

HOW PROCRASTINATION CAN IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

# THE WRITER

THE  
MEMOIR  
ISSUE

Memory Lane

TIPS FOR FIRST-TIME AUTHORS

HOW TO WRITE A  
MEMOIR THAT SELLS

IS THE MARKET OVERSATURATED?



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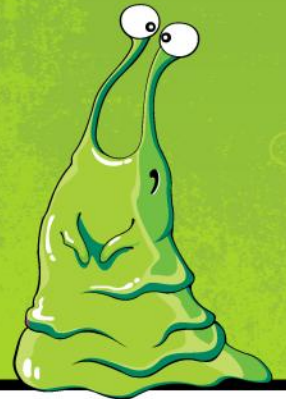
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**H**ow much snide commentary there is about the memoir these days.

Oh, it's certainly true that agents are flooded with some not-very-good memoirs, that some not-very-true memoirs have made their way to publication, that shelves are cluttered with not-very-original works from writers hoping to sneak to success by riding a mega-best-seller's coattails.

But why is that any reason to damn an entire genre? Must we condemn all vampire stories because of the deluge of bland *Twilight* copycats? Should we take up arms against the essay just because a rash of sensationalist clickbait has overtaken the internet?

*Poppycock*, I say, with full knowledge of how ridiculous that word will look on this page, because no other word would suffice when confronted with such ridiculous notions.

Imagine if Mary Karr had listened to such snobbery, or Helen Macdonald, or Frank McCourt, J.D. Vance, or any number of the splendidly talented modern memoirists teasing art out of their pasts. As you'll see in Jack Smith's article on page 12, memoir remains a serious literary craft, with as high standards and intense rigor as any other genre.

So go on, call memoir self-indulging, call it narcissistic, call it empty, vapid, a byproduct of reality television, but do not utter a word against it until you've plumbed the genre to its very core. Only when you have seen *all* ends of the spectrum may you pass judgment.

Or, heck: Just don't read it. And leave the vast treasures of this genre for the rest of us.

Keep writing,

Nicki Porter  
 SENIOR EDITOR

# DEFINING A WRITER

Or, you know you're not a writer when...

BY JONI B. COLE

## WHAT IS A WRITER?

In the family of philosophical questions (*Does God exist? Is pleasure possible without pain? How do you know you're not dreaming right now?*), this one is on par with, say, that Kardashian brother, as insoluble as his sisters but less likely to provoke deep and prolonged examination. For those of us who care, however, the answer matters, *really* matters, because it can affect our sense of identity, our pride and insecurities, our motivation, and our decision to own that title in our minds, as well as when we are out in public.

"Of course I'm not a Real Writer..."

As a writing instructor in MFA programs, in my community, and at conferences across the country, I hear people introduce themselves this way all the time. Their logic?

"I've never been published."

"I only write little essays about my life, not a book or anything."

"I'm a terrible speller."

These are just three out of countless reasons why aspiring authors discount themselves as "Real Writers," even as they are working away on their very real

poems and stories. So how do we explain the discrepancy? How do we manage the cognitive dissonance that comes from believing one thing that is in direct contradiction with our actions or secret ambitions?

What is a writer? Probably the most facile response is the following: *A writer is someone who writes.* Maybe if the question was a scientific rather than a philosophical one, that answer would suffice, but philosophy is intended to go where science can't or won't, as a means of mining a deeper wisdom.

Writers are also often defined, or rather maligned, through stereotypes: the misanthrope or the drunk, for example. Yet another misrepresentation of the term: A writer is someone whose work has been published. In other words, a writer is an author. I say "misrepresentation" here because we cannot fully trust the literary establishment to define who among us is real. After all, not so long ago it was the publishing powers-that-be who categorically dismissed the voices of women and people of color. That is how we ended up with a literary canon

that still consists mostly of "dead white guys," to quote clever English majors.

So the question remains: What is a writer? Despite the fact this issue aligns with my own professional experience, the best I could come up with is a sensibility, a certain awareness and responsiveness to the world. I would say if writers have anything in common, it is that we have two operating systems running at the same time: one is actively engaged in whatever situation we find ourselves in, the other is simultaneously processing whether that experience translates into potential material for our work. Say something bad happens to us. Yes, we feel sad, but, wow, that mix-up at the hospital would make a great plot point for chapter six! We take note, mentally and literally, of anybody or anything that might serve our creativity. Meaningful personal experiences are registered as possible essays. We log the idiosyncrasies of family members, friends, and strangers to inform our characters. We eavesdrop on conversations because we are nosy, and with an ear toward converting speech to dialogue.

In a way, this dual processing means that writers are not just people who write but people who are always writing, even when we are nowhere near a computer or can't find a pen in our purses.

Still, I continued to struggle with a definitive answer to the question of what constitutes a writer, until one day I had an epiphany. It happened towards the end of a workshop. The group members were offering feedback to a woman I will rename Winnie, because I don't like that name, and I did not care for how she was always sketching in her notebook during class, probably creating caricatures of the rest of us as we discussed the stories on the table. Winnie's submission elicited the usual mix of positive and critical comments – some spot on, some from left field, but all of them, to my ear, well-intentioned. Here is a condensed transcript:

**Feedback Provider:** “I don't think you need to introduce all your characters on page one...”

**Winnie:** “But they're all important to the story...”

**FP:** “I had a hard time following the scene on page seven...”

**W:** “But that part really happened to me. I didn't even make it up.”

**FP:** “The story's sudden switch in point of view was confusing...”

**W:** “There's no other way to show what the cab driver is thinking...”

A lot of writers get defensive when people criticize their work. Sometimes my own first impulse in the face of negative feedback is to get mad at the reader because, clearly, the person is clueless, even if right. But most of my workshop participants come to quickly appreciate reader responses to their works-in-progress. Winnie, on the other hand, only grew more defensive as the class continued, which, in

turn, made me feel more defensive as the instructor.

“How come you always encourage everybody else,” she confronted me toward the end of her story discussion, “but you never say anything positive to me?”

*Oh, puhleeze!* I thought. Or at least I hope I didn't say it aloud. Normally, I am good at working with writers with tender egos (it takes one to know one), but not in this case, not when the person is a sketcher. In my mind's eye, I could just imagine Winnie's caricature of me – a blowsy blonde with devil horns and fangs. As the class ended and Winnie, still visibly upset, passed by me to leave, I thought something I hardly ever think: *You will never be a writer.*

That was when it struck me: That the only way to address the issue of “What is a Writer?” is through a negative definition. What is a writer? Too many variables, too many manifestations, disallow a conclusive response. But what can be pinpointed is what a writer is *not*. Similar to a diagnosis of exclusion in medicine – that is, identifying something by it not being other things – it occurred to me that this is also the most reliable way to determine who is a Real Writer, and whether we qualify.

With this in mind, I came up with a list of characterizations – a short list, as it turns out – that negatively defines a writer. If you find that you are none of these things, then you can safely assume that you are real. It is that simple. It is that important. You may be unpublished, you may struggle to acquire craft, others may discount your voice, your genre, your aspirations, but if you assume you are a writer, if you claim that title in your head and heart, good things will happen. You will take yourself and your work more seriously. Without the distraction of an identity crisis, you will commit more fully to doing what Real Writers do, which is believe you have something to say, and then figure out a way to communicate it on the page.

## You know you're not a Real Writer when....

*You can't handle constructive criticism.* Writers want their work to have power, to communicate, to engage and entertain, to mean something to people other than themselves. They don't blame the reader if they fail. If you can't get past your insecurity or ego to hear where your writing needs improvement, invest in a diary and keep your thoughts to yourself.

*You won't revise.* Writing is rewriting. It is not simply transcribing the stories you make up in your head to the page. It is not settling for good enough just because you prefer the rush of a new story idea or have grown tired of revisiting the same piece. If you are not open to revising or putting in the time to polish your work, you are only half a writer, and not necessarily the better half.

*You can't separate writing from ranting.* I knew a talented wordsmith who could have been a writer, if it wasn't for her ex-husband. In the personal essays she worked on during the time I knew her, she could not *not* slam her “wasband,” as she called him. She told her readers repeatedly what an asshole he was, which was one of her kinder descriptions of him. Essayists have agendas – that is a good part of why we write, to share our truths. But we will never get readers to see what we want them to see, or come around to our way of thinking, if we force our judgments on them. “Show, don't yell,” I said to the woman with the wasband. Sometimes even bad humor can dispel enough anger to make room for craft. “But he is such an asshole!” she persisted, which may very well be the case, I thought, but only a writer can make me believe it.

*You don't want to be a writer.* Once upon a time I finished a book and decided I was done. So I stopped all that dual processing in my head and did other meaningful things, like decorate the house with giant, fake cobwebs for Halloween. This was something I had



\* “In memoir, you have to be particularly careful not to alienate the reader by making the material seem too lived-in. It mustn't have too much of the smell of yourself, otherwise the reader will be unable to make it her own.” —Rachel Cusk

done every year since my daughters were little, but now I took great pleasure in the arrangement of the web and the placement of each dangling plastic spider, even though by this time my girls were teenagers and failed to share my enthusiasm. My cobweb phase lasted about two years, during which time I loved not writing...until I didn't. What this experience taught me is that there will always be days, weeks, months, even years in your life when you are not writing, but those times only feel great when you are not a writer.

*You let others discourage you.* Good riddance, I thought as Winnie packed up at the end of class. Her story discussion had ended on a civilized note, but when she walked by me to leave, I could see in her face that she was still upset. *You will never be a writer.* It actually gave me a pang to think this about her; to think this about anyone who clearly cares about writing.

The following week, as anticipated, Winnie did not show up for class. But then, to my surprise, she returned for the remaining sessions, and the work she put forth revealed that she had listened to the group's feedback and was willing to revise. She also dropped a good bit of her defensiveness, though her drawings may tell another story.

Regardless, Winnie and all those sketchy types like her can teach us an important lesson: If a writing instructor, even one so intimidating as to sport devil horns and fangs, thinks that you will never be a writer, that does not necessarily make it true. Unless, of course, you decide to believe it.

—Excerpted from *Good Naked: Reflections on How to Write More, Write Better, and Be Happier* (©2017, University Press of New England). Visit the author at [jonibcole.com](http://jonibcole.com)

## WRITERS ON WRITING

### Benjamin Lorr



Victoria Loustalot

Benjamin Lorr's debut book, *Hell-Bent: Obsession, Pain, and the Search for Something Like Transcendence in Competitive Yoga*, was met with high critical

acclaim. The *New York Times* called it “witty and wise,” and Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, said reading it was “a wonderful, inspiring, maddening, complicated, edifying journey.” Prior to his career in writing, Lorr was a high school science and sex education teacher in Bushwick, Brooklyn. He is presently working on his second book and working as a consultant for public schools in New York City.

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

This is a very process-oriented answer, so [I'm] not entirely sure if that is the spirit of the question, but here goes. In nonfiction, there is this John McPhee school of thought where you never begin writing until all the research is finished. The idea is you don't want to go in and begin crafting sentences or laying out a story until you know and have mastered the entire sphere of content that is going to give those sentences meaning and define the arc of that story. Now, what I've found is that [idea] is a very helpful thing to tell editors, because it buys you a lot of time upfront and provides wonderful excuses for why things aren't being done on time, but that in terms of actually writing, it is exactly the wrong approach for me. I need to be writing pretty much continuously

throughout the process, as close to the moment itself as I can get. I'm not talking about research notes here, but crafting considered sentences. And I mean doing it immediately after an interview when there is still proverbial steam coming off everything. Memory is an incredibly tricky thing, and I've learned that to get the richness of detail and the immediacy of feeling I want – while keeping things firmly grounded in reality – I need to take a stab at something as close as I can to its occurrence.

#### HOW HAS THAT HELPED YOU AS A WRITER?

This has helped immeasurably. So much of writing is work. And like all work, there is fatigue. In nonfiction, where you are out gallivanting around, negotiating the logistics of an interview or tracking down a source, there is a great temptation that when you are done with that non-writing work – finally finished the big interview you spent months setting up, etc. – to relax. To exhale from the tension of all these little pieces going right and celebrate the success. And what I've found, for me, is that is the precise moment I need discipline to sit down and actually pull out the laptop. Carving out that extra hour or two to go back and really work on the material as a crafted piece of writing is essential. These moments – now concretized – become islands slowly rising out of the murky soup that is the vague notion of “book,” until eventually you have enough of them that you discover a narrative between them, authentic to them, and then finally can go back, fill in gaps, and do the really high-level work of making everything sing.

—Gabriel Packard is the associate director of the creative writing MFA program at Hunter College in New York City and also the author of *The Painted Ocean: A Novel*, published in 2016 by Corsair/Hachette.

# Stepping out in high style

How to elevate your prose.

One writerly luxury is that we can work in our pajamas. Our writing, too, oftentimes takes that familiar, across-the-kitchen-table voice readers relate to. Still, we know that even if we are dressed *down*, our manuscripts must be dressed *up* – fresh, clean, and well-formatted – when they hit the editor’s desk. At times, our language also needs to abandon the jeans-and-flannel feel for power suits and evening gowns. When we have something serious to say, we may want to elevate the tone. Such writing signals significance to readers. It demands: *Pay attention!*

For example, in his 1950 Nobel Award speech, William Faulkner wanted to offer some advice to young writers, particularly the one who might one day stand in his place. He might have said:

He mustn’t be afraid. He needs to remember that fear is the worst thing and to forget it. In his workplace, he should only remember those tried and true heart-felt truths. Without them, a story doesn’t have lasting power and will be forgotten. Writers need to remember qualities like love, honor, pity, pride, compassion, and sacrifice.

Instead, Faulkner elevated his tone:

He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid, and teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed – love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifices.

Which passage do you find more memorable? Which might be committed to memory for its elegant presentation of message?

Notice that the language in Faulkner’s version isn’t especially difficult. “Four-dollar words” are one option for elevating prose, but here complex sentence structures work magic instead, bearing readers gracefully along in a rhythmic wave of words. It is one long, but beautifully constructed, sentence. The qualities he wants to impress upon

us are each separated with the word *and*, forcing us to slow down and consider them separately.

Such writing doesn’t come naturally to most of us. It is crafted; it takes time and practice and a good ear. Fortunately, there are ways to develop an elevated style so it’s there in our toolkit when we need it. In their book *Style*, Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup offer many tips in a chapter called “Elegance.” The first is “balanced coordination,” the idea that one phrase might “[echo] another in sound, rhythm, structure, and meaning.” We see that in Faulkner’s passage:

He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid,  
and teaching himself that, forget it forever,  
leaving no room in his workshop  
for anything but  
the old verities and  
truths of the heart,  
the old universal truths lacking which any  
story is ephemeral  
and  
doomed.

In addition to the coordinated, or parallel, phrases, consider the echo of *teach* and *teaching*, the sounds of *forget* and *forever*, and the way *old universal truths* ties into both previous phrases, *old verities* and *truths of the heart*. Those *teach/teaching* phrases also create a chiasmus, an old technique in which the second part is a grammatical reversal of the first. You can bet all this didn’t hit the page in draft one.

“How you begin a sentence determines its clarity; how you end it determines its grace,” Williams and Bizup point out. They offer several ways to end sentences with grace. One is to end with a “weighty” word – not a preposition. Adverbs and adjectives are stronger, they point out, nouns stronger still, and nominalizations – those verbs and adjectives turned into nouns (i.e. nominalize becomes nominalization, attend becomes attention) are strongest of all. Perhaps this is why Faulkner ended his sentence with that string of concepts (nouns) that he wanted to impress upon us. Adding the word *of* just before the noun “quickens the

## Elegant prose is crafted; it takes time and practice and a good ear.

rhythm,” Williams and Bizup say. Notice it in this sentence of Faulkner’s: “Until he relearns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man.”

