

WRITER'S DIGEST

Write a Standout **CHAPTER 1**

- **5 ESSENTIALS FOR EVERY STRONG BEGINNING**
- **HOOK THEM FROM THE FIRST: LINE, PAGE, SCENE**
- **THE SMARTEST WAYS TO BUILD CHARACTERS THROUGH BACKSTORY**
- **JUMP-STARTS FOR EVERY STORY: PROMPTS TO PUT YOUR IDEAS IN MOTION**



Dos & Don'ts for Writing From Multiple Points of View

WD INTERVIEW

Lisa Gardner

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The Chain of Awesomeness

It all starts with a memorable first line, followed by an attention-grabbing first paragraph. Here's how to build a strong first chapter, link by link.

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Countdown to a Great Chapter 1

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1 Don't Leave Me Hanging

Suspense maven Lisa Gardner (Page 40) shares bonus insights on the art of writing by the seat of your pants.

2 Sensory Overload

After learning of the challenges faced by our Short Story Competition winner (Page 48), take in the striking imagery of her winning piece, "The Vows."

3 Poetry in (E)motion

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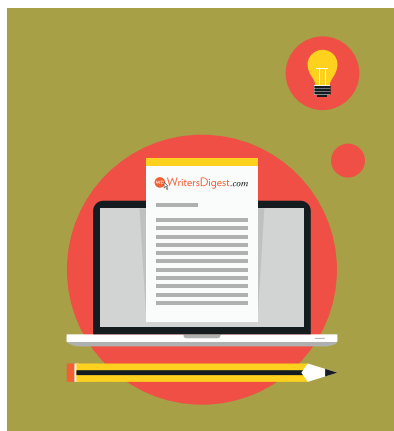
4 Everyone Likes a Good Scare

Bram Stoker Award–winner Jonathan Maberry (who advocates for writers helping writers on Page 16) offers up tips for thrilling readers with scary scenes in any genre.

To find all of the above online companions to this issue in one handy spot, visit writersdigest.com/aug-16.



PLUS: Polish your prowess with advice from the WD blogs!



WHAT ROMANCE HEROINES LACK

Would Charlotte Brontë approve of the way leading females in modern romance titles are portrayed? Author Kait Jagger provides five keys to make your heroine a complete, complex character. bit.ly/romanceheroinesWD

BOOK DEAL BEHIND THE SCENES

As she prepares for the 2017 release of her debut novel, *Almost Missed You*, WD's own Jessica Strawser pulls back the curtain on what happens in the months after a book contract is signed. bit.ly/behindthebookWD

WRITE FOR TEENS WITHOUT SOUNDING LIKE AN ADULT

Connecting with young adult readers begins with your voice. Kurt Dinan, high school English teacher and author of *Don't Get Caught*, offers 10 tips for authentic delivery. bit.ly/writewithteenvoiceWD

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Setting Your Story in Motion

To you, it probably would have looked ordinary. But to me, it was miraculous.

The laundry basket was positioned on the love seat as a makeshift basketball hoop. My 2-year-old daughter had joined my 4-year-old son in a giggly yet remarkably civilized game of taking a shot, running to where my husband

and I were sitting on the couch to distribute high fives, and then retrieving the ball to do it all again. For the first time I could remember, she didn't call out to us to lift her so she could get closer to the "net." No one pushed or went out of turn. Both kids played happily, on their own, for the better part of an hour while we watched. I waited for the moment I'd need to intervene, but it never came.

If you nurture your Chapter 1 from birth, if you lay the groundwork for free play and good behavior, you may find that one day, the same happens with your story: You've put it into motion, and now it's happily moving forward with a momentum of its own, making you proud. It might look effortless to your readers—in fact, done well, it probably should—but you'll think back to those early sleepless nights when every word was an unknown, and you'll know better.

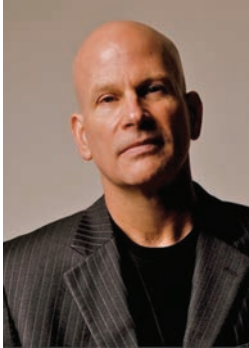
This issue is all about strong beginnings. Readers are discriminating—especially agents and editors, whose read piles are so big they must make judgments fast—and if we don't hook them from the very first scene, we risk losing them before the excitement of Act 2 ever gets going.

"The Chain of Awesomeness" (Page 24) unpacks what really makes a great first line, paragraph, page and onward, complete with plenty of examples from successful books. "Backstory From the Front" (Page 28) delves into perhaps the No. 1 warning we've heard about our opening pages—*Don't load them with too much backstory!*—in really looking at when and how we can introduce and paint fully realized characters effectively. "Countdown to a Great Chapter 1" (Page 32) highlights essential dos and don'ts for preparing your story for takeoff. And "Story Jump-Starts" (Page 36) is for anyone struggling with the best way to translate ideas or sparks of inspiration into the beginning of something wonderful.

In this issue's WD Interview (Page 40), suspense bestseller Lisa Gardner talks about how the secret of good writing can have everything to do with rewriting. So take heart that we have ample chances to improve the starts of our stories—and that if we take the time to get our most crucial of chapters right, our readers may reward us by riding along to the satisfying end.



CONTRIBUTORS



DAVID CORBETT (“Backstory From the Front,” Page 28) is the award-winning author of the writing guide *The Art of Character* and five novels, most recently *The Mercy of the Night*. His short fiction has been selected twice for *Best American Mystery Stories*, and his nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Narrative*, *Bright Ideas* and *Writer’s Digest*, where he is a contributing editor. Visit him at davidcorbett.com.

DINTY W. MOORE

Dinty W. Moore (“Character & Conflict in Personal Writing,” Page 58) is author of nine books, including *Dear Mister Essay*, *Writer Guy: Advice and Confessions on Writing*, *Love and Cannibals*; *Crafting the Personal Essay*; and the memoir *Between Panic & Desire*. A professor of non-fiction writing at Ohio University, Moore lives in Athens, Ohio, where he grows heirloom tomatoes and edible dandelions.



LISA TE SONNE (“Wordplay,” Page 10) and her husband possibilitated Charity Checks, gifts that help any nonprofit. She has written five books, most recently *The Great Outdoors: A Nature Bucket List Journal*, forthcoming in June. She’s floated weightless with cosmonauts while on assignment for *LIFE* magazine, written for an Oscar-winning film and Emmy-winning television series, and won the NATJA Gold Award for best destination travel writing.



DONNA BAIER STEIN (“Art for Modern Writers,” Page 8) is the author of *Sympathetic People*, *Sometimes You Sense the Difference* and PEN/New England Discovery Award–winner *The Silver Baron’s Wife*. Her work has appeared in *Ascent*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poet Lore*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Puerto del Sol* and more. A founding poetry editor at *Bellevue Literary Review*, she now publishes *Tiferet Journal*. Find her online at donnabaiersteinstein.com.



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YOU NEVER KNOW

In the movie *Working Girl*, Melanie Griffith says, “You never know where the big ideas could come from,” and I think this is one of the reasons I read so much (even more than I write). From books and magazines

“Thank you for a magazine with so many ideas that inspire.”

geared toward writing and inspiration I have gleaned idea after idea that gives me hope and helps me persevere in my writing craft.

Writer’s Digest is one of my favorites, not because an article tells me exactly what I want to hear every time, but because I run across little ideas within the articles that inspire me (either directly or indirectly) to write or to read on. This is an important way to keep the juices flowing. Thank you for a magazine with so many ideas that inspire.

Patrick Ryan
Gulfport, Miss.

SPOTTED ON TWITTER

Been reading my copy of the @WritersDigest mag today. Lot of good, thought-provoking articles & tips inside. Now to journal for a bit. @meganeparmerter

Enjoyed article @WritersDigest by @bailleyg about Jhumpa Lahiri. Very interesting & inspiring, thank you! @LynnSollitto

Thank you for making my 70 min bus ride tolerable, @WritersDigest!!! (The March/April issue is 🙌🙌🙌) @TheERRose

The challenges that Louise Esola faced in releasing *American Boys*, as explored in the March/April issue of @WritersDigest, were inspiring @shleyBdavis

“Stories take time and have their own schedules and we don’t control them, really.” —Jhumpa Lahiri #writersdigest @LeePorter

Look what I found in @WritersDigest: world building tips from agent @joanpaq w/ “Where Futures End” in the sidebar :) @parkerpeevy

For my birthday, I bought myself a writing boot camp for children’s books. Happy bday to me! @WritersDigest @LLeslie

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Art for Contemporary Writers

When the words won't flow, look to visual art for inspiration.

BY DONNA BAIER STEIN

A few years ago, I felt the need for a shift in my writing. I was tired of composing stories that had their seeds in incidents from my own life. Though I hadn't penned strictly autobiographical fiction, suffice it to say I'd exhausted the pipeline of personal experience. In desperate need of inspiration, I found it in an unlikely source: my office wall.

One afternoon, my gaze happened to linger upon a signed lithograph mounted above my desk. The print, titled *Spring Tryout*, is by Thomas Hart Benton—one of the most admired U.S. painters and muralists at the forefront of the Regionalist art movement (as well as a teacher and mentor to Jackson Pollock)—and depicts two boys: one riding a galloping horse across a field, and another who has just fallen off. In the distance stands a gray farmhouse with a single dark window on its second floor.

I opened my laptop and started describing what I saw:

The boy rode a dark horse across a field of yellow-star grass and olive-green shadows. A slip of a



stream, logs so recently cut their ends were white and circled with clear, brown rings—the stumps of broken branches protruding from their sides. Its head down in stride, the horse's ears pointed toward a gray farmhouse to the east, and to the left of that, low stalls and three spreading cherry trees blooming pink. On the side

of the house, a single dark window opened like an unseeing eye. Within, someone dreamed.

