agent at the

A circle of poets at the Literary Writers Conference discussing how best to submit work to literary magazines and presses.

Literary Writers Conference and returned in 2017 as a featured speaker to talk about her experience working with agent Lisa Grubka on publication and marketing.

Though the focus of this conference isn't on craft, a clinic allows writers to get feedback on the opening lines of their manuscript from a panel of agents. "It's really exciting to hear people read their work," Lependorf says, and to get feedback from agents who aren't focused on whether the writing is good or bad, but how they'd react if they received the submission in their office. "They're saying things like 'This seems beautifully written, but it's not the kind of fiction I represent, so I might send it onto a colleague of mine.' That's always cool, and it really happens."

CONFERENCE:
Literary Writers Conference

DATES: December 2018

COST: $375

LOCATION: New York City, New York

CONTACT: Conference director Jeffrey Lependorf, info@clmp.org. clmp.org.

Featured presenters

Potential attendees can check CLMP's website for the current list of 2018 presenters. "Case Studies" presentations feature a poet, fiction writer, and nonfiction writer talking along with their agent and editor – and sometimes the book designer and publisher – about how they achieved publication and how they work together to ensure a book's success.

While these presentations used to focus on internationally famous authors, attendees suggested to staff that it would be more helpful to hear from writers who'd published perhaps just one or two books. "Now, we give you a chance to hear the story of a publishing process from someone just a few steps ahead of you," Lependorf explains. "It's like seeing a peer up there presenting in an intimate session."

One of this year's presenters in a session titled "The Author and Her Team" is Amanda Stern, whose memoir, *Little Panic: Dispatches from an Anxious Life*, describes growing up with panic disorder, shuttled between an affluent father and a bohemian mother in New York City. "It will be great for folks to hear from Amanda about her long path to publishing this memoir, knowing all that she knows about the business and how she's engaged with her team," Lependorf says of Stern.

Advice for first-time attendees

Lependorf asks conference participants to come prepared with a query letter and a polished first page of manuscript. Sit up close during presentations, he advises, so that people get to know you, and don't be afraid to ask questions. Be present, engage, and attend each session with the desire to become part of a larger writing community.

Color-coded nametags make it easy to find attendees working in your genre. Networking opportunities abound during the two-day event, and staff organize meetups after hours as well, so that people get to know each other and exchange contact information in more casual settings.

"Publishing is a partnership process, and it's important to be a good literary citizen," Lependorf says. "If you're the first person to get a book out, be the first person to blurb others' books when they get published. If one of your friends from the conference gets an agent, they might recommend you to that agent. The community-building aspect of this conference is so valuable."

Contributing editor Melissa Hart is the author of the middle-grade novel *Avenging the Owl* (Sky Pony, 2016) and the forthcoming *Better with Books: Diverse Fiction to Open Minds and Ignite Empathy and Compassion in Children* (Sasquatch, 2019). Web: melissahart.com.

Strength in numbers

Writing conferences, retreats, and festivals are some of the best places to hone your craft and learn from some of the top names in the field, but they also offer the unique opportunity to meet fellow writers. In what can often be a solitary career, it's important to network and get feedback on your writing. Here are three perks you should take advantage of at any conference:

1. **Make a friend.** Finding a like-minded, or maybe not-so-like-minded, writer to bring into your inner circle can be priceless. You can each help each other brainstorm, get through rough writing patches, and read new work.

2. **Learn a lot.** Attend workshops that speak to you – and as many of them as possible. Getting advice from writers who have been in your shoes and learning the methods that work for them can make your entire conference experience worthwhile.

3. **Write.** The whole point of attending a conference is to discover more about your own writing style. Use the energy surrounding the event as inspiration, and maintain that momentum once you get back home and are back to the lonely task of working solo.

The following conferences, retreats, and festivals are a small sampling of what the industry has to offer. You'll find more market listings at writermag.com.

Information in this section is provided to *The Writer* by the individual markets and events; for more information, contact those entities directly.
Subscribers to *The Writer* have online access to information on publishers, publications, conferences, contests and agents. Go to writermag.com and click on Writing Resources.

F = Fiction **N** = Nonfiction **P** = Poetry
C = Children's **Y** = Young adult **O** = Other
$ = Offers payment

CONFERENCES, RETREATS, FESTIVALS (JULY – DECEMBER)

CALIFORNIA

La Jolla Writer's Conference San Diego, Oct. 26-28. Learn about the art, craft, and business of writing with lectures and workshops. Offers approximately 80 classes. Faculty includes authors, agents, publishers, and publicists. **Contact:** La Jolla Writer's Conference. Email from website. lajollawritersconference.com

Litquake San Francisco, Oct. 11-20. The largest independent literary festival on the West Coast, this event includes panel discussions, cross-media events, and hundreds of readings, plus the now-famous Lit Crawl through the Mission District. **Contact:** Litquake. 57 Post St., Suite 604, San Francisco, CA 94104. 415-440-4177. info@litquake.org litquake.org