A series of parallel phrases can have a strong impact as well. Faulkner continues:

He writes **not of love, but of lust, of defeats** in which nobody loses anything of value, **of victories without hope, and worst of all, without pity or compassion.**

How much stronger it sounds to say it the way Faulkner did, rather than “not of love, but lust.” And notice the buildup in the remaining phrases: *victories* is “heavier” than *defeats*; with its two syllables, *pity* feels heavier than *hope*; and *compassion* (a nominalization) is heaviest of all.

An easy approach to creating more complex structures is to examine a sentence you’ve already written, asking yourself how you might extend the idea further with a modifier. The *free modifier*, a clause that comments on the previous verb, is quite common. For example, the opening sentence of this paragraph demonstrates the free modifier with the phrase *asking yourself how you might extend the idea further*, which illuminates how you might *examine* (the verb) in the sentence.

Begin your free modifier with an *-ing* or an *-ed* word.

Similarly, a *resumptive modifier* reuses a key word (a noun, adjective, or verb), a word that enables the writer to resume the sentence after a comma. (Can you find the resumptive modifier in that sentence?) Williams and

Bizup point out that the same

modifier can also be achieved with the phrase *one that*, as in “A *resumptive modifier* repeats a key word (a noun, adjective, or verb), *one that* enables the writer to resume the sentence.”

A *summative modifier*, as its name suggests, uses a term to sum up the idea in the independent clause, a maneuver that is clarifying and graceful. The previous sentence does this by referring to this approach as a *maneuver*, allowing for a further comment.


Once it was common practice to learn writing by imitating the style of the masters. That’s not a bad exercise; it pushes you to extend your thoughts, creating structures and devices you might not ordinarily use. Look again at the previous Faulkner passage. Now

look at this imitation, using a different subject:

We argue **not with animosity, but with love, knowing that** we cannot afford to lose each other in the battle **remembering that** to unify ourselves is **to accept our common humanity, to be strengthened in our shared destiny.**

Try finding an elegant passage from a writer you admire and use it as a model in your next piece. One day, your own words might be the elegant lines a novice writer studies with admiration. **W**




Gail Radley is the author of 24 books for young people and numerous articles for adults, including, most recently, “Cut the Fat” from the July 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.



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# Writing with kids

What to expect when you're expecting – and you're juggling a busy freelance career.

**T**hree days before our daughter was born, I celebrated 10 years of freelance writing. The work felt as natural as breathing. A child, I reasoned, was another challenge – like a dropped client or an immovable deadline – that I could work my way through.

I am writing this five months later. Normalcy has only begun creeping back into my workday. Part of that is the benefit of experience. But I've also adapted. I had no choice. It's either writing or falling back on my vast bookstore experience.

New parents can freelance with a lot less stress if they prepare. Here are some tips for readying your career for your new arrival:

## 1 Work ahead.

Two reasons. The first comes from Lizzie Skurnick, author of *Shelf Discovery*, who has written everything from poetry to young adult novels: "I would say [to] use the energy of the second trimester to *really* write and publish, sock away money, and shop at the Salvation Army (which I just think is fun)," she says.

Second, you'll want time off to bond with your child. Our daughter was due Nov. 27. I wanted to be free of major assignments for at least a couple of weeks afterward. So, I picked up the pace. I even filed a movie review a day early – on the afternoon of Thursday, Nov. 17.

That evening, I was pulling chicken roll-ups from the oven when my wife entered the kitchen. "I think my water



broke," Laura said in the same tone she uses when we run out of granola bars. By 7:30 p.m., a nurse had turned the possibility into fact. At 11:17 p.m. the next day, we were shrouded in ecstasy.

I got to experience that moment without a deadline intruding. It was wonderful.

## 2 Achieve clarity – with your spouse.

"Sit down and have the hard conversations about everything: finances,

time management, weekends, who will take care of the baby when he or she is sick," says magazine writer Jancee Dunn, author of *How Not to Hate Your Husband After Kids*.

"Get clear everything that you possibly can – I've interviewed a ton of experts for my book, and what they have hammered home, over and over, is to have schedules, meetings, divvy up chores. Conflicts arise when your roles are not clear," she says.

### 3 Invest in child care.

This is where I began to lose my way.

Me, last year: “Child care? I’m a freelance writer. My hours are flexible. I’ll work while the baby sleeps.”

Me, present day: [*Shakes head solemnly.*]

Parenting and freelance writing are separate jobs and should be treated as such, says Laura Vanderkam, who is the mother of four children and the author of several books, including *168 Hours: You Have More Time than You Think*. “The idea is that there is guaranteed time when you know you will be able to focus, and that time is sufficient to the income you wish to produce,” she says.

“There are very few ways to simultaneously meet the needs of a client and meet the needs of a small child, so you’ll wind up feeling pulled in multiple directions,” Vanderkam adds. “And it’s a very simple solution to avoid that, which is that you entrust your child to someone else during a certain number of hours during the week.”

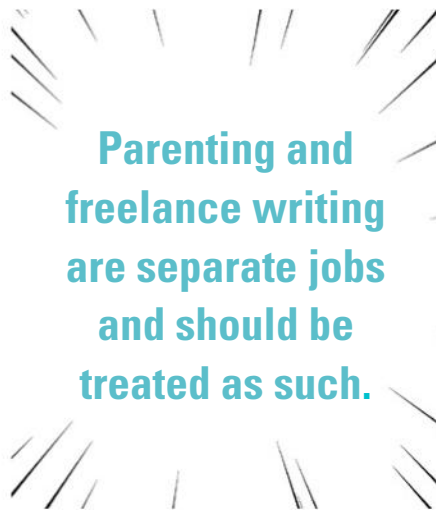
That doesn’t have to require money: A family member or your spouse will do.

“Having a kid is all-encompassing, and if you do not have a good sitter or good daycare or good child care, I don’t see how you’re going to get anything done,” says Raquel D’Apice, proprietor of the Ugly Volvo blog and author of *Welcome to the Club: 100 Parenting Milestones You Never Saw Coming*.

### 4 Recreate your routine.

I assumed I would fall into a regular work schedule and hiring a nanny would accelerate the process. But being a new parent means learning a whole new life on the fly every day. Triage becomes the routine.

Our nanny covers 15 hours a week. I need 25 hours on top of those 15 for my work week. Initially, I was grabbing those remaining hours during nap times and when the baby was



transfixed by her mobile. I might have had two hours or 20 minutes. I got angry at my wife (whose co-workers have expert bladder control) and my baby (who does not).

One exhausted and desperate night, I asked Laura to grab a piece of paper and a pen. We created a schedule in 25 minutes that gave me 39.5 working hours each week. I have a morning shift (when the nanny is on) and a night shift (when my wife comes home). I take care of our daughter in between. The schedule is still being refined, but I no longer feel defeated by 10 a.m.

### 5 Stick to the routine.

Following this step requires several parts working together.

**A. Actually work:** “It’s amazing how much you can crank out when you stop looking at celebrity gossip websites,” Dunn says. “So I would say if you are able to stop futzing around, you can compartmentalize your life in a nice way.”

Stephen Rodrick, who frequently writes for *Rolling Stone* and *Men’s Journal*, writes from 10 a.m. to 3:30 or 4 p.m., concluding with “an hour of some kind of decompression” so his son, coming home from daycare, “doesn’t get Dad at his most frantic or neurotic.”


**B. Plan your day:** Identify the three most important things to do that day, Vanderkam says. That way, if things unravel, “it’s OK, it’s only the lesser things that are going to fall off.” She also advises writers to “monitor your energy. Match the important tasks to your productive time.”

**C. Use downtime wisely:** When my daughter naps, I can do plenty on my laptop: follow up with sources and editors; begin a pitch; peek at job boards. But be sure to do something for yourself as well. D’Apice started her popular blog when her first child was 4 or 5 months old. “Before that, I was a crazy mess,” she says, “because I had nothing for myself and I was just giving everything to this kid, and I wasn’t replenishing at all – so then I had nothing to give to the kid.”

**D. Designate a work space:** Make sure “there’s a clear boundary between where work happens and where it doesn’t happen,” Rodrick says. It doesn’t have to be fancy. D’Apice’s apartment bedroom doubles as her office. “Having a door that you can close is very helpful.” Even better, she adds, if it locks.

**E. Keep honoring deadlines:** Valentine J. Brkich adds buffer time to accommodate the unpredictability that comes with being a father of two. Promise to hit deadlines only if you can make them, he says.

### 6 Embrace the lifestyle.

It’s hard to write from home with a young child, but as Rodrick and D’Apice say: Your child gets to see you do something you love. And, I’ve learned, you’ll be around to love them. 

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Pete Croatto’s (@PeteCroatto) work has appeared in many publications, including the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. He lives in Ithaca, New York.



# **MEMORY LANE**

WHAT MAKES A **MEMOIR** TRULY GREAT?

WHAT'S THE **BEST** WAY TO SELL ONE?

AND – GULP – IS THIS MEGAPOPULAR MARKET

FINALLY **OVERSATURATED?**

MEMOIRISTS, AGENTS, AND PUBLISHERS

**SPEAK OUT.**

BY JACK SMITH

**O**NCE UPON A TIME, fiction ruled the market. Today, however, nonfiction is just as heavily competitive – and memoir is a key corner of that genre.

Consider some famous best-selling memoirs from the recent past: Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle*, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, and, most recently, J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*. As three-time memoirist Mary Karr recounts in *The Art of Memoir*: "Memoir as a genre has entered its heyday, with a massive surge in readership the past 20 years or so." And luckily for would-be memoirists, the genre has a wide appeal among commercial publishers.

Why such a recent interest in this form? Perhaps it has to do with the confessional nature of memoir, the reality-based aspect: Just consider the popularity of reality TV. A memoir is a chance to read something that really happened instead of what a fiction writer has imagined. Memoir can serve as a raw baring of the writer's soul. Yet it had better be more than this for the work to stand a chance of publication.

"Memoir done right is an art, a made thing. It's not just raw reportage flung splat on the page," writes Karr. To write it well, you must make judicious selections from your innumerable fund of personal experiences to create something more than the sum of your memory's parts. You must render scenes from memory, recreating dialogue, reimagining yourself in the past, and recalling every sensory detail you experienced in any given moment. Finally, the work must, as Karr says, be *more* than "raw reportage." It must be seen as an art form. What, after all, is a personal memoir that has no deeper meaning than a stark retelling of events in one's life? Perhaps it will appeal to one's family and friends, but its chances of publication are dismal at best.

As Natalie Goldberg, in *Old Friend from Far Away*, states: "Memoirs are not usually about your whole life, covering birth to the present moment. They are more an expression of your life through something." Generally, says Bill Roorbach in *Writing Life Stories*, only celebrities – heads of state, famous athletes, Nobel Prize winners, etc. – can get away with simply putting their life story on the page from birth to the present. That *something* Goldberg mentions provides a much-needed focus that is essential in any work of literature.

Keep in mind that memoir doesn't necessarily need to be strictly autobiographical. It can also be about a person other than the writer, or about a given place, or it can be a "hybrid memoir" combining a personal story with other nonfiction subject areas. Two famous hybrids in recent years are Helen MacDonald's *H is for Hawk* and Kate Bolick's *Spinster*, which have autobiographical elements but cross several genres.

So what makes a great memoir, as memoirists themselves see it? What are some essentials in writing the form well? And what do those in the publishing world consider a salable memoir? We spoke to leading memoirists, agents, and publishers to find out.

## **PART ONE: MEMOIRISTS SPEAK OUT**

*What are your best tips for beginning memoirists on selling a memoir?*

**PETER SELGIN:** My first tip is don't think how best to sell your memoir, but how best to write it. Write the best book you can, the book that you long to pull down from a shelf and read. Assuming you long to read it, others – including agents and editors – will feel likewise. Writing to the market is an artistic mistake, and probably a commercial one as well. Tell a story that only you can tell as only you can tell it. It may be a sensational story, or not. It may be happy or sad, or both. What will make it memorable is how you tell it, the level of clarity and precision and insights you bring to your memories, the quality of the reflections that they give rise to, the characters evoked through them. Once you've written the memoir you long to read, you'll figure out how to sell it. Then it will just be a matter of having it read by the right people.

**KATE BRAVERMAN:** I would think the question is 'how do I write a striking, original book,' rather than 'how do I sell it.' How do I find the ability, the focus, skill, and stamina, the conviction for this unnatural surgery? Without vulnerability and exposure, without daring and risk, there can be no revelation. All memoirs are acts of fiction in the sense of not seeking objective truth. Unless one is historically significant with achievements and pedigrees to legitimize us, our lives are ordinary. Memoirs are not acts of journalism, either. The writer selects from the monumental possibilities, strategizes, omits, truncates, and then surprisingly expands. One examines and revises, denies and exaggerates, and in that active engagement with the page, the unexpected emerges. Memoir writing is about the illusion of truth. It's liberating to recognize that it's not

about the actual events, people, era, and landscape. Writing is about stunning and triumphing over the innocent page, which prefers you not bother it.

**GLENNON DOYLE MELTON:** Make time. I write first thing in the morning. I don't have a room of my own, but I do have an hour of my own – I get up first thing in the morning before the world wakes up and starts making demands of me. My early-morning writing hours are my pocket of time to be a soul instead of a role. I also believe we should choose carefully where we do our truth-telling. One thing I remind people is something my friend Nadia Bolz-Weber told me: "If you're going to share widely – make sure you're sharing from your scars, not your open wounds." *Love Warrior* is intensely personal, but it's not a diary. I started turning it into a memoir two years after it all happened, and I had enough distance to look at all of it somewhat objectively. So, in real time, we share with our tiny circle of trusted friends and maybe our therapist. Then, when we've found some meaning in it all and feel some peace about it, we can take it wider. At that point, if folks don't want to listen, no worries. But if you've got a story burning inside you, it's likely that somebody out there is burning to hear it. The more personal it is, the more universal it is, too.

**SHANNON LEONE FOWLER:** My advice would be to read and write as much as possible – read widely, join a book club, keep a journal, start a writing group. Write chapters and pass them around to friends and family. Don't make every change suggested, but consider each one. Rewrite, revise, repeat. I feel I'm done (for the moment) when I can't tell if the pages make sense anymore. But maybe that's just me! Decide if you want to try to sell your memoir before it's finished, or send a complete manuscript out. I found an agent in the early stages of writing *Traveling with Ghosts*, but it became increasingly clear the book she



## FAST FACTS: AUTHORS

### KATE BRAVERMAN

- A California writer of short fiction, novels, nonfiction, and essays.
- Her memoir *Frantic Transmissions to and from Los Angeles* won the 2005 Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize.
- City Lights is publishing her new book of stories, *A Good Day for Seppuku*, in February.

### SHANNON LEONE FOWLER

- An author, marine biologist, and single mother of three young children.
- Her first book, *Traveling with Ghosts* (Simon & Schuster), details the solo journey she took – through war-ravaged Eastern Europe, Israel, and beyond – to find peace after her fiancé suffered a fatal attack by a box jellyfish in Thailand. It is a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers pick.
- Her essays have been published in *The Guardian*, *Elle*, *Real Simple*, *Lonely Planet*, *You Magazine*, *Big Issue*, and *GoodHousekeeping.com*.

### GLENNON DOYLE MELTON

- Author of the No. 1 *New York Times* best-selling memoir *Love Warrior*, which was selected as an Oprah's Book Club pick, as well as the *New York Times* best-seller *Carry On, Warrior*.
- The founder of Momastery, an online community reaching millions of people each week.
- The creator and president of Together Rising, a non-profit organization that has raised \$7 million for families around the world through its Love Flash Mobs, which have revolutionized online giving.