Over the next weeks I imagined more about the boys and the woman dreaming in the farmhouse. I researched what it might have been like to live in the Midwest in the 1940s. And in the process, I discovered that

the world of visual art is full of story ideas ripe for picking.

ART HISTORY

The literary term for describing in words what you see in a picture is *ekphrasis*. The practice can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, through the Renaissance and the works of the Romantic poets, all the way into literature of the 19th century. Typically, the word *ekphrastic* is applied to poetry. Consider Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Homer's vivid descriptions in *The Iliad*, or W.H. Auden's retelling of Homer's story in his own poem "The Shield of Achilles."

But fiction writers, too, can derive inspiration from physical works of art. Herman Melville uses ekphrasis in *Moby-Dick* when he purposefully describes a painting hanging on the wall of the Spouter-Inn:

But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant.

Taking the practice a step further, visual images can become actual prompts for an entire story or novel.

MODERN ART

You may be familiar with the movie *Girl With a Pearl Earring* or the novel it's based upon—the origins of which are in oil on canvas. Author

Tracy Chevalier wrote about the 17th-century painting of a beautiful girl by Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer. In her youth, Chevalier had bought a poster of the portrait, which found a place on the wall everywhere she lived. Intrigued by the expression on the subject's face, she imagined a young woman filled with conflicting emotions directed toward the painter. The resulting novel takes place in Vermeer's home, and centers on the troubles that ensue when a new servant girl is hired, becomes intimate with the painter, and eventually sits for him as a model.

Novelist Susan Vreeland takes a different ekphrastic approach in her book *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. The collection contains eight short stories starting with the modern-day owners of an

- Visit a local gallery
- Check out a book of art history from the library
- View a collection of poster prints online or in a store.

The old aphorism "a picture is worth a thousand words" is most often attributed to Arthur Brisbane, a famous newspaperman. In 1911, Brisbane urged members of the Syracuse Advertising Men's Club, "Use a picture. It's worth a thousand words." He believed in catching a reader's attention fast and forcefully. *Don't waste your time fumbling for words*, he was saying, *when an image can get the job done better*. Inadvertently, perhaps, Brisbane was setting up pictures and words as opposing forces. Ekphrastic fiction reunites the two, as a picture can actually *produce* a thousand words.

Next time you're ready to begin a new story, try seeking out a piece of art that speaks to you. Imagine the lives of the people portrayed.

imaginary Vermeer painting. The tales span centuries, reaching further and further back in time, right up to the moment of the painting's inception.

In the novella *A Catalogue of the Exhibition*, Steven Millhauser chronicles the fictional opus of a made-up, forgotten American master. He then has the story's protagonist describe the different paintings in vivid detail.

ART APPRECIATION

Whatever medium you choose—from painting to sculpture, pottery to pencil illustrations—art can trigger a story inside of you. Here are some ideas for finding your own ekphrastic story starter:

- Wander through a museum
- Browse an art collection online

In my case, I found Benton's artwork to be filled with stories begging to be told. In that first short story I described, I conceived lives for the horse-riding boys Benton had once decided to paint. I gave them a mother who was in an unhappy marriage, a father with anger issues, and neighbors who'd known the boys' mother when she was a young, romantic girl.

Next time you're ready to begin a new story, try seeking out a piece of art that speaks to you. Imagine the lives of the people portrayed. As Henry David Thoreau once said, "This world is but a canvas for our imagination."

Donna Baier Stein is the author of Iowa Fiction Award Finalist *Sympathetic People* and PEN/New England Discovery Award-winner *The Silver Baron's Wife*.

Wordplay

BY LISA TE SONNE

When I was growing up, words seemed to be magic wands, flying carpets, shooting stars and even springboards for mental aerobatics. My father gave us clues at dinner so we could guess at a word: “Your mother and you children are this. Your mother and I are not. You children and I are this, too.” (The answer: *consanguineous*, meaning “related by blood.”)

He taught English while in graduate school, but an academic career was not his bridge to literature. My maverick mother was the youngest section editor at the *Los Angeles Times* and met daily morning deadlines with no time for writer’s block. I like being consanguine with both of them.

When I learned the word *eclectic*, I used it to fill in the blank for forms that asked for my religion. I delighted at the idea of *serendipity*, gained during a dinner guessing game, though I was less thrilled to learn the word *urinate* from my father while playing Scrabble on a rainy day.

Words and I shared other unpleasanties, too. I wept when my father read my school paper and tried to gently explain that not every noun can be turned into a verb or adjective, and not every verb has a noun counterpart. This seemed tragically limiting. When I was frustrated not to know of a word for what I wanted to describe, my father told me that ultimately, for a great writer, “Nothing is ineffable.”

My parents encouraged me to use my imagination in writing, but *not* in grammar and spelling. Until I learned to be more of a conformist for the sake of clarity, I was known to write across the top of my papers a quote by Thomas Jefferson: “I have nothing but contempt for anyone who can spell a word only one way.”

I also learned through experience that fancy polysyllabic words are not always the best way to communicate. If others don’t know what a word means, how can you convey a thought? When I worked on the high school newspaper, I was told to assume, as a rule of thumb, that readers have an eighth-grade education.

Still, I loved collecting words for myself—foreign words that have no English equivalents, words with intriguing etymologies. I bought myself the Oxford English Dictionary: two thick green volumes, complete with a magnifying glass because the print is so small. From those treasured tomes, I learned each word has a pedigree and journey.

One day, when I was older, I looked up the word *possible* to see where it came from. Next to it was *possibilitate*, meaning “to render possible.” How could we not still use this word? What did it say about us that this action verb was dormant? Five syllables may be a bit much for common



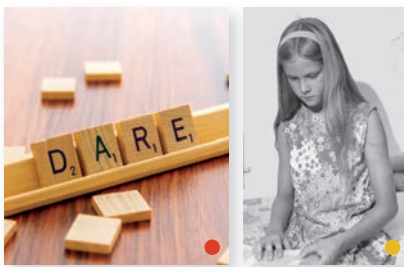
usage, but still—the *meaning* of it! The call to live life creatively and kindly!

I became a crusader, enlightening people to this powerful verb as I wrote for PBS, *National Geographic* and Walt Disney Imagineering. As a one-word evangelist, I garnered some enthusiastic responses, but little following—until I met the man who would become my husband. He even turned *possibilitate* into a noun on our first date and suggested we be “possibilitators” together.

Fortunately, in this one case, my father approved of a verb being turned into a noun. Today, my husband and I happily edit each other’s writing to possibilitate a better version—just a part of our joint efforts to seek serendipity and eclecticism happily ever after.

There are still some things that are ineffable to me, however—such as the power of words to invigorate the world with their savory nuances.

Lisa Te Sonne is an author, journalist and winner of the NATJA Gold Award for best destination travel writing. She hopes her best writing is still ahead, and wishes there were a word for such an aim.



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Life After Life

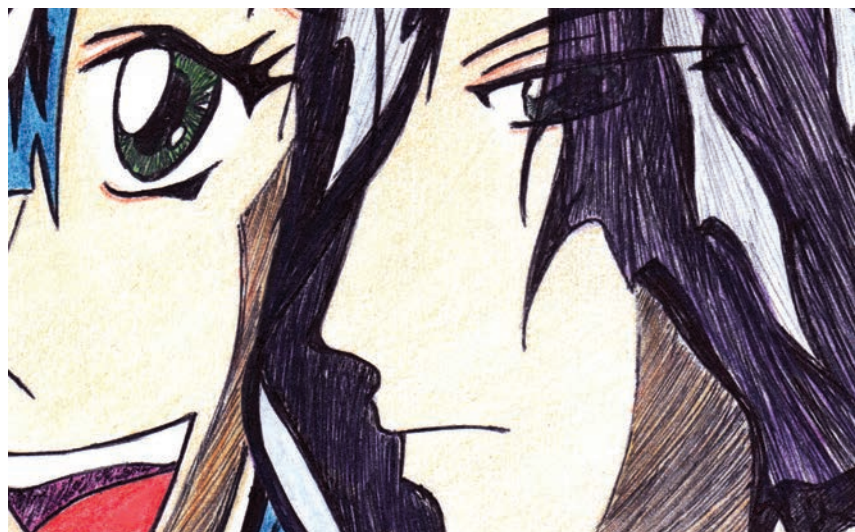
Fan fiction can be a fantastic playing ground for storytelling—or it can become a crutch that keeps you from work of your own. Here's how to leave a beloved world behind and set out into the great unknown.

BY GIL SEGEV

My name is Gil and I am a fan-fiction writer. Correction: *recovering* fan-fiction writer. At the height of my yearlong career, I had hundreds of dedicated readers visiting my Tumblr page daily, waiting for my next story about our collective favorite young adult fantasy series, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* by Rick Riordan. After all, what else are older-than-average devout fans to do while waiting for the next book? Seeing responses to my writing mere minutes after I finished a draft provided a real high—especially when my own in-progress (or, well, no-longer-in-progress) novels seemed so ... unimportant.

I was not alone in my secret hobby. The *Percy Jackson* fandom alone has more than 67 thousand fan-written titles on the online database FanFiction.net, ranking third after *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* (with 218,000 and 737,000 fan-written titles, respectively). Forget the number of entries for a moment and think of the readership required to support this community—what a marketing executive wouldn't give! Clearly, a large number of aspiring writers partake in this mostly underground activity instead of (or in addition to) publishing the traditional way. So, what *is* the mass appeal of writing fan fiction, anyway?

The protagonist of Rainbow Rowell's bestselling novel *Fangirl*—obsessive fan-fiction blogger Cath—illuminates the built-in audience appeal of “fan fic” for Rowell's more mainstream readers.



In the book, the passion of Cath's online fan base nearly rivals that of the actual author of the series she's writing about—a stark contrast to how most young novelists start out building a readership from zero.