Mendocino Coast Writers' Conference Fort Bragg, Aug. 2-4. The 29th Annual Mendocino Coast Writers Conference will feature the second annual Publishing Boot Camp on Aug. 5. Faculty for the conference will include authors Guadalupe Garcia McCall, Kerrie Flanagan, Jason S. Ridler, and more. Elizabeth Rosner will deliver the keynote address. **Contact:** Mendocino Coast Writers Conference, P.O. Box 2087, Fort Bragg, CA 95437. info@mcwc.org mcwc.org

Monterey Writer Retreat Monterey, Nov. 7-11. Author-agent professionals offer one-on-one sessions with writers, including line editing and mentorship of short stories or novel manuscripts. **Contact:** Algonkian Writer Conferences. 800-250-8290. info@algonkianconferences.com montereywritersretreat.com

Pacific Coast Children's Writers Novel Workshop & Retreat Santa Cruz, Sept. 21-23. Limited attendance makes for an intimate and focused setting in workshops, panels, classes, and more. Enrollees read peer manuscripts in advance, then compare their conclusions with those of editors and agents in a collegial, open-clinic format. The conference also features a teen workshop. **Contact:** Nancy Sondel, founding director. Email from website. childrenswritersworkshop.com

Southern California Writers' Conference – Los Angeles Irvine, Sept. 21-23. Devoted to writers of all levels, the SCWC features dozens of interactive troubleshooting and read and critique workshops, and has facilitated some $4 million in first-time authors' book and screen deals since 1986. **Contact:** Southern California Writers' Conference. Michael Steven Gregory, Executive Director. msg@WritersConference.com writersconference.com

COLORADO

Colorado Gold Conference Denver, Sept. 6-9. Annual three-day conference hosted by the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers features workshops, panels, pitch session, and networking with authors, editors, and agents. Keynotes are James Scott Bell, Kate Moretti, and Christopher Paolini. **Contact:** Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers. P.O. Box 711, Montrose, CO 81402. 303-331-2608. Email from website. rmfw.org

Writing the Rockies Gunnison, July 18-22. Workshops, readings, panels, semi-

nars, and other events in poetry, genre fiction, screenwriting, and publishing. This year's conference includes an extended collection of offerings in creative nonfiction, including keynote speaker Patrick Pexton as well as world-renowned keynote speakers in screenwriting, poetry, creative nonfiction, publishing, and genre fiction, and three-day workshops on craft in all areas. **Contact:** Writing the Rockies, Western State Colorado University, 600 N. Adams St., Gunnison, CO 81231. Dr. Mark Todd, Co-Coordinator. 800-876-5309, ext 7. mtodd@western.edu western.edu/writingtherockies

CONNECTICUT

Ridgefield Writers Conference Ridgefield, Sept. 21. Keynote address and reading by Rachel Basch and a Q&A panel with agent, authors, and guest editors. **Contact:** Word for Words. 203-894-1908. Adele Annesi, a.annesi@sbcglobal.net. ridgefieldwritersconference.blogspot.com

FLORIDA

Sanibel Island Writers Conference Sanibel Island, Nov. 8-11. Open to writers in all stages of their careers. Offers workshops in fiction, poetry, songwriting, children's literature, journalism, screenwriting, and creative nonfiction; panels in publishing and editing; and readings, keynote addresses, and concerts. The presenter lineup includes Steve Almond, Joyce Maynard, Annemarie Ní Churreáin, and Stephanie Elizondo Griest. **Contact:** Sanibel Island Writers Conference, Reed Hall 242, Florida Gulf Coast University, 10501 FGCU Blvd. S, Fort Myers, FL 33965. Tom DeMarchi, director. 239-590-7421. tdemarch@fgcu.edu fgcu.edu/siwc

GEORGIA

AJC Decatur Book Festival Decatur, Aug. 31-Sept. 2. The largest independent book festival in the United States, featuring over 1,000 authors. Taking place in the historic downtown Decatur square, AJC Decatur offers book signings, readings, panels, a children's area, music, poetry slams, workshops, and more. **Contact:** AJC Decatur Book Festival. Email from site. decaturbookfestival.com

Chattahoochee Valley Writers Conference Columbus, Sept. 29. Conference featuring presentations for poetry, fiction, nonfiction, scriptwriting, short stories, novels, essays/articles, editing, marketing, and more. This will be the 12th Annual Chattahoochee Valley Writers Conference, and Debbie Horne, Ty Manns, Steve Scott, and more will be there. **Contact:** Chattahoochee Valley Writers, P.O. Box 2184, Columbus, GA 31901. 706-326-1617. chattwriters.org

INDIANA

ALTA Conference Bloomington, Oct. 31-Nov. 3. The 41st annual ALTA Conference will have the theme "Performance, Props, and Platforms," which will ponder the changes in the environment of the practice and discipline of translation. ALTA hopes to create a platform to openly discuss translation as a process and will include sessions, readings, and keynote speakers. **Contact:** American Literary Translators Association. The Fire Works, 701 S 50th St., Fl 3, Philadelphia, PA 19143. Assistant Managing Director Rachael Daum, rachaeldaum@literarytranslators.org literarytranslators.org