### PETER SELGIN

- Author of *Drowning Lessons*, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, as well as a novel, two books on the fiction writer's craft, an essay collection, and several children's books that he also illustrated.
- *Library Journal* called his recent memoir *The Inventors* one of the best memoirs of 2016, claiming that "it is a book destined to become a modern classic."
- Assistant professor of English at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, Georgia, and an affiliate faculty member of Antioch University's low-residency MFA in Creative Writing program in Los Angeles, California.



# “WRITING TO THE MARKET IS AN ARTISTIC MISTAKE, AND PROBABLY A COMMERCIAL ONE AS WELL.”

wanted to sell was not the book I wanted to write. In the end, I finished (with many revisions still to come) and found an agent who completely believed in the story *and* in the way I wanted to tell it.

*What makes a memoir stand out?  
What makes one truly great?*

## **SHANNON LEONE FOWLER:**

Unflinching, uncomfortable, and unapologetic honesty is what makes a memoir stand out. I think of Sonali Deraniyagala’s astounding memoir, *Wave*. It has got to be the most shocking, brutal, raw, brave, and truthful book I’ve read about grief. Because a reader can see through an author who is trying to paint herself or himself in the best possible light, when each and every one of us is capable of noble acts of generosity as well as terrible acts of unkindness. A truly great memoir reflects both of these qualities of the human experience, with moments of light and with moments of darkness.

**GLENNON DOYLE MELTON:** Truth. I believe that the truth sets us free. I think how that works is this: We think we are bad. We think our feelings and urges and secrets are shameful, and so we hide who we really are. That hiding leaves us isolated and disconnected from others, and often causes us to feel afraid and sick. When we share our real selves, others are inevitably emboldened to come forward, out of hiding, towards us and say those magic words, “*me too*.” When we hear “*me too*,” we realize that our feelings and urges and secrets aren’t shameful at all, they’re just human. And so we stop being so afraid of who we are. That realization empowers us to step out of hiding and

take bigger steps towards others. Reading a great memoir makes you feel connected and brave and healthy.

**PETER SELGIN:** There are as many answers to the question as there are different kinds of memoirs. For sure a sensational story can make for a sensational memoir. Not having survived a deadly disease or been a mob hit man or sailed solo around the world, I can’t speak to the sorts of memoirs that describe such dramatic experiences, yet each of us has an interesting story to tell, if only we can learn, as Emerson urges himself in his journal, “...how to choose among what [we call our] experiences that which is really [our] experience, and how to record truth truly.” Among the memoirist’s greatest challenges is to rescue memory from imagination, and to do so with the understanding that the one can’t survive without the other. The trick in writing memoir as faithfully as possible is to be aware of the role imagination plays in shaping our memories, in making them cohere into scenes. The next great challenge is to avoid sentimentality, which I define as emotions in excess of experience. What that boils down to, essentially, is the need to make sure that the reader has shared our experiences as fully and accurately as possible so that whatever emotions they end up with derive from the experience itself, rather than from anything added, like sweeteners or food coloring, to it.

**KATE BRAVERMAN:** It’s not the story. It’s how you tell it. After all, *Ulysses* is about one day in Leopold Bloom’s life. June 16. Garcia Lorca said art was a struggle, a process, ancient and unmistakable. It has a quality of the foreign, the eternal and the just born. You recognize it by its sincerity. Your book

will be as grand as you make it. Master a writer’s full repertoire – experiment with description, dialogue, characters, textures, scents, specific details you create, not actual details. Use the illusion of thought and memory. Language, language, language. Each word choice is the sum of your life’s experience. Individual syllables are a music you can orchestrate. Sentences are intersections where you can go in any direction – you can fly, transform, predict the future, and time travel. Write for the wild pleasure of the process, give yourself vertigo and fever, and write what you didn’t already know.

*How can the writer make the memoir special for the readers instead of being “all about me?”  
What’s the difference between memoir as art and memoir as a shallow, self-serving telling of one’s own story?*

**SHANNON LEONE FOWLER:** I believe this is one of the trickiest parts of writing memoir, figuring out how to tell a story that is deeply personal yet also universal. My 25-year-old fiancé was killed by a box jellyfish – an incredibly unlucky and unlikely event. Part of my own journey after his death was searching for other stories of grief, which I found all over Eastern Europe. I was desperate to not feel alone, and I was able to lose myself in the histories in the haunted landscapes there and the stories of the people left behind. Some of the most fascinating memoirs are about extreme situations the average reader would never even come close to experiencing. Yet at the core of every story are emotions, hopes, and fears that anyone should be able relate to.

**GLENNON DOYLE MELTON:** I wrote *Love Warrior* and rewrote it, and with every paragraph asked myself: How is this not just about me but about the reader? About all of us? How can I turn my personal story into something universal? I sifted through my own pain and mined it for gold to share with others. When we truth-tell widely in real time, it's alarming to people because it can feel more like a cry for help than an act of service. You must be still with your pain before you can offer it up and use it to serve and connect with people you don't know. When we get real, we and the people we're writing to relax because we realize that at our cores, we're all the same. Our details are different – looks, jobs, families, pasts, personalities – but our essentials – our deepest fears and joys – are the same. For that reason, we've got to share the truth somewhere, sometime, with someone because we have to learn that we're not alone. We realize that our feelings and urges and secrets aren't shameful at all, they're just human. So we stop being so afraid of who we are.

**PETER SELGIN:** I think the key thing to understand is that – though based on our memories and experiences – unlike an autobiography, a memoir is never about us. Even when we're the main character of our memoirs, we're not the subject. The subject is something bigger than ourselves, a theme to which certain experiences we've had attach themselves. In my memoir *The Inventors*, the dramatis personae are my father (who was an inventor), my eighth-grade English teacher, and myself; but the theme is how *we are invented by those who influence us*, and more specifically *how each of us invents our selves*. My father “re-invented” himself by denying his past; the teacher did so by fabricating his. Through their profound influences they in turn shaped my character; they invented, or helped to invent, me. The story I'm telling is my story, but it's not *about* me; it's not even about those two men. It's about the reader, who, in reading my

book, discovers that she, too, like all of us, is her own invention. The test of a great memoir is how much the story it tells us is, ultimately, our own.

**KATE BRAVERMAN:** *I* is just a word, like she or Aunt Amy or my bridge partner, George. The *I* you create on the page is just another character. You make your *I* a multiple being. Find a voice you didn't know existed. Talk in tongues. Live your incarnations simultaneously. Revise your own history. When they go low, you go high.

## **PART TWO: PUBLISHERS SPEAK OUT**

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*Is the memoir market oversaturated?*

**GAIL HOCHMAN, BRANDT & HOCHMAN LITERARY AGENTS:** I don't talk in terms of saturated or oversaturated. I do not hear specifically from editors, “The memoir market is saturated.” What I hear is, “We tried a book similar to yours, and we loved it, we all were passionate about it, but it didn't work. Therefore we can't buy yours.” So I would never say saturated or unsaturated.

**WALTER CUMMINS, CO-PUBLISHER, SERVING HOUSE BOOKS:** I believe the memoir market mirrors the fiction market. Certain subjects and approaches tend to become overdone in terms of saturation and redundancy. But even a very familiar subject can find an outlet if it offers original approaches and perspectives.

**RAPHAEL KADUSHIN, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS:** Yes. We get a lot of memoirs, not only from agents and writers that we know, but also from people who aren't really writers. With their Twitter accounts and blogs, people are so used to telling their own life story that they think it's almost an obligation to write it. So a lot of the memoirs we receive are from people

who never really thought of writing before. Most of the submissions we get are first-time books.

*What are your best tips for selling a memoir? What are you looking for now?*

**GAIL HOCHMAN:** I'm not looking for this, or that, or the other thing. But if I love the way something is written, then I may be interested enough to pursue it. What I do hear from editors is that they are not looking for the classic memoir about your drunken parents or drug-addicted spouse. I often find editors rolling their eyes at the classic abuse memoir type of thing. What I find is that if somebody writes something fresh – alive, new, creative, we haven't seen it before – it has a chance. In memoir, voice and story are everything. Even if we've seen the story once or twice, if the book creates characters who come alive in a way that glues us to our chairs, then that book has a chance. The problem is that every person who writes a memoir honestly thinks his book will glue readers to their chairs.

**WALTER CUMMINS:** Because Serving House Books is a literary publisher, the strength of the writing matters most. The quality of the presentation is usually more important than, say, just the unusualness of the subject matter. We've turned down manuscripts about sensational subjects that might inspire TV specials because the bizarre isn't literature. In most cases, good writing is inseparable from deeper and fresher insights into oft-told tales. Consider how many great novels and stories explore love. Why can't a great memoir offer an original take on a common subject?

**RAPHAEL KADUSHIN:** I'm not interested in memoirs that focus on identity politics. What I'm really looking for now are beautifully written memoirs that have some universal resonance. That's what I think is the problem with

## FAST FACTS: AGENTS AND PUBLISHERS

### Brandt & Hochman Literary Agents

- Originally founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Seven agents represent a wide range of writers in areas including literary fiction and memoir; history and biography; mystery; and children's literature.
- Represent classic titles in print for decades as well as a list featuring 50 to 70 new titles each year.

### Serving House Books

- A literary press publishing poetry, novels, story collections, essays, memoirs, and other creative works.
- Authors generally come to this press after achieving such accomplishments as previous publications, grants, and awards.
- A number of its books have been finalists and winners of literary rewards and have received exceptional reviews.

### University of Wisconsin Press

- Has one of the largest trade lists of memoirs, fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry of any university press.
- Has the only series in the world devoted to LGBT memoir.
- Strong academic lists include classics, human rights, modern European history, Jewish studies, folklore, and Slavic studies.



most memoirs – there is nothing universal there. It's rather just the writer's own story, which is ultimately boring. Unless there's some poetry or beauty to a memoir, it's really just another blog.

### *Are there any overdone or overpitched life stories?*

**GAIL HOCHMAN:** The bottom-line is that the conventional stories – like my parents were abusive, or I was locked

in a closet for the first 20 years of my life, or I didn't know my spouse was gay until so-and-so happened – we've seen all that before, so of course they're over-pitched. But when the text reads staggeringly well and makes you see the world that you thought you knew in a somewhat different way, then that's a different matter. I do a lot of memoirs. I love memoirs. I've had projects that I've worked on many times. I've sent them out in five different drafts. My advice would be to give

the book more of a driving center, a premise which then has the arc of a truly dramatic story. I still often hear the same response from editors. And the response usually is not, "There's something wrong with this book," or "Here's a specific problem which needs to be fixed." The response usually is, "I really liked it. I think XYZ was done so well, but we don't think we can break it out in a competitive memoir market." So for a good book, that's what I find is the most recurring reason for rejection: "We don't think we can make this a break-out book. So we cannot take it on." And it is heart-breaking, because some of these books are fabulous.

**WALTER CUMMINS:** I've been arguing that quality of presentation can make any life story compelling and memorable. On the other hand, memoirs that fall into the category of stories for story's sake can wear a topic thin. Sad as they are, trauma of abused childhood or addiction can be interchangeable if they just present the details of what happened in a way that makes one memoir blur with those that preceded it.

**RAPHAEL KADUSHIN:** Yes. The genre is packed with substance-abuse memoirs as well as memoirs of abusive childhoods, sexual abuse, sexual harassment – you know, all the tropes, usually beginning with a decline and fall and then some kind of road to recovery or rehab. Just way too many of these. It's not that I'm downplaying these problems – they're the real thing. It's just that you can tell these stories so many times, and then they lose their power. So in a way, all these stories are really in some ways mitigating against the power of these stories.

### *What makes a memoir stand out? What makes one truly great?*

**GAIL HOCHMAN:** Editors want something fresh. They want something that

does not seem derivative. They want something that does not seem like we've seen it a thousand times before. But what makes it stand out is usually the writing.

**WALTER CUMMINS:** I've already emphasized the potential power of the words on the page for a good literary memoir that stands out. The great memoirs go beyond literary excellence to truly illuminate much more than an

**GAIL HOCHMAN:** The most important thing to know when looking at publishing these days is that it's a business. I'm not a business person. I'm a reader, an editor. But it's a business. Books are categorized – on paperbacks you'll find this on the back – as Literature, Self-Help, or History, or whatever, so that the bookstore can put it in the store in the right place. If a book is so much of a hybrid that you can't even figure out

personal memoir but were something that related to history. For instance, we published a memoir of a gay Jewish man who went through the Holocaust, and we've published some Latino memoirs that reflect Latino culture and the conundrum of living in two different cultures. Those books resonate in larger ways than just the personal story. In addition to the quality of the writing, that is something I always look for.

**"A MEMOIR THAT DESERVES PUBLICATION SHOULD RESONATE IN A WAY THAT'S MUCH DEEPER THAN THE ANECDOTAL."**

aspect of the life of the writer but lead readers to encounter something fundamental about all our lives, about what it means to be human and to live among others.

**RAPHAEL KADUSHIN:** It just comes down to one thing: the quality of the writing. Writing should be left to writers. The sense these days that everyone is a writer is just insulting. I think the problem is that too many non-writers attempt a memoir because everyone can pitch their own life story, and then social media embraces the ideas that every life story is worth sharing. Everyone assumes you need talent to be a musician or an artist, but somehow people dismiss the fact that you actually need talent to write well.

*Are hybrids (that blend personal truths with other nonfiction elements) easier to sell because they're "special," having more legs than a straight-up personal story?*

where it goes, then it won't go in the store very well, and no one will find it. So no, I do not usually represent or embrace hybrids. What I find is that personal stories sometimes allow the writer to find his voice, and sometimes a writer will blend various elements. It's probably a matter of the context or the balance – let's say the balance. It should be clearly categorizable. If it's part memoir, part how-to, and part history book, you have set yourself up to fail.

**WALTER CUMMINS:** Perhaps not easier to sell, but having the possibility of receiving more attention because they can embody original techniques for incorporating different or unique material. That attention may lead to sales.

**RAPHAEL KADUSHIN:** They're more interesting in the sense that they aren't just personal. The memoirs we've done that are the more pertinent ones and that got more attention weren't just a

*How can the writer make the memoir special for the readers instead of being "all about me?" What's the difference between memoir as art and memoir as a shallow, self-serving telling of one's own story?*

**GAIL HOCHMAN:** The bottom line is that the guy who writes books has to remember this: Nobody on earth gives a damn about your life and your book, except for you, your friends, your family. Nobody cares – you have to make them care. Now if there were a formula for the writing, I could tell you, but there isn't. You have to somehow present your story in such a way that it has universal appeal and can put a wide range of people glued to their chairs. If you tell them things about the world we live in that they never really thought about that way – something that they wouldn't have gotten in a different book – you can make them care. Another thing, I would recommend that a writer make sure the premise of the book appears dramatically in the first 30 or 40 pages. You have to have something happen that gets the ball rolling: a challenge, a question that has to be answered, or a goal that the protagonist is trying to reach, so we say, "Yeah, I got it! Now, oh my god, what is she to do? How would you address that?" You have to tell us early in the book *why* we're reading the book. You've got to make us care by how you write it, by the story elements you put together, and in what way. In memoir,

we have to fall hard for the character and feel swept up in the way the story is told. So when I say “fresh,” I mean not necessarily a fresh story we’ve never heard, even though that’s helpful, but the freshness of how it’s told. That’s the word I hear a lot from the editors that buy the most books from me.