But there's more to it than instant results. Think to your last fiction project—how agonizing world-building can be, how painstaking the effort of crafting those elaborate subplots. This and all the other hard work that goes into nursing a story to life has already been done for you when you write fan fiction.

Beyond the practicalities, there's romance in writing about characters you know and love. Did the finale of a series not end the way you think it should've? You can give it a new resolution. Did that fictional couple break up too soon for you? You can “ship” them back together. *Percy Jackson* and

his friends roamed free of Riordan's framework in my mind, and writing about them was a way to keep the adventure from winding down in between his installments.

Still, despite all the benefits, something important was missing from my fan-fiction pursuit: cash.

Those who write for readers who enjoy it, naturally, hope to earn monetary compensation for their work. But derivative works such as fan fiction (unauthorized sequels, in other words) are widely considered to infringe copyright and therefore typically cannot be sold commercially (though there is hardly a consensus on the legality of the issue). Many authors are kind enough to turn a blind eye to free online fan-fiction communities, but if a writer charged money for stories starring someone else's characters, there could be trouble. It's a tricky

hobby to defend—even for esteemed law professors such as Georgetown University’s Rebecca Tushnet, who is spearheading a case for the Organization for Transformative Works nonprofit.

I’d had my practice writing in someone else’s world. The time had come to get up the courage to pursue a writing project wholly my own. In June 2015, with a heavy heart I announced to my followers that I was leaving fan fiction, took down the content and turned my attention to original works at long last.

At first, I found myself utterly terrified of the empty page, struggling to apply to my own work what I’d learned about storytelling. But eventually I waded through the mire, and I’ve since completed a first draft of a YA novel currently in the editing stages.

Here are the lessons I learned—for others stranded in fan-fiction limbo:

1. THE WORLD IS NOT YOUR STAGE (YET).

I had to remind myself that I was no longer writing for a pre-existing audience. Sure, I wanted someone to read my novel someday and find it worth her time, but when you’re striking out on your own, you write because you *believe in the story you want to tell*. Don’t be disheartened in saying goodbye to the instant gratification of responses from readers at the ready. Be liberated. This is your world now, and you can do as you like.

2. RECOGNIZE WHAT WORKED IN YOUR FAVORITE SERIES.

Starting out, I worried that my characters would fall flat without a pre-written five-part history informing their every action. So I went back to the root of it all and studied the qualities I admired in Riordan’s protagonist, and found a winning combination of

juxtapositions: honorable bravery and leadership in the face of adversity, yet tenderness and compassion toward his friends. Respect and rebellion in balance, humor and seriousness when appropriate ... all universal qualities that could show themselves in endless combinations. Suddenly, I was buzzing with ideas for giving my protagonist flaws and complications of his own—though worlds apart from the character I was observing.

3. REMEMBER THAT YOU’RE STRIVING FOR SOMETHING MORE NOW.

When I felt truly overwhelmed by the weight of creating something that would eventually have to stand on its own feet, I reminded myself that ultimately I would have the potential to be financially rewarded for all this hard work—as well as more broadly recognized for something that was mine and mine alone. Realizing this was the first step toward a professional, *legal* career made it easier to leave my old self behind and aspire to greater goals.

If you’re one of the many writers immersed in fan fiction—how comfortable it can be when you’re caught up in it, how satisfying seeing your work posted can feel—but contemplating the less welcoming but ultimately less limiting world of traditional publishing, ask yourself this: How do you want to grow as a writer? Are you content to live in somebody else’s (copyrighted) shadow, or would you rather craft a world that might one day inspire others to mimic it themselves? There’s no one right answer, and that choice isn’t always easy. But no one can write your future but you.

Gil Segev is a freelance writer, blogger, poet, author and the editor of the beauty reviews website Nosegasm.com. He resides in Toronto.

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The Winners of the 2015 WD Poetry Awards

BY CHELSEA HENSHEY

The best poetry elicits reverberations that can be felt far beyond the page. Such is the case with Ruth Elizabeth Morris' villanelle "Inheritance," which stood out from more than 2,200 poems in a multitude of styles to take home the grand prize for the 2015 *Writer's Digest* Poetry Awards. She will receive \$1,000 and a copy of the 2016 *Poet's Market*.

"The first thing about 'Inheritance' that stood out for me was the voice that hooked me from the opening stanza," *Poet's Market* editor and final-round

judge Robert Lee Brewer says. "The story between a daughter and mother—and what is passed down between the two—was engaging, too. To make such a successful poem using an established form, well, that's just icing on the cake."

The WD Poetry Awards calls for previously unpublished, original poems of 32 lines or fewer. The top 25 winners receive a copy of the 2016 *Poet's Market* (WD Books) and recognition on writersdigest.com.

To find out more, visit writersdigest.com/competitions.



"Inheritance"

BY RUTH ELIZABETH MORRIS

When I was 9, I tried on my mother's mastectomy bras.
I filled the pockets with Kleenex, posing in front of a mirrored door
to admire the curves I had created underneath my overalls.

In locker rooms my mother's phantom-breast was all I saw:
Afraid to be seen, I held a towel to hide my "budding orbs"
while she dared other women to look, removing her mastectomy bra.

Once, while her bra was still warm, I reached my small
fingers into the hidden pocket and removed the breast-form;
I held it to my chest—bee-sting nubbins!—beneath my overalls

and imagined the woman I would be when my training bra
was full. Everywhere my future-self went—gym, grocery, hardware store—
she was walking alone, wearing her mother's mastectomy bra.

When I graduated from college, I bought myself a pushup bra
and wore my sweater-stretchers like medals of honor,
thinking back to girlhood, playing bra-stuffed dress up in my overalls.

Lately, I stare at my nipples while they are still mine. I draw
red lines where the incisions will be, not sure what I will ask for
in the operating room. I hold my mother's mastectomy bras
and ask, whose breasts will I wear beneath my overalls?

THE TOP 10

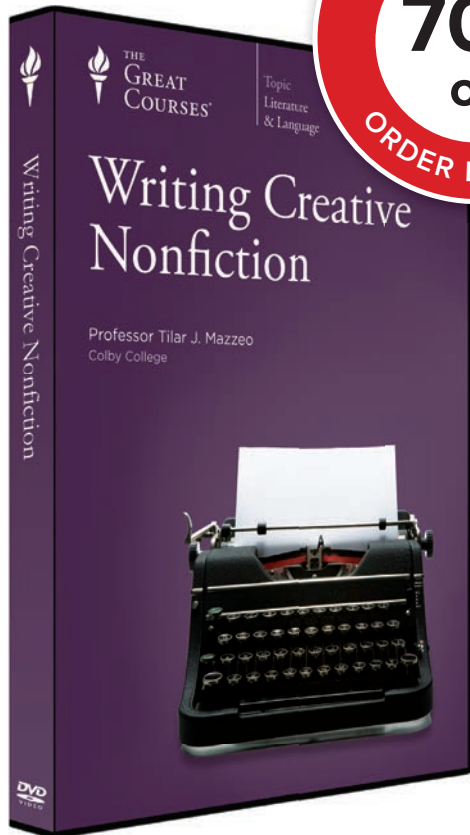
1. "Inheritance"
by Ruth Elizabeth Morris
2. "In Praise of Retiring in Pacific Standard Time"
by Carolyn Martin
3. "Hooked"
by Judith Marks-White
4. "PROTO MASS"
by Elisabeth Avery
5. "After Parking at Starbucks"
by Jed Myers
6. "Leaking You Like Resin"
by Lea Tsahakis
7. "DREAMY DRAW"
by Chuck Collins
8. "An Addendum to the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows (Baseball Edition)"
by Michael Berecz
9. "August"
by Margaret Sharp
10. "Childhood—1952"
by Judith Marks-White

THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

To read all 10 winning poems from WD's 2015 Poetry Awards, visit writersdigest.com/aug-16.



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Writers Helping Writers

Bestselling horror author Jonathan Maberry's message to fellow writers is anything but scary. Learn how as a young writer, he took a pair of legendary mentors' advice to heart—and how the rest of us can, too.

BY TYLER MOSS

Jonathan Maberry has no reason to fear being typecast by genre. *The New York Times* bestselling author and five-time Bram Stoker Award–winner has published books, short stories and articles in nearly every category imaginable, including science fiction, horror, fantasy, thriller, mystery, young adult and Western.

In addition to editing anthologies (including the recent *X-Files: Trust No One*, based on the revamped hit television show), penning the popular Big Scary Blog and co-hosting the pop-culture podcast “Three Guys With Beards” with Christopher Golden and James A. Moore, Maberry is a strong advocate for writing communities and mutual support networks—a sermon he preaches at length to crowds at writing conferences across the country.

Maberry took a brief break from his rigorous writing and speaking schedule to chat with WD from his home in Del Mar, Calif.

You keynote many conferences spreading a message about writers helping other writers. How did you come to feel so passionate about this approach?

When I was 12 I had the good fortune to meet and get to know several top science-fiction writers, including [the bestsellers] Ray Bradbury and Richard Matheson. Both of these

legendary writers were incredibly kind, generous and patient with me. Over the course of the three years I knew them, [they] advised me on both the craft of writing and the business of publishing. They recommended I learn both and become skillful at each so that I could more effectively live the dream of being a professional writer. At the same time, they cautioned me to always be generous and helpful to other writers. Bradbury said, “None of us—not one person in this entire business—became successful without help.” They also warned me to be cautious of the negative propaganda that limits a lot of writers. Matheson said that I'd encounter the common lie that creative people are naturally bad at business. They pointed out that since many writers had become successful despite the same obstacles we all face, it implied that solutions must exist. Once learned, they said, these solutions should be shared. After all, what good is ever accomplished by seeing our colleagues crash and burn, or waste their own time by doing things the wrong way?