KENTUCKY

Kentucky Book Fair Lexington, Nov. 17. Will take place at the Alltech Arena at the Kentucky Horse Park and feature dozens of authors of all genres. The informal atmosphere encourages discussion and conversation among all of those in attendance. **Contact:** Kentucky Book Fair. 206 East Maxwell St., Lexington, KY 40508. 859-257-5932. kyhumanities@kyhumanities.org kyhumanities.org/kentuckybookfair.html

Kentucky Women Writers Conference Lexington, Sept. 13-16. A women's literary festival at the Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning featuring workshops for writers, evening readings, and events that are open to the community. Featured guests include Tarfia Faizullah. **Contact:** Kentucky Women Writers. 232 E. Maxwell St., Lexington, KY 40506. 859-257-2874. kentuckywomenwriters@gmail.com womenwriters.as.uky.edu

LOUISIANA

Louisiana Book Festival Baton Rouge, Nov. 10. Free and open to the public. Features author readings and an exhibit hall of booksellers, publishing houses, and scholarly programs. **Contact:** Louisiana Book Festival. Robert Wilson, Assistant Director, 701 N. Fourth St., Baton Rouge, LA 70802. 225-219-9503. lbf@state.lib.la.us louisianabookfestival.org

MAINE

Summer Stonecoast Writers' Conference Portland, July 9-14. Students work closely with the distinguished faculty, composed of award-winning writers. Workshops are available in poetry, short fiction, novel, and nonfiction/memoir, or a mixed genre boot camp. **Contact:** Justin Tussing, Director, Stonecoast Writers' Conference, c/o Dept. of English, University of Southern Maine, P.O. Box 9300, Portland, ME 04104. 207-228-8393. justin.tussing@maine.edu usm.maine.edu/summer/stonecoast-writers-conference

MARYLAND

Baltimore Writers Conference Towson, Nov. 10. Features sessions on poetry, fiction, nonfiction, playwriting, screenwriting, and the business of writing with authors, publishers, and agents. Also offers quick critiques. **Contact:** BWC c/o English Dept., Liberal Arts Building, Towson University, 8000 York Rd., Towson, MD 21252. 410-704- 5196. PRWR@towson.edu baltimorewritersconference.org

Summer Nightsun Writers Conference Frostburg, July dates TBA. A weekend to study with published writers and to workshop, design, and generate new material and receive feedback for finished works. **Contact:** Frostburg Center for Creative Writing, Department of English, Frostburg State University, 101 Braddock Rd., Frostburg, MD 21532. 301-687-4340 cla@frostburg.edu

frostburg.edu/cla/workshops/nightsun-writers-conference/

MASSACHUSETTS

New England Crime Bake Dedham, Nov. 9-11. Hosted by the New England Chapters of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America. Features manuscript critiques, agent pitches, master classes and plenty of opportunities to meet with other mystery writers and fans. Guest of honor Walter Mosley. **Contact:** New England Crime Bake. Email from website. crimebake.org

Viable Paradise Martha's Vineyard, Oct. 21-26. A one-week residential workshop in writing and selling commercial science fiction and fantasy. Features extensive time spent with award-winning authors and professional editors in the field, both one-on-one and in group sessions. **Contact:** MVSFA, 351 Pleasant St., Suite B157, Northampton, MA, 01060. contact@viableparadise.com viableparadise.net

MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi Writers Guild Annual Conference Jackson, July 27-28. Speakers, advice, critiques, fellowship, food, literary readings, and more. Opportunity to read work on stage, mix and mingle, and listen to keynote speaker. Workshop with well-known authors and professionals, and enjoy book signings and writing critiques. **Contact:** Mississippi Writers Guild. Susan Marquez, president. Email from website. mississippiwritersguild.com

MONTANA

Montana Book Festival Missoula, Sept. 27-30. Features authors with readings, panels, exhibits, demonstrations, workshops, and receptions. **Contact:** Montana Book Festival, c/o Arts Missoula, 327 E. Broadway, Missoula, Montana 59802. montanabookfestival@gmail.com montanabookfestival.org

NEVADA

Las Vegas Book Festival Las Vegas, Oct. 20. A celebration of the written, spoken, and illustrated word. Offers a wide range of programs built around sharing resources, developing audiences, advancing the craft of writing, and sharing the joys of reading. Most events are free and open to the public. **Contact:** Las Vegas Book Festival, 495 S. Main St., Office of Cultural Affairs/4th Floor, Las Vegas, NV 89101. Email from website. vegasvalleybookfestival.org

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Live Free and Write Sunapee, August dates TBA. The Lakes Region offers a five-day retreat featuring plentiful writing time, encouraging workshops, homemade meals, and opportunities to relax. **Contact:** Murphy Writing of Stockton University. Peter Murphy, Founder, 30 Front St., Hammonton, NJ 08037. 609-626-3594. info@murphywriting.com murphywriting.com

NEW MEXICO

Green River Writers Memoir Writing Workshop July 12-15, Las Vegas. Writing-intensive program using memoir as a starting point. For experienced and beginning writers. Focus on the crafts of writing and storytelling, and the evolving world of publishing. Faculty includes Gerald Hausman, Loretta Hausman, and Alice Winston Carney. **Contact:** Green River Workshops. Alice Carney, Director. 916-947-0983. carney.aw@gmail.com greenriverwritersworkshop.com