**WALTER CUMMINS:** I recall a conversation with an editor friend about a memoir draft written by someone I knew, too, though I hadn’t read the draft. The editor said the writer had an interesting and eventful life and captured the drama and emotions of the central events. But the writer hadn’t gone beyond that to identify the themes that unify her life story, a way of grasping the significance of what the facts of her life were all about. That is, about in a manner that would matter to a reader.

For most people, what’s happened in their lives matters to them, and they may tell certain personal stories to friends, lovers, children, bartenders, or the person seated next to them on an airplane. That telling may even interest listeners. But a memoir that deserves publication should resonate in a way that’s much deeper than the anecdotal.

**RAPHAEL KADUSHIN:** I think if the writer has to ask themselves that question, they shouldn’t be writing a memoir. Any writing as art always comes down to the quality of the writing, and that means actual talent. It’s whether there is real talent, real writing, real voice, and there’s a real story that’s told in a larger, universal way. As to voice, it’s something ineffable. How do you define voice? It’s either there, or it isn’t. An editor’s job is to recognize that.

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

If you pen a memoir, drawing on your many life experiences, think beyond the autobiographical to the universal. How is this about others, not just me? This universalization principle applies to all memoir, regardless of subject. And keep in mind that memoir is not just story but an art form, calling for all the elements of great art in the service of great story-telling – and mainly, a voice that empowers the work, one that readers can’t help but listen to. You’re well on your way to publication if you can manage all that. **W**

Jack Smith is author of numerous articles, reviews, and interviews, four novels, and a book on writing, entitled *Write and Revise for Publication*.

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# THE ART OF LOAFING



In defense of procrastination. By Yi Shun Lai

**I WAS ASSIGNED THIS ARTICLE FOUR MONTHS BEFORE ITS DEADLINE. “AW, THAT’S PLENTY OF TIME,” I THOUGHT TO MYSELF.**

No points for guessing what eventually happened: The deadline was around the corner before I knew it, and my plans to research, write, and file early had been foiled by my next-level procrastination skills.

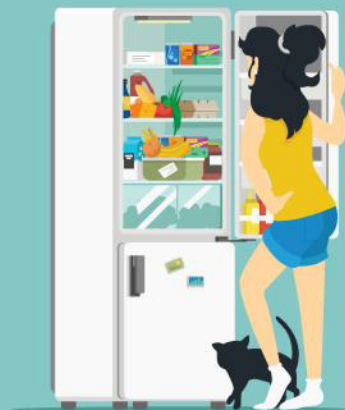
Over the years, I’ve tried to beat procrastination with these tactics: I write thoughts down immediately; I abandon multi-tasking; I tell myself very sternly to get on the stick. I have tried punishing myself (*no Cadbury eggs until you get this thing done!*) and rewarding myself (*write a paragraph, get some Cheez-Its!*) Nothing seemed to work, until I discovered that the secret is the loafing itself. Yes, I get stuff done, with good results, when I put it off until the very last minute. Even better results, I think, than when I chip away like a good, responsible doobie.

(I should note here that I’m using “loafing” and “procrastination” interchangeably, for the shallowest of reasons: I picture “loafing” as William Powell in a dressing gown, a la *The Thin Man*, solving a murder with a drink in his hand. “Procrastination” is *Beavis & Butt-Head*. Whatever you call it, it’s decidedly not doing the thing you’re supposed to be working on.)

When I told other writers I was working on this article, I got a slew of excited *me toos* and a couple of writers who flat-out refused to call it “procrastination” or even “loafing.” It turns out, more and more writers are practicing it to great creative payoff, even if we can’t actually call it by its name. “I love that you call it loafing,” writer Daryl Tanner told me. “It takes all the negativity out of the vital time of clearing.”

“Clearing” describes best what loafing does for my creative process: I get many of my brainstorming when I’m doing something totally unrelated to the diligence of the butt-in-chair calcified advice that many new writers receive.

But the research is piling up about loafing: Organizational psychologist Adam Grant, in his latest book *Originals*, noted that “Procrastination may be particularly conducive to creativity when it leaves us solving problems at moments where we’re unfocused.” He goes on to detail a number of Nobel Prize-winning scientists who were passionate about the arts. (Prize winners are *22 times* as likely as the average





scientist to be amateur performers, and 12 times as likely to be passionate amateur writers.) The obvious implication is that cross-discipline thinking is important, even when the other discipline is task-oriented, like ironing.

The experiences of other writers bears this out. Writer Susan Mihalic said, “I believe that taking my attention off my writing and putting it elsewhere can benefit the writing. I think that’s the subconscious at work. It’s why I have epiphanies when I’m driving or riding my horse or taking a shower.”

Travel and tech writer Deborah Shadovitch said that she does tasks when she “lacks needed words.”

“I get up, wash my dishes, sweep my floor, hang up clothing...things that let my brain do its word-thing,” she says.

And she, like Tanner, terms it something different: she says she has to let the words and ideas form in her brain first, and the brainless tasks are one way of doing just that, one way of feeling as if you’ve completed something without doing any writing.

Shadovitch’s methodology hints at something else that productivity gurus love to trot out — the low-hanging fruit, or momentum-building goal-setting. The idea is that if you set enough small goals, your brain will get used to the quick wins, and the added confidence from these tiny victories will help you on the road to your big win or goal. A quick internet search turns up lots of anecdotes, but I like the one about the guy whose goal was to earn seven figures in a year best: He reasoned that he would get closer to this goal if he were a better public speaker, so he made it a goal to deliver one successful public speech. And achieving that goal necessitated

joining Toastmasters, so he then made *that* his goal. I haven’t followed up to see if he actually is making seven figures now, but it does look like he’s regularly delivering speeches now, so I’ll count that as a win.

Writer Caitlin Kelly, a full-time freelancer since 2006 who pens everything from articles for the *New York Times* to nonfiction books, is another practiced loafer. She takes “hooky days,” where she spends days enjoying visual arts or reading, and definitely not writing. “I don’t work nights or weekends,” she added. “I set tight boundaries around my life and the work I do. I can’t produce anything worth reading if I’m exhausted all the time.”

The note of discipline in Kelly’s kind of loafing struck a note with me. I have found that it doesn’t actually work as a way of generating creativity unless you really *work* at it. Like so many things in this creative life, it’s a paradox. Take, for instance, the low-hanging fruit: I make endless lists that are longer in tandem with the size the project that’s percolating in the background. These lists detail the minutiae of the day: everything from bank and post office runs to scheduling an interview to walking the dog. When I do something on the list, I check it off with great gusto.

But I have to be diligent about these small goals, setting them and meeting them, writing them down, with the rigor of someone who sets strict limits around her work and her home life, before it actually works as a productivity and creativity crutch.

So it goes with proper loafing: If you’re going to loaf, *really* loaf. Don’t multitask. Binge-watching *Magnum, P.I.*? Don’t check your email or answer the phone while doing it. Cleaning your house? Do all the bits you intended to do before you stop. Checking things off on a list? Do it with a sharp pencil and be relentless.

Novelist and travel writer Kaitlin Solimine has a newly released novel, *Empire of Glass* (IG Publishing, July 2017), that would not have been what

it is today if it weren’t for the fine art of loafing. After a round of pitching the book to publishers and then a major revision, her manuscript still wasn’t sitting right — until she met a poet who had the art of procrastination down to a hard shine. At a coveted residency, “I got right to work,” Solimine says, “but *she* spent the first week designing her office space. She wanted it to be homey.” Solimine says the poet asked her for a coffee date, and despite her internal drive to knuckle down and get to work, Solimine agreed.

“It was one of those long, lovely, really slow conversations over coffee on a summer day,” she says, but it eventually led to Solimine’s friend mentioning a writer she’d never heard of, and the discovery of that writer led to Solimine’s being able to see her own work with new eyes and craft a whole new version of her book — one that eventually sold.

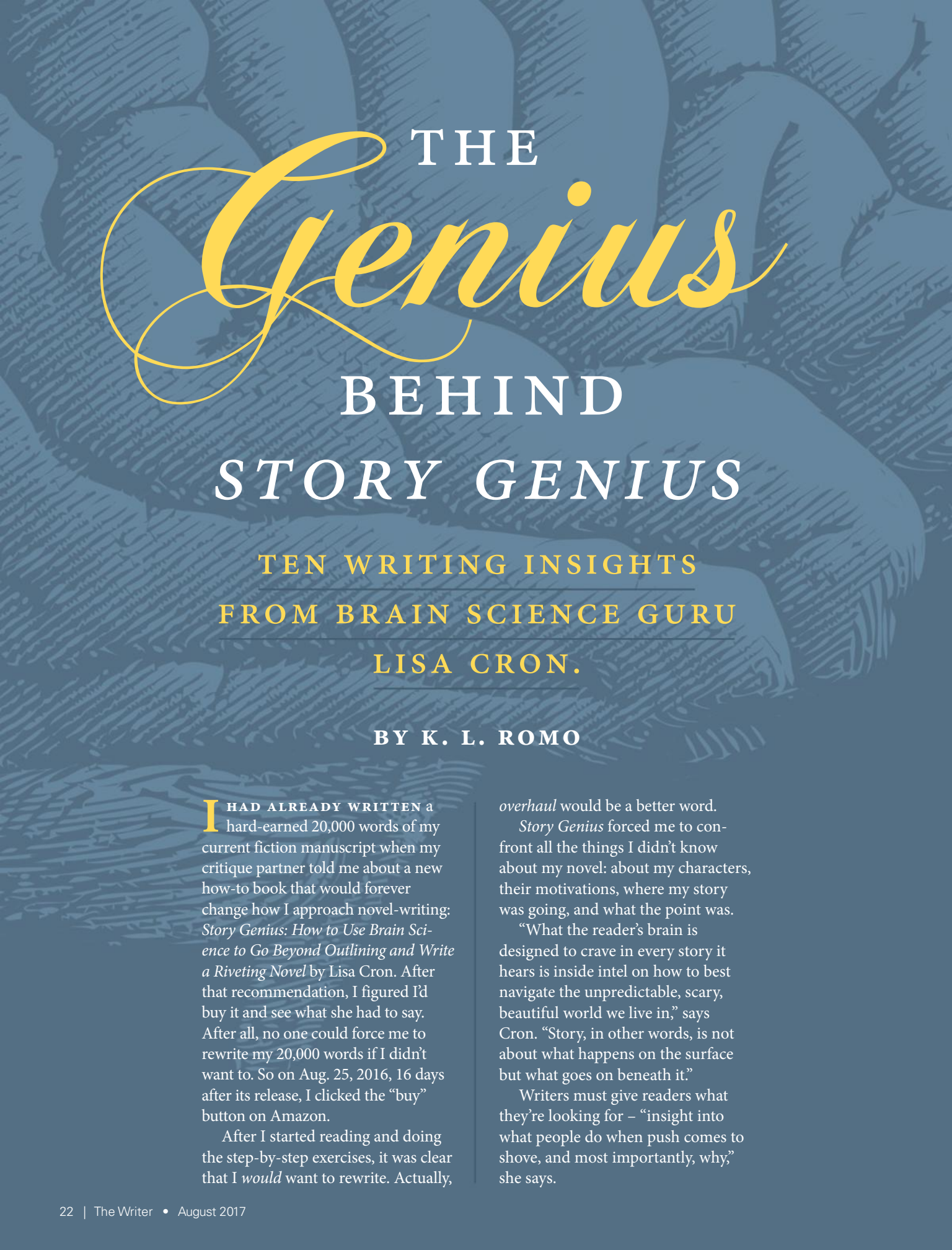


“It was just one of those random convos that feel like such a waste of time. The purpose of it wasn’t for her to provide literary insight to me,” says Solimine. But it was only through what seemed like a waste of time that Solimine could find the *a-ha* moment that made her book what it is today.

So really, what’s a couple hours a day spent loafing, so long as you do it right? You just might find that it boosts your creativity and productivity game to a whole new level. **W**

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Yi Shun Lai is a novelist and the nonfiction editor at the Tahoma Literary Review. Visit her online at [thegooddirt.org](http://thegooddirt.org) and on Twitter @gooddirt.



# THE *Genius* BEHIND STORY GENIUS

TEN WRITING INSIGHTS  
FROM BRAIN SCIENCE GURU  
LISA CRON.

BY K. L. ROMO

**I** HAD ALREADY WRITTEN a hard-earned 20,000 words of my current fiction manuscript when my critique partner told me about a new how-to book that would forever change how I approach novel-writing: *Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel* by Lisa Cron. After that recommendation, I figured I'd buy it and see what she had to say. After all, no one could force me to rewrite my 20,000 words if I didn't want to. So on Aug. 25, 2016, 16 days after its release, I clicked the "buy" button on Amazon.

After I started reading and doing the step-by-step exercises, it was clear that I *would* want to rewrite. Actually,

*overhaul* would be a better word.

*Story Genius* forced me to confront all the things I didn't know about my novel: about my characters, their motivations, where my story was going, and what the point was.

"What the reader's brain is designed to crave in every story it hears is inside intel on how to best navigate the unpredictable, scary, beautiful world we live in," says Cron. "Story, in other words, is not about what happens on the surface but what goes on beneath it."

Writers must give readers what they're looking for – "insight into what people do when push comes to shove, and most importantly, why," she says.



## WHY STORY GENIUS IS DIFFERENT

In her previous book, *Wired For Story*, Cron explored the many connections between brain science and good writing. *Wired* explained what the brain craves in stories and why, but Cron realized it didn't tell writers where to start the process – or how to actually build the story.

In *Story Genius*, Cron decided to teach writers how to use the theories she discusses in *Wired* to write a great story. According to Cron, “it's a fully prescriptive how-to guide that takes writers, step-by-step, through the process of creating a novel, beginning with the first glimmer of an intriguing idea.”

I had the opportunity to pick Lisa Cron's brain about *Story Genius* and its unique methodology. Here's what we discussed:

### 1 DEFINING A STORY

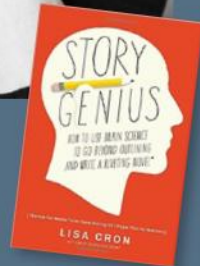
A story is “how a protagonist overcomes a defining misbelief. It's about an internal change, NOT an external change,” says Cron. Meaning our protagonist must enter the story already needing to change internally. “Every protagonist steps onto page one of your novel *already* wanting something, and that desire will drive their story-long agenda, but she must overcome her misbelief in order to have a shot at getting it,” she says.

### 2 WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

You must consider your story's point before you pick up the pen. “All stories make a point, beginning on page one. The point is what holds everything together and supplies the underlying story logic. You must know what your point is before you begin writing,” says Cron.

### 3 FINDING THE BEGINNING

*Story Genius* debunks the myth that page one is the beginning of any story. In truth, all stories really begin *in media res* – in the middle. “Every protagonist must overcome a longstanding misbelief about human nature in order to have a shot at getting what she wants,” Cron says, but the protagonist's defining misbelief has already been formed long *before* the story starts, almost always very early in her life. The first



page of the novel is actually the beginning of the *second half* of the story: When the plot forces the protagonist to go after something she's desired for quite some time, but in order to gain what she wants, she must face, question, and overcome her misbelief.

### 4 SELECTING THE PROTAGONIST

Cron believes story is built around how our protagonist “solves one problem that grows, escalates, and complicates from beginning to end – think cause-and-effect trajectory.” The protagonist is the reader's portal into the story – the reader's avatar. Even in stories with multiple POV characters, one almost always emerges as what Cron calls the “alpha-protagonist.”