I took that to heart. I'm mindful of the value of the lessons I learned from them, and from other good-hearted people I've met. At the same time, I have taken negative encounters as learning experiences rather than letting myself become mired in regret, anger and grudge-holding.



During the economic downturn I saw two main camps emerge from the writing community. One camp apparently believes that if writers help other writers, then the people they help are the ones who will take what few opportunities are out there. That is fear-based thinking, and it is counterproductive.

The other camp—to which Bradbury and Matheson belonged, and I am a resident—believes that if writers help each other, then more good books will get written and sold, more readers will be drawn to this bounty, and all of publishing will prosper. I like that camp. There are more kids in the playground and more toys to play with.

Does this mentality apply to writers of all levels?

Positive thinking is simply good business. A positive attitude is more

attractive to potential collaborators, editors, agents, booksellers, readers and reviewers. I've been invited into anthologies, speaking engagements [and more] as much because of my positive "let's all share" attitude as for my writing. Any writer who establishes a personal and career brand that is inclusive, open, nonjudgmental and fair, but who also understands the nature of the commercial side of publishing, is a safer, saner (and likely more profitable) bet. That is as important when breaking into the business as it is for someone trying to maintain a viable brand as a working writer.

It's critical to make sure that all of a writer's social media reflects this brand. ... I've seen writers, including some close friends, sabotage themselves by becoming too political or by using their social media to elevate their status by climbing over their colleagues. That's bad form and it turns people off. Social media is the new business attire. Dress for success, not to shock and offend.

How does your involvement in *The Liars Club* fit in with this message of community?

The Liars Club is a group of professional writers I co-founded with fantasist Gregory Frost when I lived in Philadelphia. Our original goal was to form a group that would be a mutual support network for writers we knew. But during the economic downturn we shifted that focus outward. We did a lot of parties and events in support of brick-and-mortar bookstores and libraries, and held fundraisers for literacy foundations. Our anthology, *Liar Liar*, was a fundraiser.

Around the same time, I began a series of monthly gatherings called the Writers Coffeehouse. These were

free, three-hour networking sessions open to writers of any kind and every level, from beginner to bestseller. I later brought *The Liars Club* in to help me facilitate these meetings because they exploded from half a dozen people to about a hundred per session. We expanded outward, setting up new Writers Coffeehouses in the Philly area, and after I moved to California a couple of years ago, I expanded it further by establishing a new one at Mysterious Galaxy Books in San Diego. Then, as I began doing a lot of keynote speeches and talking

"If writers help each other, then more good books will get written and sold, more readers will be drawn to this bounty, and all of publishing will prosper."

about the power of the writers community, I was approached by other writers who wanted to do the same thing in their city. Now we have a slew of them, and more opening all the time. No one has to register, there are no fees, and no one gets paid. It's all about writers helping writers without asking for anything in return.

The sessions are great. The first hour is usually built around the pros in the group sharing info on the latest deals, events, news and so on in publishing. Then we open [the floor] up to questions. We talk conventional and indie publishing, we talk about pitching, we talk craft, and we talk about whatever else anyone wants to talk about.

Meanwhile, you're such a prolific writer. What does your process look like?

I was trained as a news reporter, so I [was able to develop] good work



DON'T BE SCARED

Maberry shares secrets for writing successful horror scenes, and more about creating anthologies, at writersdigest.com/aug-16.

habits. I'm fortunate enough to be a professional writer, so this is my day job. I usually write eight hours per day, four in the morning and four in the afternoon, with a break in between. I write between 2,000 and 4,000 words per day—less when I'm editing, more when I'm closing

in on a deadline. I write three to five novels per year, in multiple genres. I plot out my books but also allow for organic changes. I write about two dozen or more short stories per year, and usually some comics for Marvel, IDW or Dark Horse. I am never bored and am having an insane amount of fun.

For the first 25 years of my career, I was a part-time magazine feature writer. [During that time I published] nonfiction books, textbooks, greeting cards and other stuff. Then in 2004 I wrote my first novel, *Ghost Road Blues*. I'm now writing my 25th and have seven more sold [and] waiting to be written.

I'm an active participant in my career. This is not just my craft, it's also my business and I follow Matheson and Bradbury's advice by doing my best to be good at both.

Tyler Moss is the managing editor of *Writer's Digest*.

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ON THE (REJECTION) RECORD

"I love my rejection slips. They show me I try."

—Sylvia Plath

"Failures, repeated failures, are finger posts on the road to achievement."

—C.S. Lewis

"You have to know how to accept rejection and reject acceptance."

—Ray Bradbury

#CompleteThisTweet

We asked, and @WritersDigest followers on Twitter answered.

What are your #writerthemesongs?

Wait, there was an option besides "Eye of the Tiger"?
@KaetheSchwehn

"I get knocked down" ... but I get up again!
@RobinBezzerrides

"Say what you wanna say. Let the words fall out."
@SaraBareilles'
"Brave" @karenjoyalcober

Any @PearlJam bootlegs ignite my creative process. "Not one for faking the reeling is healing, he lets the records play."
@sadsworld

Classic jazz. Always. Nothing with vocals. (That's my cue to get up and take a quick break.)
@iswpw

"The Waiting" (Beta reader feedback, agent search, submission process, publication schedule ...)
#writerthemesongs
@JamesEGraham

Anything off the "Bat Out of Hell" album.
@JasonFlint

"You better lose yourself in the moment ..."
@moshoke

Depends on what I am writing.
#Music helps create a mood.
#writingtips @rjc411

"Strumming my pain with his fingers, singing my life with his words ..."
Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly"
@ernio

Anything early jazz like Ella Fitzgerald or Josephine Baker.
@thereelAlana

"The Fighter" by Gym Class Heroes.
"Every time you fall it's only making your chin strong."
@drgrahambooks

"Selected Ambient Works Vol 2" by Aphex Twin
@chadayeager

"The Snow Angel" by Mike Patton. You can hear it in the film "The Place Beyond the Pines"
@thereelAlana



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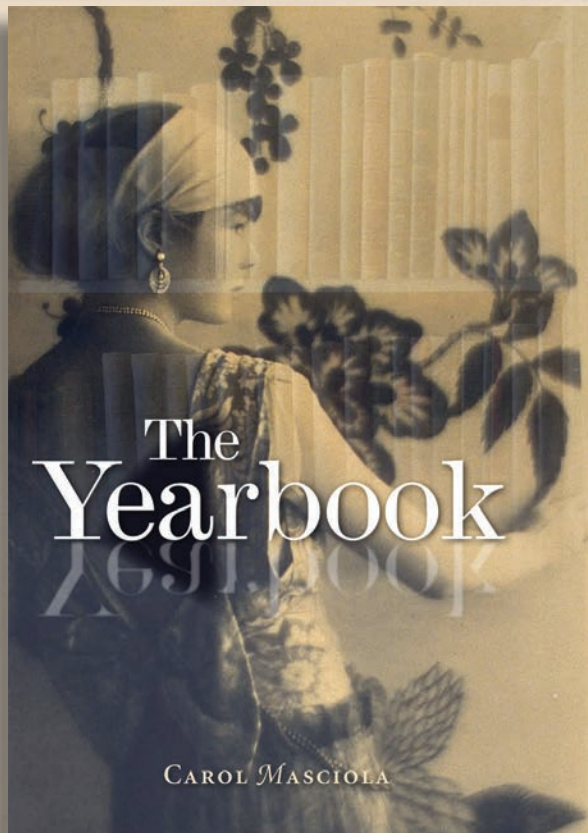
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—*Kirkus Reviews*

The suspense and surprises will keep readers eager to learn how the story ends.”

—*VOYA Magazine*

“The sweet ending is a perfect collision of the past into the present. I am a sucker for a good time-travel romance, and this is a story that will resonate with many readers—teen and adult.”

—*USA Today*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Carol Masciola is a first-place winner of the PEN/West Literary Award in Journalism and a former reporter for the *Orange County Register* (California). Her feature screenplay *The Fiery Depths*, a supernatural thriller set in a haunted convent in the Alps, is in development with Clever Girl Productions, Los Angeles. Visit theyearbooknovel.com.

MEET THE AGENT

BY KARA GEBHART UHL

Dado Derviskadic FOLIO LITERARY MANAGEMENT

Dado Derviskadic was born in Yugoslavia and moved to Brooklyn, N.Y., at age 7. He learned English by reading novels—supplemented by “a dash of Cartoon Network”—and fell in love with the works of Japanese literary greats Haruki and Ryu Murakami. Years later, Derviskadic won the New York Times Foundation Scholarship and went on to study Japanese and Chinese literature at Middlebury College.

Derviskadic interned in Beijing as a foreign correspondent with *The New York Times* during the 2008 Summer Olympics and went on to work as an acquiring editor and foreign rights manager for some of China’s top publishers. “It was a steep learning curve, and one I had to scale in Chinese no less, but within months I was traveling the world’s major book fairs and acquiring huge bestsellers and quiet, important works alike,” he says.

Upon returning to New York City in 2012, Derviskadic joined Folio Literary Management, where he is actively building his client list across genres. Find him online at publishersmarketplace.com/members/DadoDerviskadic.



Ryan and Katherine Harvey, a husband and wife chef/journalist team, of *The Bare Bones Broth Cookbook* (Harper Wave)



Mathew Ramsey, former National Geographic producer, food photographer and author of *Pornburger* (Ecco)



Dr. Cate Shanahan, geneticist and author of *Deep Nutrition* (Flatiron Books)



REPRESENTS

“Books, whether literary novels or histories or cookbooks, are our greatest legacy and contribution to the world—they allow us to not just live better, but to live more lives than just our own.”

WHY HE DOES WHAT HE DOES

“Nonfiction: works of cultural, literary and intellectual history; narratives by working journalists; literary memoir; science, health and diet; cookbook; works in translation; biography; pop culture.”