NEW YORK

Brooklyn Book Festival Brooklyn, Sept. 10-17. The largest free literary event in New York City, featuring national and international authors. **Contact:** Brooklyn Book Festival, 249 Smith St., PMB #106, Brooklyn, NY 11231. Liz Koch, 570-362-6657. info@brooklynbookfestival.org brooklynbookfestival.org

Slice Literary Writers' Conference Brooklyn, Sept. 8-9. Panels and workshops cover the craft and business of writing with top editors, agents, and authors. Offers one-on-one agent meetings and craft classes. **Contact:** Slice Magazine. editors@slicemagazine.org slicelitcon.org

Southampton Writers Conference Southampton, July 11-22. Offers intensive workshop sessions led by distinguished authors as well as readings, lectures, panels, and discussions. Offers focus in novels, short stories, poetry, creative nonfiction, memoir, and children's literature intensive. **Contact:** Southampton Arts, Stony Brook Southampton, 239 Montauk Hwy., Southampton, NY 11968. 631-632-5030. christian.mclean@stonybrook.edu stonybrook.edu/southampton/mfa/summer

NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina Writers' Network Fall Conference 2018 Charlotte, Nov. 2-4. Hundreds of writers from around the country gather for a weekend full of activities, including banquets with readings, keynotes, open mic sessions, and one-on-one manuscript critiques with editors or agents. **Contact:** NCWN, P.O. Box 21591, Winston-Salem, NC 27120. 336-293-8844. mail@ncwriters.org ncwriters.org

OREGON

Summer Fishtrap 2018 Wallowa Lake, July 9-15. A week-long nonfiction workshop held at Wallowa Lake and Retreat Center. Keynote given by Kathleen Dean Moore. Aspiring and established writers welcome to spend a week in writing workshops, panel discussions, and evening readings as well as participate in leisure activities such as hiking and fishing. **Contact:** Fishtrap, Inc., P.O. Box 38, Enterprise, OR 97828. 541-426-3623. Email from website. fishtrap.org

Willamette Writers Portland, Aug. 3-5. This year's theme: "Words have value." Tracks for fiction, nonfiction, genres, screenwriting, and young adult. Consultations with agents, editors, and film producers available. **Contact:** Willamette Writers, 5331 SW Macadam Ave., Suite 258, PMB 215 Portland, OR 97239. wilwrite@willamettewriters.org willamettewriters.com/wwcon

Wordstock: Portland's Book Festival Portland, Nov. 11. Portland's famed literary community thrives during this one-day event that includes author events, workshops, readings, concerts, a book fair, and more. Also enjoy a beer tent and local food trucks. **Contact:** Literary Arts. 925 SW Washington St., Portland, OR 97205. 503-227-2583 la@literary-arts.org literary-arts.org

PENNSYLVANIA

Highlights Foundation Workshops Honesdale, dates vary. Workshops geared toward authors interested in writing and illustrating for children. Intermediate and advanced levels led by children's publishing professionals, including editors, writers, art directors, publishers, and agents. See website for list of workshops. **Contact:** Highlights Foundation, 814 Court St., Honesdale, PA 18431. 877-288-3410. jo.lloyd@highlightsfoundation.org highlightsfoundation.org

HippoCamp Lancaster, Aug. 24-26. *Hippocampus Magazine*'s creative nonfiction writing conference features notable speakers, including past participants Tobias Wolff, Beverly Donofrio, Kaylie Jones, and Laurie Jean Cannady. Also included are attendee-led breakout sessions in four tracks, interactive panels, readings, social activities, and networking opportunities. **Contact:** HippoCamp. Email from website. hippocampusmagazine.com/conference

SOUTH DAKOTA

South Dakota Festival of Books Brookings & Sioux Falls, Sept. 20-23. Features well-known authors participating in book signings, presentations, panel discussions, and readings on topics that include fiction, nonfiction, poetry, children's/young adult, history/tribal, and writer support. **Contact:** South Dakota Center for the Book, 1215 Trail Ridge Rd., Suite A, Brookings, SD 57006. 605-688-6113. info@sdhumanities.org sdbookfestival.com

TENNESSEE

Southern Festival of Books Nashville, Oct. 13-14. Free and open to the public. Features readings, panels, performances, and book signings with approximately 200 authors in a wide range of genres. **Contact:** Humanities Tennessee, 807 Main St., Suite B, Nashville, TN 37206. 615-770-0006. info@humanitiestennessee.org humanitiestennessee.org/programs/southern-festival-books-celebration-written-word

TEXAS

American Christian Fiction Writers Annual Conference Grapevine, Sept. 20-23. Network with literary agents and Christian publishing houses. This conference allows attendants the opportunity to interact with other writers and present their ideas to agents and editors. **Contact:** Robin Miller, Conference Director, ACFW, P.O. Box 101066, Palm Bay, FL 32910. cd@acfw.com acfw.com/conference

Texas Book Festival Austin, Oct. 27-28. Free and open to the public, with more than 250 authors and 80 exhibitors. Includes sessions, book signings, and an evening lit crawl. **Contact:** Texas Book Festival, 610 Brazos, Suite 200, Austin, TX 78701. 512-477-4055. bookfest@texasbookfestival.org texasbookfestival.org