### 5 FLESHING OUT THE PROTAGONIST

Writers, from newbies to MFA students, are surprised when they discover they've been pursuing the wrong things – exciting plots and beautiful writing. “The biggest and best surprise new writers have is that by digging down into who their protagonist is before the story starts, they're able to not only create a fully fleshed out character who *needs* to change, but the plot, too, begins to organically appear,” Cron says.

## 6 PUT DOWN THE PLOTLINE

Most writers believe they need to sketch out a rough plot before writing, but, again, the process really hinges on character. “The plot is created second, and its goal is to force your protagonist to go after what she wants, but in order to get it, she must confront her misbelief,” says Cron. “Everything that happens in your story will get its meaning and emotional weight from one thing: how it affects your protagonist *internally* in pursuit of her goal.” The plot exists in service of the protagonist’s internal journey; thus, writers must create their protagonist’s story-specific past before they can go forward into the story present.

## 7 DIGGING INTO THE PAST

Cron instructs her students never to prepare a general character bio for their protagonist but to instead detail specific past events in her life that will contribute to how she handles what happens in the story. Writers aren’t just digging up random, action-oriented backstory in this process; they should instead examine how a protagonist’s misbelief has grown, escalated, and complicated as it guided her from its inception to the moment our plot kicks in. “Our subjective past experience is the decoder ring we use to make sense of what’s happening in the present. It’s the one thing we never do leave home without. To write forward without creating your protagonist’s decoder ring (which means writing about their story-specific past experiences *in scene form*) is like shoving them onto the page with amnesia,” Cron says. Then, because you’ve already written quite a bit about your protagonist’s story-specific past before ever starting the first chapter, you will be able to easily determine the point at which your story truly begins.

## 8 THIS IS NOT PRE-WRITING

“Creating their protagonist’s story-specific past is *not* pre-writing. Not only does the plot begin to appear during this process, but everything [the writer

## WHAT I’VE LEARNED USING *STORY GENIUS*

My print copy of *Story Genius* now has so many dog-eared pages, bookmarks, and sticky-notes that it seems I’ve been using it for years. Following the process has sharpened my understanding of story – and, more importantly, how to write a good one. I’ve learned that:

- There is no story without backstory. Everyone has a past, and as a writer, you must know who your characters are before you even write the first scene.
- The law of cause-and-effect is at the heart of every story. What one character does or believes shapes how she sees the world as well as what her next actions will be.
- I can still be a pantsner while blueprinting my story.
- Every scene requires you to know what your character goes into a scene believing and why. You must know what her goal in the scene is and what she expects will happen. Then you must determine what actually happens in addition to what she’s learned from it.
- The questions “what if?” and “why do I care?” are the powerful sparks that get the flame of your story going and help you decide what the point of your story will be. Do those flames warm your cold and soggy feet, char those weenies on a stick to fill a hungry belly, or signal planes flying overhead that you need a rescue?
- One of the most important questions a writer can ask about their characters and their actions is *Why? Why? Why?* You’ve got to know the answers!

## USING *STORY GENIUS* WITH WRITING SOFTWARE

What if you want to use Cron’s method with writing software, such as Scrivener? Gwen Hernandez, author of *Scrivener for Dummies* (and military romantic suspense novels) and a Scrivener instructor, says not to worry: “Scrivener can accommodate just about any writing method or process. It’s just a matter of creating folders and files to suit your needs.”

In fact, Hernandez has already created a *Story Genius* template that can be used when creating a new project in Scrivener. And don’t worry if you’ve already created a Scrivener project – you can import files or move them from the current project to the new one. Hernandez says, “It’s simple to open both the current and the new project, and drag files from one binder to the other. There’s also a ‘File>Import>Scrivener Project’ option that’s a quick way to bring over everything from the old to the new.”

You can find Hernandez’s *Story Genius* template for Scrivener at her website, [gwenhernandez.com](http://gwenhernandez.com). You can also create your own *Story Genius* project template in Scrivener.


has] uncovered is then laced into every page of their novel, in the form of dialogue, flashbacks, snippets of memory that the protagonist urgently uses to make sense of what's happening and what the hell to do about it," says Cron.

## 9 CONSIDER YOUR SECONDARY CHARACTER'S AGENDAS

"Every character steps onto page one with a pre-existing overarching agenda, which they try to move forward in every scene in which they appear," Cron explains. "The goal is to create all secondary characters, *and their agenda*, with one purpose in mind: to help facilitate the protagonist's story. They're there to serve your protagonist's struggle, and so everything they do is geared to either help her, hinder her, or often, both."

## 10 'PANTSEERS' VERSUS 'PLOTTERS'

The *Story Genius* method is not a formula but a way to discover why characters do what they do. Thus, it's useful to *all* writers, pantsers and plotters alike. According to Cron, "*Story Genius* gives plotters a way to break free from the external shell of the story, which almost always results in novels that are flat and formulaic, and it gives pantsers a way to stop writing in the dark, which almost always results in novels that are nothing but a bunch of things that happen."

For more information about Lisa Cron or *Story Genius*, visit [wiredforstory.com](http://wiredforstory.com). You can also learn more about the *Story Genius* Workshop Cron teaches with Jennie Nash at [authoraccelerator.com/story-genius](http://authoraccelerator.com/story-genius). 

K.L. Romo writes about life on the fringe: teetering dangerously on the edge is more interesting than standing safely in the middle. She is passionate about women's issues, loves noisy clocks and fuzzy blankets, but HATES the word normal. Her historical novel, *Life Before*, is about two women separated by a century who discover they've shared a soul. Web: [KLRomo.com](http://KLRomo.com) or @klromo.



JENNIE NASH

## LEARNING IN REAL TIME

One of the things that makes *Story Genius* unique is that readers can see each of the book's lessons unfold step-by-step in real time via author and book coach Jennie Nash's real-life examples, which are detailed throughout the book as she applies Cron's method to her own novel-in-progress. "[Nash] developed her novel from scratch on the pages of *Story Genius*... Watching the process unfold is

invaluable because writers can see firsthand exactly how a writer starts by digging into the story *before* page one of the novel, and how everything else organically builds from there," Cron says. In other words: *Story Genius* doesn't just *tell*, it *shows*.

Cron also provides a template for "Scene Cards," which aim to help the writer both flesh out what will happen plot-wise in each scene, and, more importantly, *why* what happens matters to the protagonist – and what she realizes as a result. "Your protagonist will emerge from every scene changed in some way: They'll have picked up some fresh inside-intel, and their plan for achieving their agenda will have been recalibrated – a little or a lot," Cron says. These Scene Cards are designed to help writers blueprint their novels from beginning to end, but they are not intended to be all filled out at once, nor are they meant to serve as an outline. It's a gradual, sequential process that encourages the writer to consider a moment's purpose and residual effects *before* writing each scene.

So, if you want to get to know your characters intimately – know what makes them tick and why – and create a plot that forces your characters to change internally and act based on who they are, check out the *Story Genius* method. Your characters and readers will be glad you did.



# UgLY PrOSE

The virtues of very bad sentences.

By M. Thomas Gammarino

**As** a younger writer, I spent lots of time trying to write elegant prose. I read and emulated the acrobatics of Nabokov, the romantic flights of Cheever and Woolf and Baldwin, the liposuction of Hemingway and Carver. But even as I steadily internalized the virtues of “good” writing – clarity, precision, variety, etc. – I was also discovering a batch of writers who wrote phenomenally *bad* prose. And here’s the thing: I loved it every bit as much.

To be sure, I’m not talking about prose that is *merely* bad, i.e. incompetent or unrefined; I’m talking about prose that has been masterfully crafted to defy all of those received virtues and wear its ugliness on its sleeve – prose that aims not to shimmer and flow so much as creak and stink and ooze.

We might say that good bad prose falls into two types: the “naturalized” and the “unnaturalized.”

By “naturalized,” I mean that there is some intramural narrative justification for the shoddiness. Here’s an example, from the beginning of George Saunders’ short story “Jon:”

Back in the time of which I am speaking, due to our Coördinators had mandated us, we had all seen that educational video of “It’s Yours to Do With What You Like!” in which teens like ourselves speak on the healthy benefits of getting off by oneself and doing what one feels like in terms of self-touching, which what we learned from that video was, there is nothing wrong with self-touching, because love is a mystery but the mechanics of love need not be, so go off alone, see what is up, with you and your relation to your own gonads, and the main thing is, just have fun, feeling no shame!



This run-on violates nearly all of the dictates of conventionally good prose. First we get the clunky and overwrought adverbial phrase, followed by a grammatically impoverished one (“due to” invites an object that never quite comes). Then we get “ourselves” and the gloriously inelegant “in terms of self-touching,” followed by the unearned “love is a mystery,” the jarring point-of-view shift to the second-person, the awkward de-contraction (“see what is up”), and the coup de grâce: a wholly unwarranted exclamation point. On its surface, there is a very definite my-kid-could-do-that quality to this opening paragraph, but of course kids can’t do that, not as craftily and multi-dimensionally as Saunders does. If you read the story, you’ll find that the narrator is a teenaged boy who has been raised in an advertising research facility as a programmed, narcotized product tester. The bad prose therefore enfold something of the dystopian setting and plot; it *makes sense* that Jon would speak like this. And, of course, it’s ironic: Saunders knows the writing is bad, and he knows that we know that he knows that, so he’s free to louse it up as expertly as he can.

To take an even more in-your-face example of naturalized bad prose, let’s look at Daniel Keyes’ classic *Flowers for Algernon*, which contains gems like this:

She said; You, got. to-mix?them!up: She showd? me” how, to mix! Them; up, and now! I can. mix (up all? kinds of punctuation – in, my. writing! There” are lots, of rules; to learn? But. Im get’ing them in my head:

One thing? I, like: about, Dear Miss Kin-nian: (that’s, the way? it goes; in a Business, letter (if I ever go into business?) is that, she: always; gives me’ a reason” when – I ask. She”s a gen’ius! I wish! I could be smart-like-her;

Punctuation, is? fun!

The effect is humorous, thank goodness, because otherwise the story is almost too painful to bear. If you’ve read the novel (or the novella it grew out of), you know what I mean. If you

haven’t, suffice it to say that at the outset of the story Charlie, our narrator, has an IQ of 68. It’s soon to elevate, however, and so too, in lockstep, is his prose.

In both of these examples, sentence-level concerns remain in some sense subordinate to story. We can’t help notice the language, and yet, per realism, we mostly see through it to the world it projects. Certain other writers – more self-consciously “avant-garde” ones, if you like – so delight in writing off-kilter prose that they raise it to the level of genuine aesthetic vision and depart from realism altogether. **Their unapologetically awkward sentences become vehicles for defamiliarizing, and thereby refreshing, our relationships to language, if not to the world itself.** They “purify the words of the tribe,” to borrow Stéphane Mallarmé’s phrase.

By any account, Donald Barthelme has to be reckoned one of the great prose stylists of the 20th century, the worthy heir to masters like Joyce and Beckett. If postmodernism can bear the irony of having a canon, Barthelme must be somewhere near dead center. Whatever postmodernism may mean – and the jury is forever out on that – we can at least agree that Barthelme was fundamentally a collage artist, finding in the “dreck” (his word) of midcentury American culture, readymades to be lifted and artfully juxtaposed. Sometimes Barthelme’s collages function at the level of content (e.g. “Porcupines at the University,” which combines, well, porcupines and the university), sometimes at the level of form, and very often both. In either case, where Saunders’ and Keyes’ bad prose comes from fouling up sentences, Barthelme’s comes mainly from screwing around in the spaces between them. The effect is one of free-floating irony. The targets of his pastiches and satires aren’t always identifiable in any one-to-one way, but it’s clear he’s not capitulating to dreck so much as using it against itself. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Barthelme said this of his method:

I look for a particular kind of sentence, perhaps more often the awkward than the beautiful. A back-broke sentence is interesting. Any sentence that begins with the phrase, ‘It is not clear that...’ is clearly clumsy but preparing itself for greatness of a kind. A way of backing into a story – of getting past the reader’s hardwon armor.”



If you’re new to Barthelme, reading him may take a little practice, but once you’re attuned to the registers he works in, you’ll find his ungainly, albeit perfectly pitched, prose can sometimes break your heart.

Ben Marcus is one of several writers who have clearly inherited Barthelme’s mantle. His first book, the story collection *The Age of Wire and String*, is “a catalog of the life project” in which Marcus adopts the deadpan tone, Latinate specificity, and wooden syntax of the logician (incidentally, Marcus’ father was a career mathematician, and Ben himself studied philosophy at NYU) to inventory the mundane sociology of an alternate Ohio, where a “girl burned in water” is the “basic unit of religious currency,” and there is a “time-based sense” to the term “Walter.” English words are reconnotated or imbued with altogether new meanings until sooner or later the reader’s frames of reference give out. If you have a taste for surrealism, and language play, it’s fabulously interesting. Here, for example, is his definition of “Heaven:”

Area of final containment. It is modeled after the first house. It may be hooked and slid and shifted. The bottom may be sawed through. Members inside stare outward and sometimes reach.

Now if we try to read this in the realist mode – that is, if we let it project a world for us – we find it strangely incomplete. Heaven is modeled after the “first house,” but don’t expect Marcus to say anything more about that. Heaven may be “hooked and slid and shifted.” OK, but how? Hooked with what? Slid to where? What is the bottom made of that it can be sawed through? And most obviously, most *badly*, “reach” is a transitive verb. It is impossible to read that members “sometimes reach” and not ask what it is they reach. The effect is part disorientation, part schizoid euphoria.

Marcus also gets good use out of the generally ill-advised passive voice, especially when the active might have done just as well:

“The snoring person can be stuffed with cool air to slow the delivery of its language...” (From “Snoring, Accidental Speech.”)

“It is understood in terms of the phenomenon of combustion as seen in wood and brick...” (From “Views from the First House.”)

It is known that certain figures will chase circular objects when a song is played. (From “Hidden Ball Inside a Song.”)

And get past our armor he does. Barthelme is no aesthetic nihilist; like his modernist forebears, he still takes aim at the ineffable, but he gets there by the most sublunary paths. An example from his short story “Paraguay,” which is a kind of travelogue gone awry:

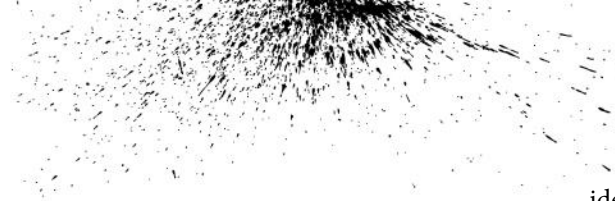
Anechoic chambers placed randomly about the city (on the model of telephone booths) are said to have actually saved lives. Wood is becoming rare. They are now paying for yellow pine what was formerly paid for rosewood. Relational methods govern the layout of cities. Curiously, in some of the most successful projects the design has been swung upon small collections of rare animals spaced (on the lost-horse principle) on a lack of grid. Carefully calculated mixes: mambas, the black wrasse, the giselle. Electrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ratio far in excess of standard is used to fix the animals in place.

If some of the logical connective tissue seems to be missing between sentences, rest assured, *it is*.

The story, by this point, has become mostly a litany of official-sounding non-sequiturs and inscrutabilities, a “slumgullion” (again, Barthelme’s word) of cultural and linguistic detritus. And yet, as Barthelme said in another interview:

Mixing bits of this and that from various areas of life to make something that did not exist before is an oddly hopeful endeavor. The sentence “Electrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ratio far in excess of standard is used to fix animals in place” made me very happy – perhaps in excess of its merit. But there is in the world such a thing as electrolytic jelly; the “capture ratio” comes from the jargon of sound technology; and the animals themselves are a salad of the real and the invented. The flat, almost “dead” tone paradoxically makes possible an almost-lyricism.