SEEKING

“Fiction: international, the dark and gritty, introspective and serious. Mood, thought and voice are what I respond to most strongly.”

WRITING TIPS

“Develop relationships with other writers you respect. ... Build your own community, even if it’s through emails.”

PITCH TIPS

“Pull me in with at least one solid, recent comparable title in the first paragraph—one to three recent books that are similarly positioned will show an agent that you’ve done your homework.”

QUERY PET PEEVES

“fiction novel” and “true-life memoir”

QUIRKS

“Two eternal obsessions: Hannah Arendt and the history of film.”

“I’ve worked as a fashion writer, film producer, press release translator (the worst!) and bartender.”

FAVORITE

BLOG:
Is Mercury in Retrograde?

LIVING AUTHORS:
Ben Lerner,
Siri Hustvedt

PLACE:
Railay Beach, Thailand

DEAD AUTHOR:
Italo Calvino



DERVISKADIC PHOTO © STEPHEN SULLIVAN; RAILAY BEACH © SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; IAKOV KALININ

Kara Gebhart Uhl (pleiadesbee.com) writes and edits from Fort Thomas, Ky.

Amber Brock

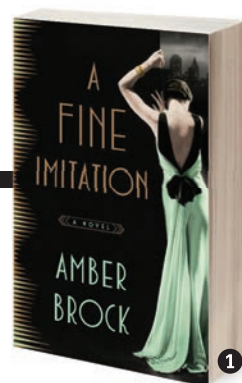


1 *A Fine Imitation*

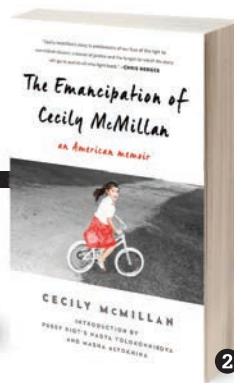
(historical fiction, May, Crown) "Set in the glamorous 1920s, [the novel follows] a privileged Manhattan socialite's restless life and the affair with a mysterious painter that upends her world, flashing back to her years at Vassar and the friendship that brought her to the brink of ruin."

WRITES FROM: Atlanta. **PRE-FINE IMITATION:** This is my fifth completed novel and my third historical novel. Though I queried some of those earlier novels (with varying levels of success), I knew from the time I started *A Fine Imitation* that it had the potential to be the one I broke in with. The others are keeping warm on my hard drive, but I needed the experience of writing them to be ready to write this one. There are never any wasted words, in my opinion. **TIME FRAME:** I did several weeks of preliminary research before diving in, including reading the 1922 edition of Emily Post's *Etiquette* and an Advanced Placement art history textbook cover to cover. I wrote the first draft in just under six weeks, though it was far from complete. I picked it up again six months later and revised until I felt it was ready to send to agents. Then I revised some

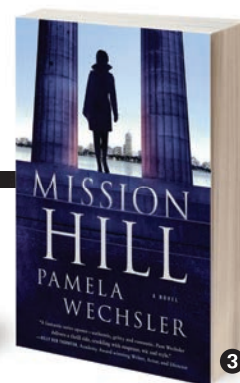
more. **ENTER THE AGENT:** I queried my agent, Stefanie Lieberman of Janklow & Nesbit Associates, about nine months from the time I started sending the novel to agents. **WHAT I LEARNED:** Patience and resilience. I've also picked up some serious research skills. **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** I worked hard and kept writing. Without hard work and patience, luck and timing don't make much of a difference. **ADVICE FOR WRITERS:** The best thing I've done for my writing is work with a critique partner and some very opinionated beta readers. I've learned how to give and receive feedback. **WEBSITE:** amberbrock.net. **NEXT UP:** [A] novel set in the 1950s in New York City and Miami.



1



2



3

Cecily McMillan



2 *The Emancipation of Cecily McMillan: An American Memoir*

(memoir, July, Nation Books) "An American millennial coming-of-age in search of the promise of democracy—a desperate attempt to make sense of identity, family and duty in 21st-century America."

WRITES FROM: Atlanta. **PRE-EMANCIPATION:** In the spring of 2014, I was tried as the "last Occupy Wall Street defendant" for second-degree assault of an officer. After enduring a Kafka-esque trial, and in spite of public outcry, I was convicted and sentenced to three months in New York's most notorious prison. When I was released, *The New York Times* featured my article "What I Saw on Rikers Island: Cecily McMillan on Brutality and Humiliation on Rikers Island." **TIME FRAME:** I wrote the book from January 2015 to November 2015. **ENTER THE AGENT:** When I got out of Rikers, I knew I had to expose what was going on in there. So [friend and writing mentor Maurice Isserman] set up an introduction with the Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency and it was a great fit. I was paired with agent Roz Foster and she's been the saving grace of this whole whirlwind of an experience. **WHAT I LEARNED:** Publishing is a little world with its own (very coded!) language. I had no idea how to write a book. **PLATFORM:** [I've written] for *The Huffington Post* blog, and

WRITES FROM: Atlanta. **PRE-EMANCIPATION:** In the spring of 2014, I was tried as the "last Occupy Wall Street defendant" for second-degree assault of an officer. After enduring a Kafka-esque trial, and in spite of public outcry, I was convicted and sentenced to three months in New York's most notorious prison. When I was released, *The New York Times* featured my article "What I Saw on Rikers Island: Cecily McMillan on Brutality and Humiliation on Rikers Island." **TIME FRAME:** I wrote the book from January 2015 to November 2015. **ENTER THE AGENT:** When I got out of Rikers, I knew I had to expose what was going on in there. So [friend and writing mentor Maurice Isserman] set up an introduction with the Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency and it was a great fit. I was paired with agent Roz Foster and she's been the saving grace of this whole whirlwind of an experience. **WHAT I LEARNED:** Publishing is a little world with its own (very coded!) language. I had no idea how to write a book. **PLATFORM:** [I've written] for *The Huffington Post* blog, and

published articles on Rikers Island and on the state of America (culturally and politically). I'll also be engaging the 196,000 people who through a Change.org petition lobbied for my freedom, and doing a thorough media run. **NEXT UP:** Something that starts to reinvigorate a conversation about the responsibilities of Americans.

Pamela Wechsler



3 *Mission Hill* (legal thriller, May, Minotaur)
 “Boston’s chief homicide prosecutor—an indomitable, fashion-obsessed, adrenalin-addicted Brahman with a lot of secrets—has to solve her most personal murder yet.”

WRITES FROM: Boston. **PRE-MISSION:** I was working as the on-set legal

advisor for *The Judge*, a movie shot in Boston. In between takes, Billy Bob Thornton, who played the role of the prosecutor, suggested that I write the novel that has become *Mission Hill*. **TIME FRAME:** I gave myself one year to write and sell this book, and if it didn't work out I would go back to practicing law. I wrote [it] in five months. It took another four months to get an agent, do the rewrites, and sign with a publisher. Luckily, I came in three months short of having to suit up and dig a briefcase out of the bottom of my closet. **ENTER THE AGENT:** I found my agent, Victoria Skurnick of Levine, Greenberg and Rostan Literary Agency, through a cold query. **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** I found a supportive community of writers, where I could workshop my pages and get both feedback and

WD MEET YOUR MATCH

Amber Brock reveals the full story of how she came to sign with her literary agent at bit.ly/WDBreakingIn.

fellowship. **WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENT:** I would have taken classes and read more books and articles about fiction. **ADVICE FOR WRITERS:** When you've finished a project, don't sit around waiting for a response—start something new. **WEBSITE:** pamelawechsler.com. **NEXT UP:** *Mission Hill* is the first in a series of three. The second book is with my editor, and I'm working on the third. **WD**

Chuck Sambuchino is the editor of *Guide to Literary Agents and Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (both WD Books). His most recent book is *When Clowns Attack*.

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CAPTIVATE YOUR READERS

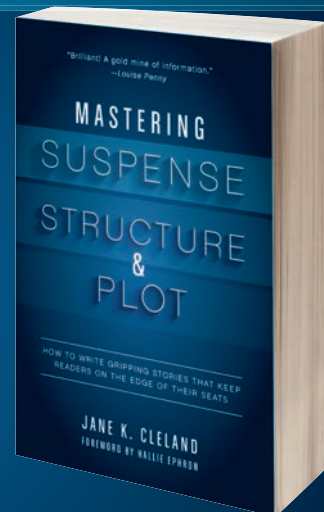
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WRITE A STANDOUT
1
CHAPTER

The Chain of **Awesomeness**

It all starts with a memorable first line, followed by an attention-grabbing first paragraph. Here's how to build a strong first chapter, link by link.



BY JEFF SOMERS

Years ago, I asked my long-suffering wife to read a manuscript I thought had some promise. It was a science-fiction novel, and my wife doesn't do science fiction, so she was immediately dubious.

The first line caught her attention; she kept reading. By the time she came home that night, she was absolutely certain I would sell that book—and she was right (it was *The Electric Church*). Even though the subject matter wasn't in her wheelhouse, she was pulled in and carried along until she was ready to bestow on me the rarest of all accolades: wifely approval.

Every writer knows that the first line of a novel is crucial. But a great Chapter 1, of course, isn't solidified in a single line—it's a chain of words into sentences into paragraphs, and at each link in that chain your readers can decide they're bored and stop reading. You have to make those links awesome. You have to build a Chain of Awesomeness readers will find irresistible from the first line onward.

It Was the Best of Lines ...

A major mistake a lot of writers make is thinking that all a first line has to do is be *cool* or *shocking*. That's effective, but what makes a first line truly great is that it makes readers want to read the *next* line.

Literature is full of examples of classic, memorable first lines. Some, such as

It was a dark and stormy night.

are memorable because they failed. Very few people know that line originally comes not from Snoopy but from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1830 novel *Paul Clifford*. All we remember is the line itself, and only in the context of parody.

In contrast, consider *Moby-Dick's* classic:

Call me Ishmael.