UTAH

Page Lambert's 20th Annual River Writing Journey for Women Moab, Aug. 27-Sept. 1. A six-day rafting and writing retreat for women entering the crossroads of their lives – professionally, artistically, personally – the perfect time and place to inspire creative change. Featuring special guest Roxanne Swentzell, a renowned sculptor. **Contact:** Page Lambert. 303-842-7360. page@pagelambert.com pagelambert.com/river2018.html

VERMONT

Brattleboro Literary Festival Brattleboro, Oct. 11-14. A four-day celebration including readings, panel discussions, and special events with emerging and established authors. All events are free and open to the public. Also offers workshops for a fee. **Contact:** Brattleboro Literary Festival, P.O. Box 1116, Brattleboro, VT, 05302. 802-365-7673. vtbookfest@gmail.com brattleboroliteraryfestival.org

Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Ripton, Aug. 15-25. Over 200 writers attend annually, convening at the Bread Loaf Campus of Middlebury College. Ten participants in each of 20 workshops will learn skills in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Magazine editors, publicists, grant specialists, and other professionals will also be in attendance to offer their feedback and expertise. **Contact:** Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, 204 College St., Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT 05753. 802-443-5286 blwc@middlebury.edu middlebury.edu/bread-loaf-conferences/bl_writers

Power of Words Conference Plainfield, Oct. 12-14. Offers workshops, performances, talking circles, celebrations, and more, featuring writers, storytellers, performers, musicians, community leaders, activists, educators, and health professionals. Keynotes by Mohsin Mohi Ud Din, Jennifer Patterson, and Christylez Bacon & Wytold. **Contact:** Transformative Language Arts Network. Teri Grunthaner, Coordinator. P.O. Box 442633, Lawrence, KS 66044. councilchair@tlanetwork.org tlanetwork.org/conference

VIRGINIA

Fall for the Book Fairfax, Oct. 10-13. Celebrate literature at this week-long literary festival held at George Mason University and other locations in Northern Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Maryland. All events are free and open to the public. **Contact:** Fall for the Book. Kara Oakleaf, Festival Manager. 703-993-3986. kara@fallforthebook.org fallforthebook.org

Hampton Roads Writers 10th Annual Writers' Conference Virginia Beach, Sept. 13-15. One evening and two full days of workshops, bestselling keynote speakers, first 10 lines critique sessions, 60 workshops, and agent pitches. Writing contests, social

events, and open mic sessions. **Contact:** Hampton Roads Writers. 757-639-6146. HRWriters@cox.net hamptonroadswriters.org/2018conference.php

2018 James River Writers Conference Richmond, Oct. 13-14. Offers meetings with agents, lectures, panel discussions, first-page critiques, a "pitchapalooza," and more. **Contact:** James River Writers, 2319 E. Broad St., Richmond, VA 23223. 804-433-3790. Email from website. jamesriverwriters.org

WASHINGTON

LiTFUSE Tieton, Sept. 28-30. A poets' workshop that combines writing, exploration, improvisation, meditation, camaraderie, natural beauty, and readings to ignite your muse. Offers master classes and breakout sessions. Will feature poet Kevin Prufer. Open to poets of all ages and styles. **Contact:** LiTFUSE. Email from website. litfuse.us

PNWA 2018 Conference Seattle, Sept. 9-16. The conference features seminars, forums, and appointments with agents and editors. Participants can practice pitching. **Contact:** PNWA, Writers' Cottage 317 NW Gilman Blvd., Suite 8, Issaquah, WA 98027. 425-673-2665. pnwa@pnwa.org pnwa.org

Poets on the Coast La Conner, Sept. 7-9. A weekend writing retreat for women with Kelli Russell Agodon and Susan Rich. Designed for writers of all levels with sessions on creativity, generating work, publication, a master class workshop, one-on-one mentoring, and morning yoga. **Contact:** Poets on the Coast, Kelli Agodon and Susan Rich, P.O. Box 1524, Kingston, WA 98346. poetsonthecoast@gmail.com poetsonthecoast.weebly.com

Write on the Sound Writers' Conference Edmonds, Oct. 6-7. With more than 30 workshops taught by noted authors, educators, and trade professionals, attendees can build their best experience at this writing retreat now in its 33rd year. Choose from a variety of topics, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, social networking, and creativity. **Contact:** Write on the Sound Writers' Conference, Frances Anderson Center, 700 Main St., Edmonds, WA 98020. 425-771-0228. wots@edmondswa.gov writeonthesound.com

Women Writing the West Walla Walla, Oct. 25-28. Explore writing and publishing's new frontiers while celebrating the pioneering spirit of the West. Three days of inspiring, learning, and networking while telling the stories of the women's West. Theme for the 24th annual conference is "Trails West: Wagons, Words, Women." **Contact:** Women Writing the West, 8547 E. Arapahoe Rd., #J-541, Greenwood Village, CO 80112. shanna@shannahatfield.com womenwritingthewest.org