It's hard to imagine that Williams formed the idea for this sentence and then retrofitted language to it. No, a sentence like this can only grow out of its own sonic, semi-signifying enzymes. In his essay "The Sentence Is A Lonely Place," Lutz talks about his own composing process:

Not only does the passive voice contribute to the quasi-authoritative tone Marcus is so fond of, but it also confers on the work a disembodied, almost haunted, feeling: Where are the doers of all these verbs?

Another inheritor of the Barthelmeian tradition – though Gertrude Stein and the language poets are back there too – is Gary Lutz, who has got to be writing some of the worst prose around. To be sure, Lutz is a virtuoso. He knows English grammar well enough to have written a couple of books on the subject, and his command equips him with an unparalleled ability to contort language in the most surprising and clever ways. He relishes rhetorical devices like syllepsis and catechresis (if you don't know what those are, allow me to recommend Mark Forsyth's excellent *The Elements of Eloquence*). And yet, as the language piles up in his stories, characters and narratives do begin to emerge. Like Marcus, Lutz is a language surrealist, with his characters and situations growing out of linguistic caprice, worlds from words (it's no coincidence that both of these writers were ushered into print by legendary editor Gordon Lish). Here's an excerpt from Lutz' short story "Devotions," from his aptly titled collection *Stories in the Worst Way*:

From time to time I show up in myself just long enough for people to know they are not in the room alone. Usually, these are people who expect something from me – a near future, a not-too-distant future. What I tell them is limited to the people I have already had myself married against. Everything I say is to the best of my knowledge and next to nothing. It comes nowhere close.

If we strain a little, we can make out the ghostly outline of a narrative here, but it's clear that language is the animating force of the story. **This is not the sort of fiction you can get lost in; rather, it is the sort that, if you let it, can fizz and pop and create exhilarating new pathways in your brain.**


And lest it seem from my examples so far that only men are writing good bad prose, here's a dizzying sentence from Diane Williams, another writer in Lish's stable:

"I do not want to leave behind anything during the accumulation that I will have to grasp at one glance because it is not a piece of crap." (From "The Time of Harmony, Or Crudite.")

And as the words reconstitute themselves and metamorphose, your sentence may begin to make a series of departures from what you may have intended to express; the language may start taking on, as they say, a life of its own, a life that contests or trumps the life you had sponsored to live on the page. But it was you who incited these words to shimmer and mutate and reconfigure even further – and what they now are saying may well be much more acute and more crucial than what you had thought you wanted to say.

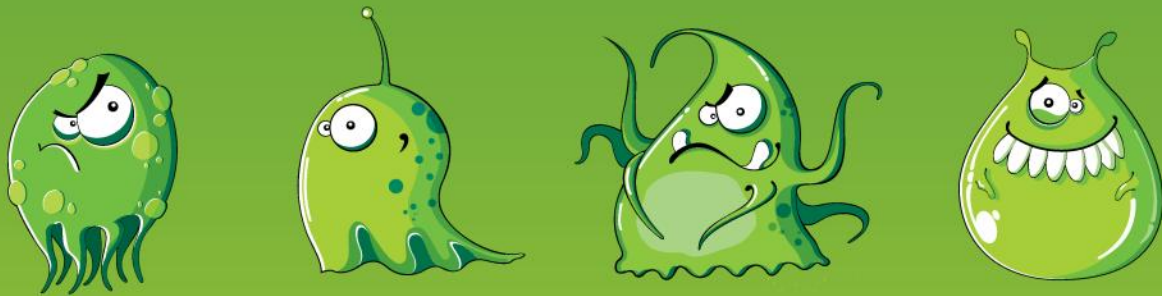
I am reminded here of a story I have heard about Einstein. While at work on his theory of general relativity, he produced an equation that announced to him, unambiguously, that our universe is expanding. At the time, everyone, including Einstein himself, believed in a static-state universe, so he ignored his result and finessed the numbers until they produced the kind of universe he'd wanted at the outset. He later came to think of this as the "biggest blunder" of his life.

Truth, the lesson seems to be, is sometimes a function of careful listening, and of getting out of our own way. I am not prepared to defend any grand metaphysical claims here, but it seems to me that a radical innovator like Lutz is a sort of mystic, crafting sentences that transcend, even unite, "good" and "bad." Be warned, though, as Hemingway wrote in *Death in the Afternoon*, "Mysticism implies a mystery and there are many mysteries; but incompetence is not one of them."

So first you need to learn to write well. Then you can write as badly as you want. 

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M. Thomas Gammarino is the author of the novels *King of the Worlds* (Chin Music Press 2016) and *Big in Japan* (Chin Music Press 2009) and the novella *Jellyfish Dreams* (Amazon Kindle Singles 2012). In 2014 he won the Elliot Cades Award for Literature, Hawaii's highest literary honor.



# LITTLE GREEN MONSTERS

THE 411 ON WRITER ENVY. BY RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE

**IT'S** human nature – you see something delicious, you want it. Writers run across this situation with regularity as their peers encounter success, and that includes me, too. Here are three of my own *I want that!* moments.

- I went to graduate school with Adam Johnson (Pulitzer and National Book Award winner).
- I'm roughly the same age as poet Kevin Young (Guggenheim fellow, NEA winner, and finalist for the National Book Award and *Los Angeles Times* Book Award).
- I'm EXACTLY the same age as Shaquille O'Neal, Jennifer Garner, Eminem, Gwyneth Paltrow, Ben Affleck, and Wil Wheaton (not all are writers, but talk about success).

One of the great writing motivations is when you see something and say, “*I can do that.*” But what do you do when this sentiment crosses the line into something unhelpful and potentially harmful to your writing career or even your life? We asked some pros for guidance.

## JANE YOLEN, AUTHOR OF 300+ BOOKS:

I only feel writer envy when someone has written something so gorgeous that I wish I had written it. But I don't envy people's successes – I glory in them. I think it's great.

I may not like their books, and I may not like their writing, and I may not like them. But if something wonderful has happened to them because of them being a writer? Terrific!

I was once in a critique group where one particular person could only be happy if you weren't succeeding. She'd throw her arms around you and say, “I'm SO sorry for you.” But should you have

something good happen to you, she'd immediately ask, “Do you think I can send to your agent? Or your editor?” The basic undertone was always “Why not me?”

I've also been at writers' summer workshops where really the model is setting one young writer against another. I find that appalling. Writing is not the WWE. You don't need to take another writer down in order to make yourself look good.

Ultimately, I just try to stay away from those people – those energy vampires. I don't know if you can reform them, but you do need to recognize them and get out of their way. *Run away! Run away!*



## HARRIET LEVIN MILLAN, AUTHOR OF THREE BOOKS:

Like most writers, I suffer from a horrific case of writer envy. Sometimes my envy is so extreme that it absorbs everything positive about my success as a writer and leaves me feeling alone and inept. It was especially severe as a student in my overly competitive MFA program at the University of Iowa. We students were pitted against each other and competed for praise, merit scholarships, and teaching jobs. Most workshops, I'd leave in tears.

In my early years, before my first book was published, I constantly compared myself to the writers I had known back in my workshop days, who had already sold books and moved ahead while I languished. Some of them became extremely accomplished. When, nearly two decades after I graduated, my first book won a national prize, the Alice Fay Di Castagnola Award, the prize did not offer publication. It took eight more years for it to win an actual publication award, the prestigious Barnard New Women Poets Prize.

I was so depressed by my envy of other writers that I had to enroll in a positive thinking course to cure myself. Now I know that the world's definitions of success are empty. Selling a book does not mean that you are a better writer than others who have not sold their books. All it means is that you were able to sell it. Once I learned that distinction, I became a better writer, because I wrote about the subjects that touched me instead of worrying about how publishers and editors would react to what I wrote.

## ELIZABETH SIMS, AUTHOR OF NINE NOVELS:

For years, I couldn't even read novels by living authors who were more successful than me, which was almost

everybody. In those days if I read a novel by a dead guy or gal, I could appreciate it without stress, because at least I could mutter, upon closing the cover, "*Ha ha, you're dead and I'm not!*"

Although I've envied other writers (and still do), I know I'm envied sometimes. Whenever I realize someone is envious of me, I'm like, "*You poor dumb shmuck, you have no idea that my life is a boiling cauldron of failure and anxiety.*" But I always act super-cool and confident.

How to conquer envy? A confident front is half the answer. The other half is to commit to being the best you can possibly be; to do at least most of the things you want to do; to meet and exceed the goals you set for your life. Throw regret to the dogs and meet every day without excuse or self-doubt.

Also this: If we say it's OK to be envious, envy loses its power. Because everybody is envious at times.

## DR. JANET RUTH HELLER, AUTHOR OF SIX BOOKS:

Unpublished writers feel envy more often because they may doubt their capacity to produce high-quality work or feel very frustrated by the many hurdles that face unknown authors. Just as athletes need to practice for a long time before they can play professionally, most writers need to develop their talent for years before they get much recognition.

I advise writers to use the energy from envy to spur themselves to revise their manuscripts, join a critique group of experienced writers to get feedback, research which firms publish the kind of work that they write, and send manuscripts out to more editors, agents, and publishers. Wallowing in envy is a waste of energy, but challenging ourselves to become better authors is a constructive way to divert the envy into creative products.

## DEFEATING THE LITTLE GREEN MONSTER

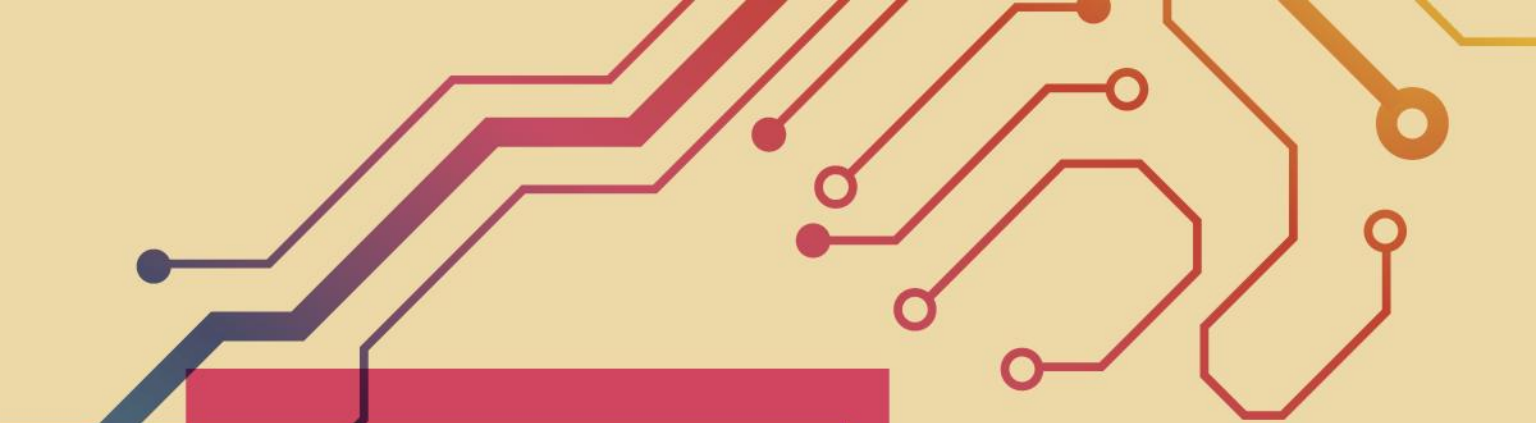
Here's the bare-bones truth. If envy is purely a motivating force that gets you to do your own work? Great. If envy makes you look like a jerk or it stops you from writing? It's time for a change. If that's your situation, here are my own three tips:

1. Practice being grateful. Take 45 seconds each morning to think up (or even write down) some of the things that you're grateful for. This keeps your focus on abundance (*what you have*) versus scarcity (*what you don't have*).
2. Realize that writing isn't a competitive sport. No one ever "wins." If you feel the need to compare, then compare yourself to yourself. Note how you've grown. Recognize what you've achieved. Appreciate the journey you're on.
3. If you catch yourself asking "*What's in it for me?*" try instead to ask "*What can I do for others today?*" This puts the emphasis on giving versus taking. That's a great start to flipping your mindset and turning challenges into opportunities.

If all else fails and you're still tormented by the little green monsters of envy, consider that Helen Keller said, "Instead of comparing our lot with that of those who are more fortunate than we are, we should compare it with the lot of the great majority of our fellow men. It then appears that we are among the privileged."

If you're like me, you came to writing because it brought you joy. Focus on that – the writing, the joy-making part. The rest will eventually fall into place. **W**

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# MAKING MUCH OF THE MOMENT

A guide to the  
micro-memoir.

By Beth Ann Fennelly

Yet I was enjoying those snippets. In fact, writing them was giving me the same pleasure I'd gotten from fiction, poems, and essays. I began to consider that maybe I *was* writing – but in a form I hadn't recognized as writing. These little clusters of sentences: What if they weren't supposed to “add up to something” but instead *were* something? What if they were exactly the size they were meant to be? I began to page through my jottings. Some were simply memories that seemed to hold more than themselves. Some were quirky observations. Some were tiny scenes, bits of overheard conversations that, with the surrounding noise edited out, seemed to reverberate. I called these little flash creative nonfiction pieces (the shortest were one sentence, the longest a few pages) “micro-memoirs.” Labeling them allowed me to write more of them, and relax into the joys of them. Unlike the novel, micro-memoirs were low-stakes. If one failed – well, so what? Throw it away, all 30 precious words of it, and write another. Unlike the historical novel, these required no research. And, after spending so much time in the heads of characters, my own head, my own experiences, seemed newly fresh.

And so now I have a book coming out in October, *Heating & Cooling: 52 Micro-Memoirs* (W. W. Norton). When writer pals hear about my project, they're intrigued. “It sounds fun!” they say. “I want to try one!” they say. Guess what? It *is* fun. Want to try one? Read on.



After finishing my last book – a novel I co-wrote with my husband – I planned to get right back on the saddle and begin another novel. I mean, sure, first I'd relax for a week or two, indulge our kids with movie marathons and lazy-morning pancakes, attend to the household repairs, and catch up on correspondence, but then I'd commence a Big New Project.

The relaxing part went off without a hitch. But that reascension-to-the-saddle part was giving me pains. My brain seemed cored of the Big and New. Weeks went by and I wasn't writing anything besides little personal jottings in my notebook. My husband tried to comfort me: *You've just spend four years researching and writing a novel; you're probably still processing.* And I reassured myself with something my teacher Miller Williams once told me: “You can't get pregnant when you're pregnant.”

But when my pregnancy entered its fifth trimester, I began to get a little panicky. Maybe I should try to return to my first love, poetry. But the poems wouldn't come out and play. The essay form, always fruitful between projects, also abandoned me. All I was writing was those scribbles in my notebook, strange little snippets of my life.

## TEN TIPS FOR TINY TRUTHS

Having practiced the form for a bit now, I'd like to offer some thoughts.