They're both brief, both iconic, but only the latter is successful. So what's the difference? The key is simple: *mystery*.

Moby-Dick's first line seems straightforward, but look closely and you'll notice it instantly raises questions. Why not simply say, "My name is Ishmael"? The "Call me" implies there's something else going on, and in order to find out what it is you're going to have to keep reading.

A major mistake a lot of writers make is thinking that all a first line has to do is be *cool* or *shocking*. That's effective, but what makes a first line truly great is that it makes readers want to read the *next* line.

Contrast that with "It was a dark and stormy night ..." Everything that sentence conveys is right there, self-contained. It's night, it's dark and it's stormy. The reader yawns and closes the book.

The element of mystery is easily identifiable in many great opening lines. Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* begins thusly:

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

It's the second clause that piques the reader's interest: What family are we going to learn about? Why is it unhappy?

For a more contemporary example, look to the wonderful opening line of Anne Tyler's *Back When We Were Grownups*:

Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.

You want to know who she is, what person she turned into, and who she *should* have turned into. In this way, a great first line acts not only as a shiny thing to catch the eye, but as a bit of thrust, pushing the reader into the narrative.

A Paragraph Apart

If your first line expertly hooks your readers, a great first paragraph needs to hold their attention. Let's take a look at the opening of *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami:

I was 37 then, strapped in my seat as the huge 747 plunged through dense cloud cover on approach to Hamburg airport. Cold November rains drenched the earth, lending everything the gloomy air of a Flemish landscape: the ground crew in waterproofs, a flag atop a squat airport building, a BMW billboard. So—Germany again.

The first sentence is *jammed* with mystery. All the word choices matter here—*strapped* is a much more frightening verb than, say, *buckled*. The rest of the paragraph offers the next link in the Chapter 1 chain: *intrigue*.

This is what a first paragraph should do: Offer a small amount of satisfaction for the reader who's just been hooked by your awesome first line, then build on that intrigue. Murakami's opening gives the reader one more bit of information (the narrator's been to Germany before, and the return isn't pleasant) and then appeals to your curiosity: *Why is he returning?*

First paragraphs don't need to be flashy. Consider the opening paragraph of the winner of the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*:

While I was still in Amsterdam, I dreamed about my mother for the first time in years. I'd been shut up in my hotel for more than a week, afraid to telephone anybody or go out; and my heart scrambled and floundered at even the most innocent noises: elevator bell, rattle of the minibar cart, even church clocks tolling the hour, de Westertoren, Krijtberg, a dark edge to the clangor, an inwrought fairy-tale sense of doom. By day I sat on the foot of the bed straining to puzzle out the Dutch-language news on television (which was hopeless, since I knew not a word of Dutch) and when I gave up, I sat by the window staring out at the canal with my camel's-hair overcoat thrown over my clothes—for I'd left New York in a hurry and the things I'd brought weren't warm enough, even indoors.

That first line might not appear in any roundups of all-time great opening lines, but if you consider it more closely, you see how much it manages to accomplish. He was *still* in Amsterdam. He's dreaming of his mother—but *why*, and why for *the first time in years*? Why is that important? The rest of the paragraph is so organic it's easy to forget Tartt is doing hard work there: She offers more information while spinning more mysteries (*Why is he afraid to leave the hotel room? Why did he flee in such a hurry?*). In short, she makes you want to keep reading. It's the second link in the Chain of Awesomeness that keeps readers excited.

Chain of Tools

So far, so great: The first links in the chain have been established. The next links must keep surprising readers, building tension and forward momentum. There are any number of ways to go about this, limited only by your imagination and your Kanye-like ability to be the greatest creative force of your generation. Here are a few of the most tried-and-true strategies for keeping your Chapter 1 chain linked tight and strong.

1 A Self-Contained Narrative

One time-tested approach is the first chapter that is a complete, almost self-contained short story. (*Almost* is the operative word.) Your readers are surprised at the neat ending to a narrative they've just begun—it's unexpected and drives them on to keep reading to find out whether the story ties in or circles back (as they assume—and rightly so—that one of the two will likely be true).

For an example of this approach, look to the opening of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, published in 1997. In it, DeLillo spins a masterful story about his characters attending one of the most famous baseball games in history, a story that lays out the themes of the book while also standing entirely on its own—and when the next chapter suddenly shifts decades into the future with new characters who seem to have nothing to do with the group we just met, we're surprised, and we want to find out *why*.

2 The Moment of Mystery

Many writers think they have to make their first chapter a tour de force of lush writing. But all you need is the Chain of Awesomeness, and the chain can be quite short. Some great novels have opening chapters that are flash fiction-sized, surprising the readers because they're

expecting you to do a lot of setup work to draw them in, but instead you more or less “drop the mic” and walk away. The first chapter of Don Winslow’s *The Kings of Cool* is just two words, one of which is an expletive (now *that’s* mystery and intrigue). The first chapter of Stephen King’s *Misery* is, in its entirety:

umber whunnnn

yerrnnn umber whunnnn

fayunnnn

These sounds: even in the haze.

That’s some serious “For sale: baby shoes, never worn”-esque brilliance, implying thousands of words of story in just a few lines. Or consider William Faulkner’s classic novel *As I Lay Dying*: The first chapter is fewer than 450 words, but still it contains an amazing description of two brothers walking toward their older brother, who is building a coffin for their mother—and without one word wasted, readers are hooked from the unadorned first line (“Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path in single file”) to the rather incredible last line (“I go on to the house, followed by the Chuck. Chuck. Chuck. of the adze”).

3 In Media Res

Sometimes the best way to deliver surprise is to skip ahead a few clicks and dive right into the middle of the action. This approach can grab your readers immediately, opening up numerous mysteries to be solved. Consider the book *All You Need Is Kill* by Hiroshi Sakurazaka (adapted into the film *Edge of Tomorrow*). Chapter 1 begins on a battlefield, where the narrator watches his fellow soldiers die—and then the *narrator* dies. Did we come in at the end of the story that’s about to unfold? We don’t know, and Sakurazaka doesn’t stop to explain anything. The frantic pace and surprise push us forcefully into the next chapter—and the next, and the next, and the next.

4 The End

You might, in fact, begin your story at the end, either right before the resolution or perhaps directly afterward. Consider the much-heralded first chapter of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, told from the point of view of a main character who has clearly suffered some horrible experience or breakdown but is trying to fake his way through a college interview. The whole chapter is a master class in mystery and intrigue that almost commands us to keep moving forward, desperate to find

out what’s going on, but the biggest surprise is when it dawns on us that this is the *aftermath*. The only way to find out what’s happened and why is—you guessed it—to keep reading.

Sometimes the best way to deliver surprise is to skip ahead a few clicks and dive right into the middle of the action.

5 World-Building

The opposite of the flash fiction approach is the first chapter devoted to world-building, in which the author delivers necessary exposition despite all the warnings that writers should avoid imparting so much information at once. Like all exceptions to rules, this technique can be effective *in the right hands*. It helps, of course, if the world is unusual and engaging enough to stand apart—as in Neal Stephenson’s celebrated 1992 cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*. Chapter 1 begins with a great line packed with mystery (“The Deliverator belongs to an elite order, a hallowed subcategory”) and proceeds to immerse the readers in a complex sci-fi universe, leaving them no choice but to dive in and keep up. Considering that the main character is a futuristic pizza delivery man, and that the grave importance of getting his pizzas to their destination within 30 minutes is clearly established, the last line of Chapter 1 has real impact and almost guarantees readers will turn to Chapter 2:

They have just given the Deliverator a 20-minute-old pizza. He checks the address; it is 12 miles away.

Sci-fi may not be your thing, but Stephenson’s chapter is one any writer can learn from.

Every word, sentence and paragraph you write is a link in a chain that keeps people reading. Make that chain *awesome*, and your readers—whether friends, agents, editors or paying customers—will gladly turn to Chapter 2. **WD**

Jeff Somers (jeffreysomers.com) is the author of nine novels, including the Avery Cates series, *Chum* and, most recently, *We Are Not Good People*.

Backstory

From *the* Front

Writers are often cautioned not to overload Chapter 1 with backstory—but if not there, where? And what if you think you need it? Use this thoughtful guide to when, why and how past and present should collide.

BY DAVID CORBETT

One hears a great deal in writing circles that backstory—whatever took place in your main characters’ lives before your story’s outset—is irrelevant, intrusive, a drag on the story’s forward momentum, even the hallmark of amateurism.

Although some of the reasons for this “backstory backlash” have merit, it’s more often true that the mishandling and misplacement of episodes from the past, not their intrinsic worth, are to blame.

Slathering the past into the story in prolonged descriptive insertions—incommodiously referred to as “information dumps”—really *can* bring forward momentum to a jolting halt (or, in the all-important Chapter 1, fail to engage the reader before any momentum builds at all). But that speaks to poor technique, not lack of narrative merit.

The central flaw in such clumsy insertions is the failure to realize that the past is embedded on Page 1 in how the character thinks, feels and appraises circumstances.

It's evident in the values she tells herself she lives by and those she actually observes. It's revealed in the attitude she brings to various situations. Most important, the past forges what she wants, why she wants it and why she's failed thus far to get it.

It's this more organic understanding of backstory—rooting it in the character's emotional, moral and psychological awareness and decision-making (i.e., her *behavior*)—that points the way toward understanding not just how and why, but *where* to use it.

Understanding the Role of Backstory

Stories that rely on empathy for their dramatic impact will draw more heavily upon backstory than others. This is because empathy focuses not just on *what happens* but on *what it means* to the character. And meaning is shaped by memory. It's that simple.