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Library of Congress National Book Festival Washington, D.C., Sept. 1. Free and open to the public. The 18th anniversary of the National Book Festival will feature authors, poets, and illustrators in several pavilions. Featured authors include Madeleine Albright, Amy Tan, Isabel Allende, Junot Diaz, and Matt de la Pena. **Contact:** National Book Festival, Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20540. 888-714-4696. bookfest@loc.gov loc.gov/bookfest

WISCONSIN

Wisconsin Book Festival Madison, Oct. 11-14. Features local literary talents alongside national voices, with events incorporating literature, film, art, and performance. **Contact:** Madison Public Library, 201 W. Mifflin St., Madison, WI 53703. wisconsinbookfestival.org

Writers' Police Academy Green Bay, Aug. 9-12. Offers a hands-on, interactive, and educational experience for writers who want to enhance their understanding of law enforcement and forensics. Guest of honor: Jeffery Deaver. **Contact:** Writers' Police Academy, PMB 234, 5055 Business Center Dr., Suite 108, Fairfield, California 94534. Email from website. writerspoliceacademy.com

INTERNATIONAL

Get Away to Write Catalonia, Spain, dates TBA. A week-long summer session for writers and poets across all genres. Includes workshops, ample writing time, panoramic cliff-top views, and excursions to Barcelona and the ancient town of Vic. Scholarships and early-registration discount available. **Contact:** Murphy Writing of Stockton University. Peter Murphy, Founder, 30 Front St., Hammonton, NJ 08037. 609-626-3594. info@murphywriting.com murphywriting.com/spain

International Festival of Authors Toronto, Canada, Oct. 18-28. The 39th edition of the International Festival of Authors will bring together the world's best writers of contemporary literature for 11 days of readings, interviews, lectures, round-table discussions, public book signings, and a number of special events. **Contact:** International Festival of Authors, Harbourfront Centre, 235 Queens Quay West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5J 2G8. 416-973-4760. info@ifoa.org ifoa.org/festival

The Vancouver Writers Fest Granville Island, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, Oct. 15-22. The 31st Vancouver Writers Festival will be a seven-day event in the heart of Vancouver, offering a forum for authors to connect with readers in a vibrant exchange of ideas and conversation. Celebrates authors, poets, spoken word performers, and graphic novelists. A helpful event for teachers as well. **Contact:** Vancouver Writers Fest, 202-1398 Cartwright St., Vancouver BC, V6H 3R8. 604-681-6330 Email from website. writersfest.bc.ca

The Writers' Summer School Swanwick, Alfreton, Derbyshire, England, Aug. 11-16. Also referred to as "Swanwick," this is a week-long program for writers of all ages, abilities, and genres featuring courses, workshops, panels, and one-to-one sessions. Cost includes full board and evening entertainment. **Contact:** The Writers' Summer School. The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Alfreton, Derbyshire, DE55 1AU. Email from website. swanwickwritersschool.org.uk

Classifieds

READERS should use caution when entering into any legal contract with a literary service offering agenting-type assistance; publishers who charge, rather than pay, an author for publication; publishers who require a purchase before publication and contests that charge high entrance fees. *The Writer* also recommends requesting a list of references and submission guidelines before submitting a manuscript. If you have any concerns regarding the advertiser's commitment or claims, please contact the advertiser and make certain all questions are answered to your satisfaction. ***ADVERTISERS*** We do not accept ads from agents or businesses that charge a reading or marketing fee; Subsidy Publishers: Copy of contract. In order to effectively handle questions from our readers regarding the products and services of our advertisers, the staff of *The Writer* asks that you provide us with some supplemental information, especially for first time advertisers. Examples include—*Contests*: Fee requirements, prizes and if purchase is necessary to qualify; *Correspondence Schools*: Copy of student's contract, copy of critiqued assignment, documentation if course is accredited; *Editing Services*: Resumes showing qualifications of service providers, a sample critique, general cost of services; *Literary Services*: General cost of services, resume of service providers, verification that at least 50% of business income is from commission on sales. For our private records, please provide us with a street address and contact telephone number. *The Writer* reserves the right to reject or cancel any advertising which at its discretion is deemed objectionable, misleading or not in the best interest of the reader. **Send Your Ad To:** *The Writer,* Sales Account Manager 25 Braintree Hill Office Park, Suite 404 Braintree, MA 02184 or call (617) 279-0213 E-mail: apiccirilli@madavor.com Major credit cards accepted.

AUTHOR'S MARKETPLACE

CONFERENCES

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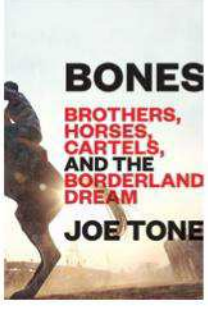
Joe Tone

For more than 10 years, Joe Tone worked as a journalist and newspaper editor, most recently as the editor of the *Dallas Observer*. After writing "The Rookie and the Zetas: How the Feds Took Down a Drug Cartel's Horse-Racing Empire" for the *Observer*, he found himself so captivated by the subject material that he decided to leave the paper to write a book about it. The result, *Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream*, is the recipient of glowing reviews from numerous publications. In one fascinating book, Tone skillfully weaves together a true story about family, loyalty, American quarter-horse racing, and the Mexican drug war. *Bones* was named a finalist for the 2017 PEN/ESPN Award for Literary Sports Writing and the production company Anonymous Content (*Mr. Robot, True Detective*) has already purchased the book's film rights.