### Micro-memoirs...

1. ...Need titles that do heavy lifting. Titles have more impact in short pieces, simply because they take up a bigger percentage of the word count. Further, we've all had the experience of being halfway through a novel or memoir and realizing we've forgotten the title; when a piece is bite-sized, the title lingers like an aftertaste during your entire reading experience. Let it contribute to your meaning-making.
2. ...Can make great use of humor, because pieces tend to be trimmed of excess exposition, and so their bones are more visible. What other form features elements stripped of all but the necessary details? The joke. Like jokes, micro-memoirs succeed or fail based on timing; timing, which is created through the amount and order of information in balance with silence. Note that while micro-memoirs can be humorous, they need to be more than a joke. They need to deepen, not cheapen, upon re-reading.
3. ...Make writing more like play, because micro-memoirs privilege discovery. They can be more like found poems in this way; you arrive at them instead of whittling away at them.
4. ...Teach compression, a valuable, transferable skill. Writing tiny helps us when we return to the sprawl of longer forms, because we're better able to recognize filler or description that doesn't serve the narrative.
5. ...Invite risk taking because they have low stakes. They liberate us from the pressure to produce something great, and therefore might trick us into producing something great. Feeling blocked? Challenge yourself to write 60 one-sentence memoirs in an hour. Maybe 59 are garbage. Who cares? That 60th is a keeper.

*Continued on page 34* ⇨

### The moving parts of the micro-memoir

A true hybrid, the micro-memoir strives to combine the extreme abbreviation of poetry, the narrative tension of fiction, and the truth-telling of creative nonfiction. The form might be considered a subset of the larger category of "flash nonfiction," but it's hard to draw strict lines here, because the recent proliferation of boundary-busting work is accompanied by a proliferation of terms – Anne Carson's "short talks," J. Robert Lennon's "anecdotes," Sarah Manguso's "aphorisms," James Richardson's "ten-second essays:" all of these could at times be called "micro-memoirs."

At its most basic, a micro-memoir is written in sentences, drawn from personal experience, and strives to create a world in as few words as possible. How many words is the upper limit? That, too, isn't uniformly agreed on. Dinty W. Moore, the energetic writer and editor who's done more for short-form nonfiction than anyone else, accepts essay submissions of 750 words or less for his online magazine, *Brevity*, so that might be a helpful guideline. But some great examples of the form are much, much shorter. Amy Hempel's "Memoir," for example, reads in its entirety: "Just once in my life – oh, when have I ever wanted anything just once in my life?"

Before we discuss further what micro-memoirs are, it might be useful to discuss what they're not: fragments. Micro-memoirs aren't slivers of a

bigger creation. They're designed to stand alone; they are, as Lia Purpura writes in her *Brevity* craft essay "On Miniatures," "workable things on very small scales" and therefore "radically self-sufficient."

Nor are micro-memoirs excerpts of, or failed attempts at, longer essays. The size of the prose is the size of their thinking, perfectly realized. One doesn't read a great micro-memoir and think, "Wow, I'd love to see the fuller version of that," in the same way one doesn't see a hummingbird and wish it were an eagle. What a micro-memoir *doesn't* say is part of the way it makes meaning. As David Mamet writes, "Omission is a form of creation."

### Making a micro-memoir

One thing the micro-memoir is particularly suited for is an exploration of a moment, particularly a moment that seems small or unimportant, but, when viewed from the right perspective, with the right attention, reveals itself to be central to identity. What are the moments who make us who we are?

To find an idea the right size for a micro-memoir, consider your quirkiest memories. Forget about the big memories, like meeting

your beloved or witnessing a tragedy. We know why those events were important to us, and how they shaped us. Telling the story of how you met your beloved, while fun, is a neatly labeled anecdote. You don't discover something new about yourself while sharing it. So instead of the processed or oft-repeated, consider memories that you retain without understanding why.

Say you have a vivid image of your friend Kimiko driving away from your house with her green scarf rolled up in her car window, the fringe flapping. Why, given all of the things you've forgotten about that visit with your friend, does that idiosyncratic image linger in your hippocampus? To find out, stay in the moment. Tease out its emotional complexity. Perhaps you discover the memory carries some strange feeling of dread. Why? Because the scarf is the same color as the lime Jell-O that was sitting on Kimiko's hospital tray, untouched, the last time you saw her? Or because her breezy wave reminded you of your son's first bike ride after the training wheels were removed, his wave that caused his bike wreck? Or did you remember the dancer Isadora Duncan, strangled when her long silk scarf was caught in the rear hubcaps of her convertible?

If this memory leads you into a complex cause-and-effect chain – which is to say, plot – maybe you're looking at the seeds of a short story or longer essay. But if the moment is dignified by white space – if it seems to grow in importance by not being subsumed in a larger narrative, if it doesn't want to be welded into the upside-down check mark of the Freytag triangle, then, friends, you have the makings of a micro-memoir. **W**

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**Beth Ann Fennelly** teaches in the MFA Program at the University of Mississippi, where she was named Outstanding Teacher of the Year. She's won grants from the N.E.A., United States Artists, and a Fulbright to Brazil. Her sixth book, *Heating & Cooling: 52 Micro-Memoirs*, will be published by Norton on Oct. 10.

6. ...Encourage tonal variation. While individual pieces are so short that they might only allow the expression of one nuance of the human register, they can vary widely in tone from one to another. Challenge yourself to embrace the full range of human emotions. Write some that are wistful, some wry, some poetic, some acerbic, some deliberately flat.
7. ...Provide a home for certain ideas, voices, or music that would be tiresome in anything longer. Also, because they're cushioned by white space, they can be intensely musical or conceptually demanding or deliberately shocking. It's not inconsiderate to exhaust the reader if you provide a rest.
8. ...Can find opportunities in technology. For example, *Narrative Magazine* includes an "iStory" in each issue – "a short, dramatic narrative, fiction or nonfiction, up to 150 words long," designed to be read on an iPhone screen. "Can you tell a true story in a single tweet?" challenges *Creative Nonfiction* editor Lee Gutkind. Writers who tag their 130-characters-or-less microessays with #cnftweet are considered for publication in the print magazine's "Tiny Truths" column.
9. ...Are modest. Perhaps subversively so. In her *Harper's Magazine* piece on aphorisms, "In Short," Sarah Manguso writes, "This cultural pressure to think big – to equate size with ambition – is especially burdensome for writers who cannot follow – or choose not to follow – in the footsteps of Great Men – who don't fit the Hemingway-Mailer-Roth-Franzen model." Micro-memoirs provide a model for those interested in running from "Go big or go home," running fast, with fleet sentences like streamers flying above our heads. Try that, Great Men.
10. ...Change the shape of your thinking. If you want to change your writing, change the size of your ideas. Enter the restriction of the small true story (essay written on a fortune cookie, a matchbox, a postcard) the way you'd enter a dollhouse: imaginatively, alive to the possibilities unlocked by radically shifting scale. Then, when you return to the bigger world, you see its expansive possibilities freshly.

## WANT MORE OF LESS?

### Here are some further resources:

- One of the most vibrant publishers of short forms, Rose Metal Press has published a *Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction: Advice and Essential Exercises from Respected Writers, Editors, & Teachers* (edited by Dinty W. Moore), featuring 26 writers examining the form and providing examples.
- *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of 8 Hybrid Literary Genres*, edited by Marcela Sulak and Jacqueline Kolosov, has a healthy section on short-form nonfiction with contributions by Brenda Miller, Ander Monson, Patricia Vigderman, Sarah Gorham, and Bret Lott.
- Judith Kitchen's popular anthologies of flash nonfiction include *In Short, In Brief, Short Takes, and Brief Encounters*.
- The Iota Conference on Campobello Island, New Brunswick, Canada (just over the bridge from Lubec, Maine), is "a celebration of the small, the brief, the miniature...Short forms deserve their own long weekend." The 2018 conference is set for August 15-18.

## NOW, YOUR TURN:

A prompt, an example, and a chance to be published!

In 2015, at the Sanibel Island Writing Conference, I attended a great craft talk on short-form nonfiction given by Leslie Jamison that ended with a writing prompt, and she's kindly agreed to let me share the prompt with you.

Jamison began by introducing the class to the concept, originating in the 16th century, of the *wunderkammer* – the cabinet (or room) of wonders, which held collections of interesting human-made artifacts, specimens of natural history, and treasures collected on expeditions. Wunderkammer were carefully curated and arranged to inspire awe (taxidermied alligators, drinking vessels carved from rhino horns) curiosity (narwhal tusks, intricate puzzles, or navigation tools), titillation (jade sculptures of unusual sexual positions), even fear (poison rings, shrunken heads).

Jamison challenged the class participants to explore the idea of the personal wunderkammer, a cabinet of wonders stocked with objects from their own pasts. “The idea is to remember objects that feel charged with emotional electricity,” she said, “ideally objects whose significance you haven't figured out, objects whose categories haven't yet been determined. In particular, I'd like you to focus on objects that feel dangerous – that might hold some kind of pain or explosive charge.”

Next, Jamison had us take out notebooks and create a list of five objects and list the emotional charge attached to each one. Then she had us select the most intriguing object from our list and

gave us some time to write a one-paragraph piece.

Here's what I wrote in that Florida classroom, with the noise of scribbling pens all around me, and a buff gecko doing pushups on the window by my shoulder:

### Small Fry

I didn't have a grandpa, so I studied my friend Lara's. He dozed before the TV in his wool cardigan. He walked without lifting his feet from the floor. Sometimes in the afternoon he shuffled to the hall closet, ducked inside for a moment, then shuffled back to the couch. Lara's eyes didn't swerve from *Mighty Mouse*, but I had to know what Gramps was doing in that closet, I had to. The next time he *shh-hed* open the door, I snuck up behind him. He whirled around, wild-eyed, but when he saw it was me, only me, he smiled. He allowed me to witness him easing from a coat pocket a palm-sized white paper bag, McDonald's. He noiselessly uncrimped the top, spread its mouth with his thumb and index finger, reached in and pinched out a single fry. I understood that he was sneaking it. I understood that we must hide things from the mommies and the daddies. He held it out to me, a tiny sword, cold as if pulled from the heart of a stone.

### THE CONTEST

Give Jamison's assignment a try. Consider objects from your personal history as potential entries in your wunderkammer. Stock your cabinet with items from your past that inspire curiosity, awe, titillation, and fear. Review the items on your shelves and then choose one to realize more fully. Don't go for the obvious – evoking danger through a knife, for example. Select an object with an unexpected powerful emotional charge and tell its story in one paragraph.

Are you ready to let someone peek into your wunderkammer? If so, submit your previously unpublished one-paragraph (no longer than 200 words) micro-memoir to *The Writer* by emailing it as an attachment to [tweditorial@madavor.com](mailto:tweditorial@madavor.com) with the subject line “Micro-Memoir Contest” by Aug. 8<sup>th</sup>. (One entry per writer, please.) I'll judge the finalists, and the winner will be published in our December 2017 issue!

# Salamander

This magazine seeks diverse voices, resilient writers, and transformative content.



**T**he salamander, in ancient Greek and Roman mythology, can live in fire. When Jennifer Barber decided to start a literary magazine in 1992, she found the animal's rumored resilience appealing. "I thought it was a good metaphor for what writers do, how they deal with their difficult experiences and transform them into art," she says.

*Salamander Magazine* publishes poetry, fiction, and memoir. The publication also sponsors events and readings, mostly in the Boston area.

Barber and her staff look for highly



accomplished work from writers who might not yet be household names but who deserve a wider audience. From the first issue, they've had a strong com-

mitment to publishing female writers.

"When I started the journal such a long time ago, there weren't very many literary journals with women editors," Barber says. "And I wanted to make sure we had a great representation of women writers."

## Tone, editorial content

*Salamander's* guidelines indicate editorial interest in literary works with the power to transform. "Transformative," Barber explains, "in the sense that you read a piece and feel changed by it, and it stays in your mind."

She points to a story in the June issue of *Salamander* as an example. Titled “My Father’s Teeth,” it’s Marsha Pomerantz’s memoir piece exploring the intersection between her father’s life as an immigrant and her own life. Pomerantz begins:

“My father saved his teeth by lying through them. Somewhere on the border between Russia and Poland, pines and rifles, in the nineteen-teens, he went off to the woods with two other boys to visit the village horses hidden there from soldiers, who would commandeer anything from anybody, but especially from Jews.”

“It’s a personal history, but it has a larger historical background of leaving the old country and starting a new life, having to acquire a language,” Barber says. “It made me think a lot about father-daughter relationships – the ways they succeed, the ways they fail. It uses the teeth as a metaphor for a lot of different things.”

### Contributors

Past contributors to *Salamander* include Afaa Michael Weaver, Yiyun Li, Naira Kuzmich, Sonya Larson, Carys Davies, Siobhan Fallon, Chase Twichell, and Maura Stanton. James Winter has a short story called “The Watchers” in the June issue. It follows the life of a teenager in Ahmedabad, India, surviving with his girlfriend in a slum shanty, without money for food. The main character is haunted by the thought that men are going in search of vulnerable people and stealing their organs for science.

“The story is beautifully done,” Barber says, “because you can never tell if this is a reasonable fear based on reality or based on rumors that he’s heard. It’s a very intense piece.”


The same issue contains a short story by Mary Crawford. Titled “Vibiana in the Half-Court Set,” it’s about a girl and

her best friend – eighth graders on a Los Angeles-area high school basketball team in 1987. “Much more than that, it’s about the families of the two girls,” Barber says. “The main character is the daughter of Irish immigrants. Her best friend is the daughter of an African-American father and a Korean mother. It’s a really wonderful piece on a lot of levels, with an awful lot going on in it that makes you stop and think.”

She notes that when we talk as a society about identity, we often discuss a particular ethnicity or race as if each category were entirely separate. She appreciates the intersectionality that informs Crawford’s story. “If your mother’s Korean and your father’s African American, your identity is going to be complex,” she says, “and your best friend trying to understand your identity will have a more layered appreciation of it.”

### Advice for potential contributors

Barber believes memoir, in particular, presents structural challenges because authors are drawing directly on their own experiences. “It’s difficult to know where to start and where to end, and what kind of structure you’re going to apply to the piece,” she explains. “Successful memoir is very highly shaped and structured. It needs to have all of the artistic qualities of a poem, say, or a short story. Everything that’s there is completely necessary to the overall design.”

She suggests that writers show their work to trusted friends or writing colleagues and solicit feedback before they submit. “Each work has its own timeline, and it can be very hard for the writer to judge when a piece is finished,” she says. “Usually, it’s helpful to let a little time go on between when you think a piece is finished and when you send it.” 

Contributing editor Melissa Hart is the author of two published memoirs and the YA novel *Avenging the Owl* (Sky Pony, 2016).

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# Writing Down the Soul

This intense, nine-month certificate program combines the science of psychology with the art of memoir writing.

**Y**ou've lived a full and rich life, and now you want to write about it. How much of a commitment are you willing to make in order to learn how to craft a memoir that truly reveals your inner self?

Unless your answer is "as much as it takes," then Pacifica Graduate Institute's Writing Down the Soul probably isn't for you.

The Santa Barbara-based, nine-month, non-MFA certificate program is an intensive immersion covering multiple aspects of memoir writing. Though most of the program is spent working online, students also have two on-campus residencies: once at the beginning of the program and once again at the end.

Why devote so much time and thought to this particular genre? "There's a quote by Carl Jung where he talks about one of the most important questions that you have to answer for yourself: 'What myth are you living?'" says Dr. Jennifer Selig, an oft-published author and one of the three instructors coordinating and running the Writing Down the Soul program. "Part of what we do in the program is try to help our participants discover the mythic patterns of their lives."

According to Selig, Pacifica is the only school offering Ph.D.s in depth psychology in the United States, and from that psychological emphasis, the memoir program emerged.