Stories that do not rely on empathy—for example, action stories, superhero tales and mysteries, and other forms of wish fulfillment where the hero inspires awe or admiration rather than reader identification—will require less in the way of backstory. Still, even Hercule Poirot and Jack Reacher come from somewhere—careers as the greatest detective in Europe, and a homicide investigator for the U.S. Army, respectively. That past shapes how they engage with the here and now, the way they view events and people, and their attitude toward society and the world. And in that way, it shapes the story.

Stories rely on three levels of conflict: interior struggles, interpersonal clashes and external challenges. The most engaging stories involve all three conflict levels, and create unity by interweaving them, so that resolution of one conflict requires or creates resolution of the others. The key to using backstory wisely, from Chapter 1 onward, is showing how inner life and outer action are inseparable. Specifically, each action a character takes and every word he speaks from the start reveals what he values, what he hopes for, what he fears, what he wants. The latter is most important, because desire presumes a previous state of lack, of yearning, of need. What shaped that yearning? Why hasn't it been gratified sooner, and why is it prompting the character to act now? The answers to those questions necessarily derive from backstory.

Translating Backstory Into Behavior

Why is your character, at the story's outset, falling short of her dreams? Some weakness, wound, limitation or

flaw is inhibiting her full embrace of what she wants from her life and herself. This is where the exploration of backstory is most valuable—the examination of those key moments of shame, pride, guilt, forgiveness, fear, courage, loss and love that have shaped the character's *modus operandi* for living, her sense of what is possible, what is probable, what's out of the question and yet what nevertheless remains desired. These key moments have forged the character's fundamental sense of who she is and what she wants from life, her compromises between hope and fear, trust and suspicion, promise and pain.

This is how backstory organically becomes behavior. Rather than *telling* the reader why the character behaves this way or that, you can *show* it in how the character responds to events, engages with people or circumstances, thinks about what is happening, etc.

Beyond the obvious advantage of *show over tell*, allowing the character's behavior to speak for itself also creates a kind of suspense, especially if the character's thoughts, feelings, attitude or behavior seem at first blush somewhat puzzling, even shocking. Readers will endure a certain lack of explanation if what's happening is interesting, much more than they'll sit through having everything belabored through tedious explanation.

Whether or not you need to explain the behavior depends upon the narrative arc of your story. If the story concerns *overcoming* the effects of the past to create a newfound sense of purpose or identity, or to forge a new way of life, then such explanation may be required. The explanation most likely should not, however, appear at the story's outset. Rather, it should be withheld until crucial moments of self-evaluation are required to justify a key decision or action.

Placing the Past in the Present

When searching for the most effective scenes in which to reveal essential backstory, look for these signposts.

Moments of Reflection or Interpretation

These are often glancing asides that provide depth to an otherwise fleeting moment. Such asides can serve three functions:

1. **RAISE THE STAKES:** A quick glance back to a moment of great poignancy or meaning can reveal what might be lost or gained through comparison with what's happening in present time.

Example: One finds this sort of method in perhaps the most famous opening line in modern literature, from Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which a man’s execution is juxtaposed with a childhood moment of wonder:

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.

(Yes, you read that right: That’s backstory not just in the opening chapter but in the opening *line*.)

2. COMPLICATE MOTIVATION: By adding a reference to a past event—a memory—to an otherwise straightforwardly motivated incident, you can add texture to the character’s inner life and provide emotional or moral crosscurrents to why he is responding as he is.

Example: In Janet Burroway’s *Raw Silk*, the narrator is attempting to explain why she has decided to leave her tycoon husband and 6-year-old daughter. She conjures a memory to hint that the reason is complicated:

I don’t know exactly how much money we have, and that’s peculiar, because I grew up in a trailer, the only daughter of a California jobbing carpenter, and spent my childhood in a rage against the turning off of taps and the apportioning of nickels for ice cream cones. ... These things don’t always follow the accepted pattern.

The key to using backstory wisely, from Chapter 1 onward, is showing how inner life and outer action are inseparable.

3. REVEAL SUBTEXT: By weaving the past and the present together, juxtaposing a present moment with a “flash from the past,” you can reveal what the character feels or thinks but, for whatever reason, cannot express in the moment (or cannot express *completely*). A sudden insertion of backstory can provide context and meaning that vividly reveal inner life and echo the story’s theme.

Example: In William Trevor’s short story “The Room,” Katherine is the wife of Phair, a man accused of murdering a call girl he was secretly seeing. Years after standing by him through his trial and subsequent acquittal, she has an affair of her own. As she and her lover lie in bed, the man asks her to tell him what happened. After first resisting, she does so, but it’s clear she is withholding some of the most revealing, painful details, which are relayed to the reader through memory, not dialogue. The result underscores her discomfort at the symmetry between her husband’s infidelity and her own:

When the two policemen had come in the early morning, she had not been dressed. ... When she went downstairs they were talking about the death of someone whose name she did not know. “Who?” she asked, and the taller of the two policemen said Sharon Ritchie, and Phair said nothing.

Regardless of what purpose these insertions of backstory serve, it’s usually best to keep them brief, like a flash cut in a film. The key is to *use the present* to trigger the memory; don’t just stick in a flashback because you want to use it and it has to go somewhere. Make each flash vivid through explicit and telling details—the journey to discover ice, the apportioning of nickels for ice cream cones, being undressed when the police arrive—the more visual and sensual, the better.

As the story progresses and the character’s nature is established, these kinds of insertions may become less necessary, unless used as echoes of previous reveals—to show, for example, how the same situation has returned, but in a new context.

Sequel Scenes

After an intense action scene—or a sequence of scenes that are fast-paced or dramatic and lead to some kind of conclusive revelation, reversal or partial victory—both the characters and the reader will need a breather. The scene that provides that breather is called a *sequel*.

A sequel possesses three key components:

1. It conveys the emotional impact of what has just happened.
2. It explores the logic and meaning of those actions and events (i.e., it weighs the difference between what was expected to happen and what actually took place).
3. It provides an opportunity to plan for what comes next.

As you've probably guessed, it's in the first two components that backstory most effectively comes into play. But this isn't a time to wander back into the past because you have a lull in your story and you've been dying to slip in this scene you came up with as you were dreaming up your character. Rather, whatever context the past provides as the emotional impact registers and meaning is revealed should be in service to a *decision*.

Consider Shakespearean monologues. The vast majority end with a resolve to act or a change of heart. They escape being perceived as info dumps because they aren't just verbal bloodletting; they are *action*. They form the means by which the character figures out where he stands so he can determine what to do next. This is where backstory can often prove most effective—by showing how the past and present echo each other, or how they contrast, as the character struggles to understand his present circumstances.

Finding a way to use interpersonal conflict to reveal backstory—a technique sometimes referred to as “revealing through conflict”—is generally preferable to simply offering up the past through exposition. The argument may concern the meaning, importance or relevance of what's outwardly in dispute, but it forces at least one character to address her past and thus expose her inner conflict. It also serves to help both characters figure things out, which helps solve their exterior problem, at the same time either intensifying or undermining their relationship, thereby weaving all three levels of conflict together.

Crucial Moments of Self-Evaluation or Decision

Some scenes are so structurally important they serve as pivot points in the plot, and deserve special attention. These include:

- ❑ **THE FIRST ACT BREAK:** Sometimes called the “Point of No Return,” when the character realizes there is no going back to the way things were, but instead the journey into the unknown must begin. (Note that certain backstory elements *must* be conveyed or hinted at adequately in the opening chapters to ensure this point has the necessary impact.)
- ❑ **THE MIDPOINT:** When the character has been obliged, through some devastating revelation or reversal, to completely reassess who he is, what he is doing, why he is doing it and where it all may lead. (Popular writing instructor James Scott Bell refers to this as the story's “Mirror Moment.”)

- ❑ **THE CRISIS OF INSIGHT:** Also known as the “Dark Night of the Soul,” the “Encounter With Death” or the “Change-or-Die Moment,” this crisis often comes when the character seems on the brink of ruin or failure, usually near the end of Act 2. The self-evaluation that began at the Midpoint intensifies to a complete reassessment of himself or his situation—though it's worth noting that it need not always be negative or despairing in tone. The transformative revelation may be gratifying, even liberating—or it may be a simple, if unwelcome, matter of facing facts.

These three pivotal scenes stand out because of the intensity of their self-examination, and this necessarily requires examining the past. Note that key moments of self-reflection tend to build upon those before and develop through the story. Accordingly, if one key episode from the past informs each pivot point, merely repeating that past incident will not do. Rather, the character's understanding of the moment must also develop, or the moment should be presented in sections, with each subsequent section revealing significant additional information with greater, more poignant or more devastating emotional resonance.

Note also that, after the profound change produced by the Crisis of Insight, the final act begins, and the need to dredge up the past fades away. Although there are exceptions, the importance of backstory in shaping decisions has largely been exhausted. The only question remaining is: Will the character's transformation help her achieve what she wants? The groundwork for the answer has already been supplied. From this point forward, action predominates, and further reflection can often feel like belaboring the obvious.

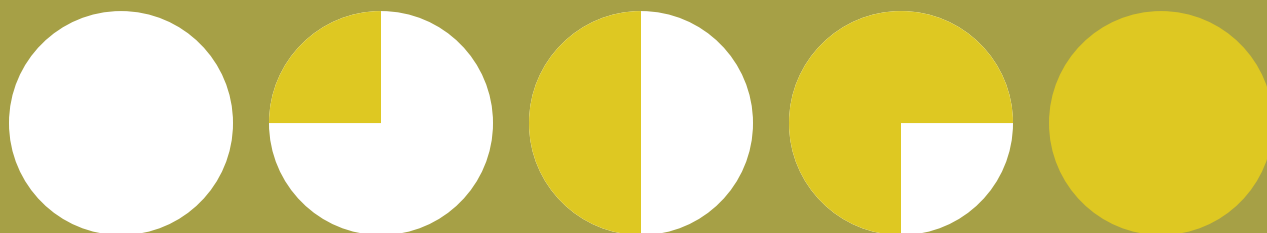
The best uses of backstory lie in shaping the behavior, values and attitudes with which your character negotiates the world, and in helping him evaluate the emotional impact and meaning of subsequent events in order to determine what to do next. Both uses are not mere vacations into the character's prior life, but employ the past in service of the present. Recognizing that will help you better recognize from the start where to insert backstory, and why it belongs there and nowhere else. **WD**

David Corbett (davidcorbett.com) is the award-winning author of *The Art of Character* (called “a writer's bible” by Elizabeth Brundage) and five novels, including 2015's *The Mercy of the Night*.