Expanding an article into a book

The article felt like it barely skimmed the surface – more like an outline or a treatment. I knew from my reporting that there was a ton more reporting to do. There were dozens of people to talk to and themes left unexplored in the article. My own desire was indicative that there was more. I ask myself if I'm still hungry for this topic or "am I done with this?" As a writer, do I want to pursue it, or have I squeezed everything I can out of it?

"What I am at my core is a journalist and a reporter, and I've always been drawn to stories that require a lot of reporting and research."

Structuring multiple intersecting themes

I knew there was a lot of history and background that I wanted to weave into small narratives, but it was a little difficult during the writing. Especially with parts about the history and explanations. My editor suggested we pull a handful of things out and make them into separate chapters. Once we did that, we felt good about how the narrative flowed, while still sliding into backstory and history.

Journalism and storytelling

What I am at my core is a journalist and a reporter, and I've always been drawn to stories that require a lot of reporting and research. Tools of investigation, public records, source development, digging through court records – I love stories that require all that. I use those to shape dramatic, personal, and emotional narratives.

Readers want to know where you got your information, and I'm always trying to figure out a way to use less attributions. The great thing about a book is that you can move a lot to the sources section without cluttering the narrative.

The transition to book author

The hardest transition was going from being in a newsroom to being at home and being lonely, frankly. I used to feel responsible for up to 20 or 30 things a day working at the paper. You feel useful. I was responsible for the career of staff and freelancers. Now I'm in a room, writing for months, for a book that would come out years later – and writing something you don't know how many people are going to read. It took me a while to adjust, and I still struggle with it. But I found that I really enjoy the work and enjoy the process of writing.

Self-editing

I was able to put my trust in my editor. But even with a good book editor, and mine is one of the best, you have to be a good self-editor. This book was the biggest editing challenge I've ever faced. Story selection, planning, organization, and motivation all go into a book. But my editing experience was critical to my ability to pull it off.

Allison Futterman is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Catherine Downes

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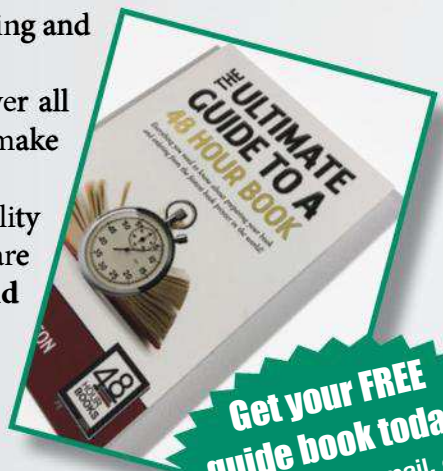

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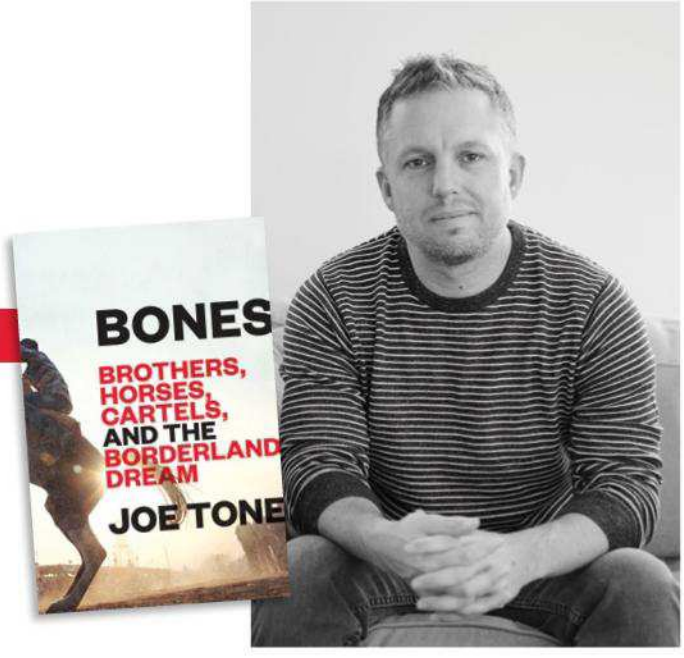

EXCERPT: *BONES*

Chapter One
Foundations

You've seen a horse race. Maybe you've leaned over the rail at your local track, hollering at the seven because you bet the seven, for reasons that made sense at the time. Maybe you've donned a floppy hat and gotten hammered off mint juleps, running in from the kitchen to catch the end of—or maybe a replay of?—the Derby. Maybe you've been in a Vegas sportsbook, where not even the immortal gods of American football can muscle the ponies off those little TVs in the corner.

Somewhere, someway, you've seen a horse race. Most likely you saw thoroughbreds, the horses that were loping down the backstretch when you stumbled in from the kitchen. Maybe you watched a steeplechase, for the novelty of seeing these graceful beasts leap through a manicured obstacle course. But it's unlikely that you've ever knowingly watched a quarter-horse race, and, for our purposes, you'll need to see one, if only in your mind's eye or on YouTube.