"Someone said that memoir has been called the genre of our age... There's a real connection to depth

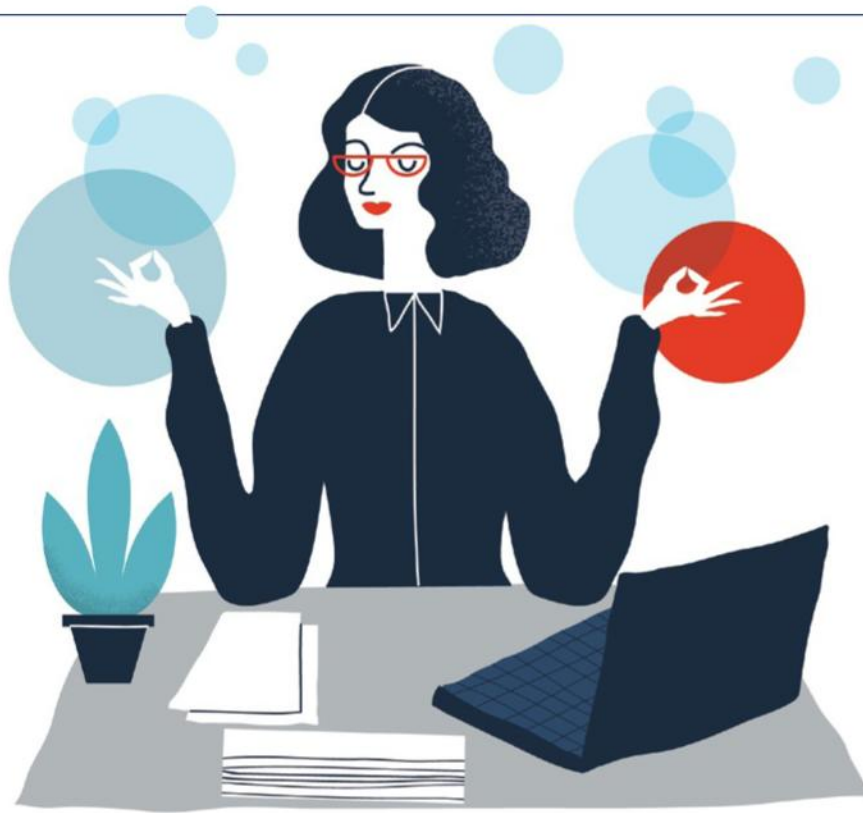
psychology, because depth psychology is very interested in how people story their lives and the ways that the stories that we tell are both functional and dysfunctional to our own psyches. Depth psychology believes that we live our lives in mythic and archetypal patterns, and that the memoirs that do the best and are the most evocative are ones that focus on the particularities of someone's story, but also have an archetypal or mythological element so you can see yourself inside that story pattern. There are a lot of tools that we can bring from the [depth psychology] field into looking at our own particular stories."

Selig arrived at Pacifica as a depth psychology student in the late '90s and joined the faculty in that department in 2005. "I'd personally never been drawn to using depth psychology to become a therapist," she says, "but there's something obviously very therapeutic and healing about creativity and writing in particular. And part of my background is as a creative writer." She created a Master's program called Engaged Humanities in the Creative Life at Pacifica, and from that program Writing Down the Soul was born.

So why would a student choose this path rather than the more traditional MFA?







“The distinction I would make with an MFA program is that we are not here to critique the writer, per se,” Selig says. “Certainly we have an aspect of that online, and every month there’s a feedback group where you submit some pages and get some feedback on it. But it’s not just about judgment and critical assessment of someone’s work. It’s much more about the process of discovery and recovery, to a large extent, of a person’s own soul.”

As there is no academic reward for completing *Writing Down the Soul*, prospective students need not meet the same criteria that MFAs require: “There’s just the desire of the person to be in the program.” As a result, she says, “Our students – as all are who come to Pacifica – are an eclectic bunch. We have people in their 20s up until their 70s in the program now.”


“It’s been a real blessing to have this combination format,” Selig adds. She and co-presenters Dr. Maureen Murdock and Dr. Daphne Dodson focus on different components of the

program. “When we have students come onto campus for a long weekend, they are [studying] with Maureen, who’s written books on memoir and has written memoir herself. She works with the students [during] the first weekend and goes through the elements of memoir writing with exercises on the kinds of stories they might want to tell and what makes stories evocative. Daphne brings something unusual to the program in her work with memory. She did her doctoral dissertation on something she calls Imaginal Remembering, a way of going into a meditative space and allowing a memory to come up and then entering into the memory and walking around inside of it and working with it.”

The goals of the program are several, Selig says. “We hope they’ll become more conscious of new kinds of unconscious patternings in their lives. Certainly the potential for healing from some of the upset and the trauma of the past would be another goal. More self-awareness is another

one. I’m finding that people build community; there’s a sense of not being so alone – sometimes we get trapped in the past and feel we’re the only ones who’ve been through these things. There’s a real sense of healing inside community. We’re looking at how you take an idiosyncratic person’s story and make it more appealing.”

Often, Selig has found, students find truths about themselves from the beginning. “Even within the opening weekend there are lots of tears and lots of laughter,” she says. “Part of what happens from being online is that people share their stories and then other people come in and resonate with those stories and add their own. People are having insights left and right about their lives and their patterns. It’s really beautiful.”

*For information on Pacifica, its programs and retreats, visit [retreat.pacifica.edu](http://retreat.pacifica.edu).* 

Jeff Tamarkin is a freelance writer/editor. He lives in Hoboken, New Jersey, with his wife, novelist Caroline Leavitt.

# Write in the Sound

This casual conference is low-pressure, but in high demand.



Shannon Black

**T**he logo advertising the Write on the Sound conference in Edmonds, Washington, depicts a pen and pencil along with the front end of a ferry on the ocean with a seagull overhead. Attendees at the three-day conference on Puget Sound often arrive early or stay past the weekend to ride the Washington State Ferry over to Bainbridge Island or hike through the evergreens at local parks. The conference itself takes place in a historical elementary school building with a view of the Pacific, capping at just 275 attendees.

“It’s this wonderful intimate and casual atmosphere where people learn about writing and talk about the joy of writing,” says coordinator Laurie Rose. “The conference feels particularly easygoing to people who may be a bit new to writing and to the discovery process.”

Unlike many conferences, Write on the Sound doesn’t

incorporate pitch sessions with agents and editors. “We stay focused on the craft of writing, on learning new things without the pressures of having to sell a book and get an agent,” Rose says. “It’s not intimidating.”

## What you’ll learn

Classes run the gamut from writing believable dialogue and describing body language accurately to how to use setting to establish emotion. Attendees can delve into fiction, nonfiction, and poetry; they can also explore specific subgenres such as young adult novels, magazine articles, and science fiction and fantasy. A professional writing track includes information on platform-building, social media success, and the ins and outs of publishing.

Write on the Sound is so popular that it comes close to selling out within 72 hours, and the most desirable workshops



fill up fast. “We’re different in that you don’t just register to attend the conference,” Rose explains. “It’s more like when you register to attend college; we want you to sign up for the workshops you intend to take.” Those in the know check the website and sign up for the WOTS email list so that they can sign up as soon as registration opens (in 2017, it’s July 20). “For the most part, those who register within the first few days tend to get most, if not all, the sessions they want,” Rose says.

#### Featured presenters

Past keynote speakers include Natalie Goldberg, Anne Lamott, Tim Egan, and Rick Steves. In 2017, the keynote speaker is Kristin Hannah, author of the *New York Times* best-selling novel *The Nightingale*. Mary Buckham – author of the *USA Today* best-selling *Invisible Recruits* series – will teach a seven-hour class on Friday that pulls from her non-fiction books on the craft of active writing. There are several half-day workshops on Friday afternoon as well.

“One of the wonderful things about our conference is that it’s a step toward publication for a lot of our attendees,” Rose says. “From time to time, people

will come back and say that Write on the Sound gave them the confidence and tools to start on the path to self- or traditionally publishing.”

Attendees can mingle with each other and presenters on Saturday night at the conference, at “Dine around Edmonds” events, sponsored by members of the local writing community who reserve tables or banquet rooms at local restaurants. “They might put up a sign-up sheet for the Italian place, or post a sign-up sheet for the memoir writers to meet at another restaurant,” Rose explains. “It’s a fun networking opportunity for people, and a friendly way to get to know our picturesque little town.”

She notes that all the presenters are accessible and happy to talk to people after their session. “Most presenters attend the Saturday book signing reception, which is another great opportunity to connect,” she adds.

#### Advice for first-timers

Sign up for workshops that stray from your comfort zone. Rose loves those anecdotes involving attendees who took a children’s book writing class on a whim and didn’t expect to get much

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Write on the Sound

#### DATES:

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#### COST:

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#### LOCATION:

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#### CONTACT:

Laurie Rose, Conference Coordinator,  
wots@edmondswa.gov  
writeonthesound.com

out of it, but ended up with exciting new ideas. “If you end up having to select a session that is not your first choice, keep an open mind that you just might glean something unexpected and new to you,” she says. “We often receive feedback from attendees that they were pleasantly surprised to get something out of a session they thought had nothing to offer them. In other words, poetry might not be your thing, but you might pick up a tip or insight you can apply to your memoir or creative nonfiction work.”

At the end of the conference, she loves to see attendees walking away with new connections and information they can put into practice in their writing immediately. “I get a kick out of the people walking away beaming from ear to ear,” she says. “Their minds are full, and they might be exhausted after taking in so much information, but they’re so excited about what they’ve learned. I often hear people say, ‘I can’t wait to get home and start writing!’” **W**

Contributing editor Melissa Hart is a frequent conference presenter and an editor/consultant at Creator & Collector Services. Web: creatorcollector.com.

## Book publishers

You've been working on a manuscript for the next best-selling novel, and after years of hard work and revisions, you're ready to send it out. But all of the time you've spent on your manuscript won't matter much if you simply pop your masterpiece into the mail without thoroughly researching the press. Before you submit to a publisher, whether big or small, it's essential to make sure you've perfectly met their criteria.

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# Ian Purkayastha

**T**hough he's only in his mid-20s, Ian Purkayastha has found enormous success as one of New York's premier truffle brokers. Purkayastha supplies these elusive and valuable members of the fungus family to some of the finest restaurants in the city. In his memoir, *Truffle Boy*, he recounts his journey from a childhood filled with a love of food to struggling to make his mark in the competitive world of exotic food purveyors.

The book came about in an unusual way: Purkayastha had written some stream-of-consciousness reflections about his life that he thought might be the basis of a book some day. At a friend's book launch party, he met a literary agent who showed enthusiasm for Purkayastha's story. A book deal soon followed – and the same friend who hosted the launch party, Kevin West, went on to become a co-writer on *Truffle Boy*. The resulting memoir is part coming-of-age story and part truffle primer, complete with recipes and an exotic food glossary.

## Crafting a memoir

I did a lot of writing over a two-year period when I was living in New Jersey. I was living a sullen, anxiety-inducing lifestyle and writing a lot about what was happening at the time. Earlier parts were [written] from memory.

## Working with a co-writer

I took the lead in writing in the first draft, especially the more narrative passages. Together we'd go through and fine-tune. It was very hands-on for me. It was a joint, unified effort, where we would go back and forth, tweaking.



**In my everyday life, I'm pretty private and reserved, so the hardest part was taking personal emotion and putting it on the page and putting myself out there.**

## Writing routine

Typically, we would write [during] weekends and mornings. We formed a general outline for what the book would look like. There was a lot of traveling in Europe and Asia, doing research, and when we were driving on the way to a truffle plantation in Spain, the final outline came together. Seventy percent of the book was written two months before the deadline, and the last refining was done during the last month. Kevin stayed with me the last four weeks while we fine-tuned.

## Niche subjects

It's a subject matter I hope will find resonance with others. I've been so fortunate to hear positive feedback from others on the subject matter and my life. I hope the story will be an interesting read for others.

## Challenges as a first-time author

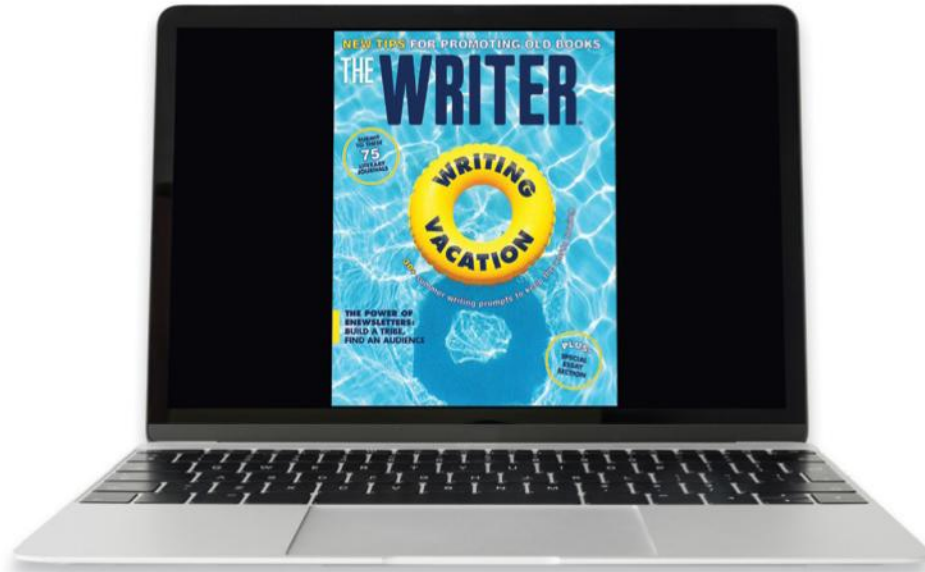
My vocabulary early on was pretty rudimentary. As I've matured, my vocabulary has gotten stronger, which helped with writing the book. My earlier writing wasn't as strong as what it is today. I was just messing around, trying to document different feelings in the moment.

I've never considered myself a strong reader or writer. When I was younger, I had some hardships with reading and writing, and I never thought of myself as someone who could pull this off. To a degree it was challenging. In my everyday life, I'm pretty private and reserved, so the hardest part was taking personal emotion and putting it on the page and putting myself out there. After reading those parts, I would always cringe. **W**

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

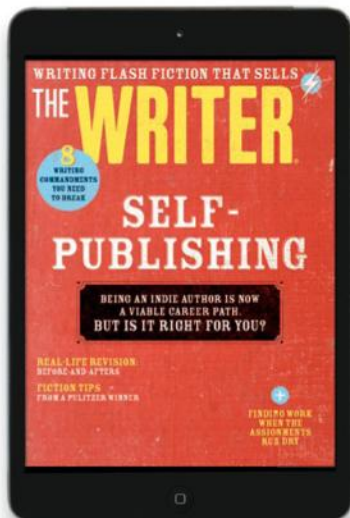
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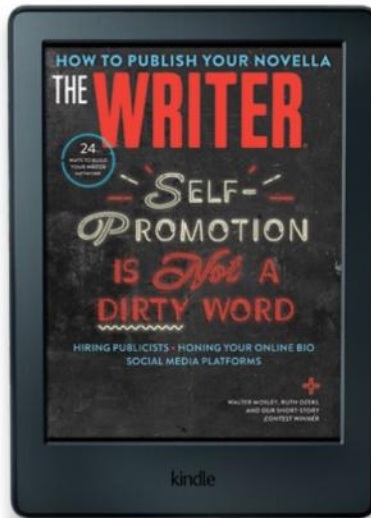
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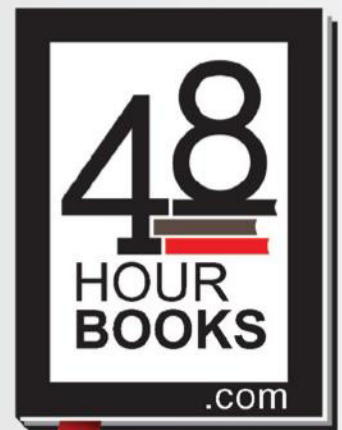
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