Be forewarned: There are no mint juleps here. The best we can offer is a lime in your Corona.

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The colonists who settled Virginia and the Carolinas invented quarter-horse racing in the 1600s. It was more or less an accident.

They'd brought a handful of Arabians and thoroughbreds with them on the voyage, and between shifts tilling the New World, they started racing through the main streets of their newly settled villages. The races were informal and short, usually about a quarter of a mile, run between two horses down straight streets lined with villagers. But winning them became a point of pride, and over time, the colonists discovered that breeding their horses with those ridden by the natives resulted in even faster racehorses. They called this new breed the quarter-of-a-mile running horse, accurately if not cleverly.

Around this time, a British military captain visited North Carolina and wrote home about his experience. He marveled at the lush tobacco fields, the "shocking barbarities of the Indians," and the horses:

> They are much attached to quarter racing, which is always a match between two horses to run a quarter of a mile, straight out, being merely an exertion of speed. They have a breed that performs it with astonishing velocity. . . . I am confident there is not a horse in England, or perhaps the whole world, that can excel them in rapid speed.

In the 1800s, as settlers moved west, they encountered a racing culture similar to the one established by those original

colonists. Three centuries of ranching across Mexico—including in the northern state of Coahuila y Tejas—had propagated a breed of stock horses built for working the farm. They were short, muscular, and placid amid the chaos of a cattle herd. They were "cow ponies," first and foremost. But they could run, too, if only for a few hundred yards, and their serenity with a rider in the saddle made them easy to settle down at the starting line.

The Southwest in the nineteenth century was defined by bloodshed, as Coahuila y Tejas became the Republic of Texas, and then an American state. Throughout it all, though, the white American settlers, Mexican ranchers, and Native Americans challenged each other to quarter-mile races all across the disputed territory. Gamblers would line the track, forming a human rail, with money and property at stake. One race was said to attract such prolific betting that it bankrupted and shuttered an entire Texas town.

The eastern settlers touted their "quarter-of-a-mile running horses." The Texans swore by the speed and smarts of their cow ponies. An imported stallion named Steel Dust quickly extinguished the East-West rivalry. He was already thirteen when he arrived from the East in 1844, but he beat every cow pony they lined him up against. Before long he was being bred with ranch horses from across the new state of Texas, infusing the Spaniards' placid cow-pony breed with a burst of speed and additional weight.

The resulting horses were, as one quarter-horse historian described them, "small, [with] alert ears, a well-developed neck, sloping shoulders, short deep barrel, a great heart girth, heavy muscled in thigh and forearm, legs not too long, and firmly jointed with the knee and pastern close." They were rarely taller than fifteen hands* but could reach twelve hundred pounds. (Thoroughbreds are lither, averaging sixteen hands but just a thousand pounds.) The new breed of horse was even better on the farm and unbeatable in a rodeo ring or on the track, provided the track wasn't longer than a quarter mile. They called him the American Quarter Horse.

By the 1940s, an industry had sprung forth around the breed. In Texas, a group of cowboys founded the American Quarter Horse Association, to manage and regulate breeding and competition. In New Mexico and California, businessmen pushed for pari-mutuel betting, allowing racetracks to collect the bets and manage the payouts. That lured horsemen and gamblers from Texas, Oklahoma, and Mexico for weekends spent drinking and betting on the races, which could now feature six or eight horses instead of two.

The quarter-horse meccas built in the 1940s and '50s still anchor the sport today, especially Ruidoso Downs, in the mountains of New Mexico, and Los Alamitos, in the palm-studded suburbs of Orange County, California. They host futurities, for two-year-old racehorses, and derbies, for three-year-olds, with millions on the line. And on any given day, at tracks sprinkled across the Southwest and Mexico, quarter horses as old as five, six, even seven run races with a few grand on the line and a few hundred people in the stands.

The best of these horses are descendants from American Quarter Horse royalty—sired by name-brand stallions like First Down Dash, Corona Cartel, or Mr Jess Perry. They're ridden by jockeys who often learned to ride in unsanctioned match races in the countryside of Texas, Oklahoma, or Mexico. Many of the best are Mexican immigrants.

The races typically cover between 350 and 440 yards. The best feature a little bumping out of the gate and all the way through the finish line. The fastest 440-yard races are run in about 20 seconds, compared to the two minutes it takes the top thoroughbreds to circle Churchill Downs. The short track leaves little time to overcome a stumble. The horses are loaded up, rearing and kicking up dust, and everything goes still. The gates fly and the race is already almost over. The horse that best taps into its English-Spanish-Mexican-Tejano cow-pony DNA has the advantage, using its hulking haunches and quiet demeanor to go from dead still to full speed in a few strides.

Now maybe you can see it, even if you've never seen it: stocky horses raised by cowboys, racing on short tracks, ridden by jockeys trained in the thick brush of cow country, all a safe distance from the floppy-hatted dignitaries of the Jockey Club. They call thoroughbred racing the sport of kings? This is the sport of cowboys. Muddle your mint elsewhere.

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* One hand is four inches. So fifteen hands would be about five feet tall at the withers.