WRITE A STANDOUT
1
CHAPTER

Countdown *to a* Great Chapter 1

Engineer these essentials in your opening pages,
and your novel will be cleared for takeoff.



BY GABRIELA PEREIRA

From interning at a top literary agency, to earning my own creative writing degree, to connecting with hundreds of writers via my DIY MFA website, I've seen from all angles how crucial your opening pages can be. Agents and editors read a lot of first chapters, and if the story isn't compelling from the very start, they aren't about to keep reading on the off-chance that things warm up in Chapter 2.

Enticing your average reader, of course, is just as important. Whether you're traditionally publishing or self-publishing to an online marketplace, prospective

buyers will take advantage of the option to peek inside the book for a sample. If you want those readers to buy, read and finish your book (and tell their friends about it!) you need to make that first chapter unputdownable.

All of which means that no matter how polished your manuscript is, how compelling your characters are or how tightly you've plotted the story, that first chapter must hold to an even higher standard. If your whole book is an A, then Chapter 1 must be an A-plus.

Whether you're drafting Chapter 1 now or whipping your manuscript into shape before submitting, here's a countdown to make sure your opening pages are ready for liftoff.

5 Promises to Your Readers

Your first chapter is itself a promise you make to your readers. Your first pages set the tone and ground rules for how you will tell the story. The beginning of your novel is also an opportunity to build a relationship with your readers and let them know what to expect from the rest of your book. The promise you're making breaks down into five key elements:

- **A CHARACTER:** Without a central character, you don't have a story—you have a newsreel. Novels must give readers a character to root for, or at the very least someone they're willing to follow for the duration of the story. Even a work as postmodern and experimental as Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* has a protagonist, albeit an unexpected one. Sometimes an author will delay the appearance of the main character for thematic reasons, but sooner or later he must take center stage. The protagonist gives personal significance to the book and makes the events of the plot *mean something*.

- **A VOICE:** Voice is your writing DNA. It's the personal flair and style that makes the way you write both unique and memorable. In first-person point of view, your story's voice comes across through that character and how she thinks, speaks and narrates the story. In third-person POV, the voice might be more subtle, but it's no less present. Whether the tone you choose is in-your-face or meant to fade into the background, it should be crafted with intent.

Keep in mind, too, that while you can modulate and shape your voice to an extent, a core aspect of it is ingrained in who you are as a writer. I often tell my writing students, "You can't grow roses from sunflower seeds, but you can grow the best darn sunflowers on the planet." So it is with voice. You can cultivate, finesse and even improve your voice on a stylistic level, but you can't overhaul it completely—nor should you want to. If your voice is quirky or punchy, don't try to make yourself sound highbrow and literary. Instead, play to your strengths. Remember: Your voice is the "secret sauce" that only you can bring to a story. Embrace it.

- **A WORLD:** To where and when will you be transporting your readers' imaginations? It might seem like a tall order to promise your reader the world, even if that world is one you have imagined for your story. But this isn't about giving readers an encyclopedic description of all the minutiae of the realm you've created. Rather, the

goal is for readers to believe in you as its master architect. You don't need to show your readers the *whole* world of your story; simply aim to orient them in it enough so they trust that *you* know your story's world.

- **A PROBLEM:** Every story starts with a problem or obstacle the character must face. Sometimes you'll jump right in with the central conflict that drives the entire book, and sometimes you'll open with a peripheral problem, one that leads to the major dramatic tension of the story. Whether the stakes in your first chapter are objectively minor or life-and-death, they must feel significant to the characters—and thus to the readers.

No matter how compelling your characters are or how tight your plot, the first chapter must hold to an even higher standard.

Keep in mind that while the problem you promise in Chapter 1 doesn't need to be the main conflict of your book, it does need to relate to that conflict in some way. For instance, at the start of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, the protagonist, Pip, meets an escaped convict hiding in a graveyard. In a gripping scene, the convict threatens Pip and forces him to bring food and tools so he may break free of his chains. From Chapter 2 onward, the dramatic tension of the book centers around Pip's life and rise to success. Only much later do we realize the significance and implications of that opening scene—that the initial problem is intimately tied with conflicts that arise further in the story.

- **AN EVENT:** Whether you're writing a fast-paced thriller or an epic, sprawling saga, something has to *happen* in Chapter 1. This early event can be pivotal to the novel, such as the reaping scene in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* that launches the protagonist into the horrific world of the Games. Or it can be subtle, even occurring off the page. For example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* begins with the arrival of a wealthy new neighbor, yet we never actually see it happen. Instead, we're presented with the Bennet family—primarily the mother and certain daughters—discussing the eligible bachelor who has just moved into a neighboring estate. Regardless

of how you choose to craft this event, there should be a compelling reason for you to begin your story with that particular moment. Many rough drafts begin too early in the story. Always ask yourself whether you're starting at the right point—right at the cusp of the action—and not too far before.

While you certainly can delay these promises until later chapters or even break them altogether, keep in mind that doing so will stretch your readers' trust in you. So if you choose to bend these "rules," do so consciously, with a purpose and an alternate plan.

4 Pitfalls to Avoid

In reading and critiquing a high volume of manuscripts, you start to see the same problems come up again and again. Here are four common pitfalls that you should avoid in your first chapter:

- **SLOW-TO-WARM-UP SYNDROME:** This, of course, is when a book takes forever to kick into gear. Instead of jumping into the story just before a character's world is turned upside down, we get pages upon pages of happy characters leading normal, happy lives. Your job as writer is to create the potential for conflict from the very first page. Slow-to-warm-up syndrome delays that conflict.

Your first chapter is itself a promise you make to your readers. Your first pages set the tone and ground rules for how you will tell the story.

This is not to say that you shouldn't give *any* background about your character's normal world; if readers don't know the status quo, then any transformation your protagonist experiences will be meaningless. The key is to craft *just* a clear enough "before" picture of your character's circumstances that when they change, the "after" picture provides a striking contrast.

- **OVERCROWDED SCENES:** When it comes to dumping information onto the page, there's a limit to how much a reader can take in at once. Most writers think of "info dumps" as over-describing setting, or explaining plot

logistics to excess. Yet one of the most common too-much-too-soon problems is when a writer introduces too many characters in the first chapter.

The more characters you cram into a scene, the harder it is for your reader to keep track of everyone. This is especially true when your readers are meeting the cast for the first time. Without any context to help them decide who is a key character and who is just "filler," your readers will naturally assume that anyone you attach a name to or discuss at length must be important. Think of character names and descriptions as the writer's equivalent of shining a spotlight on your story's stage. If everyone is in the spotlight, then it's hard to tell who is really the star.

- **RED HERRINGS AND MISDIRECTION:** It can be fun to play sleight-of-hand tricks on the page: *Draw your readers' attention over here, and they won't notice you working your magic over there!* There is nothing wrong with misdirection in theory; in fact, our job as writers is to shift and focus our readers' attention where we want it to go. But in the first chapter you must handle this technique with particular care.

Any detail or imagery you include in Chapter 1 has the power to sway your readers' attention more dramatically. It takes a little while for readers to get into the world of a story, and until that happens they'll use context from their own experience to discern which details are important. For example: Think of that opening scene in the movie *Working Girl*, showing that classic New York City skyline and the Twin Towers. When the movie came out in 1988, those images symbolized the fast-paced world of high finance and nothing more. Today there is an added significance, and if you open your novel with that same image, your readers might automatically think of 9/11. In a later chapter, your readers will have more information to help them with the significance (or lack thereof) of choice details to your specific story, but remember that in Chapter 1, your readers don't have any context yet.

- **LAZY LANGUAGE:** Some mistakes simply have no business being in a manuscript. Cliches, typos, grammatical problems, syntactical errors—if it's something you could catch by proofreading, then there is no reason for it to be in your first chapter. This isn't to say that one tiny error will blacklist you from query inboxes forever, but especially with that first chapter, you can't afford to look careless.
- Don't give agents or editors a reason to put down your

book, especially if that reason is something as silly and easy to fix as a typo.

3 Tricky Beginnings

This countdown element isn't a roundup of things every manuscript should have—rather, it's a look at things you've likely been advised against but might want to do anyway. The following three story openings seem to break all the rules. These tricky beginnings aren't impossible to pull off, but if you want to use one of them, be prepared: You have your work cut out for you.

- **A CHARACTER WAKING UP:** The temptation to begin with the protagonist waking up is understandable. After all, it's a natural way to set the scene and establish this character's status quo. It's also a cliché and, sometimes, a quick slide into the slow-to-warm-up rut. But it *can* be pulled off if handled deftly, as Suzanne Collins does at the beginning of *The Hunger Games*. When we see Katniss Everdeen waking up, there's nothing status quo about it: This is the day of the reaping, the morning that everything changes.
- **DIALOGUE:** Dialogue is perhaps the surest way to throw your reader into the middle of a scene. It puts the spotlight on your characters and shows them interacting with each other. The problem is that your reader doesn't yet have any context for what's taking place—and we all know what can happen when what we say is taken out of context. The key, then, is not to use dialogue-as-exposition in order to set the scene, but to use it to deliver the context we need. One of my favorite first lines in literature is in *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White: "Where's Papa going with that axe?" Not only does it set the scene and pull readers into the story, but it also brings in high-stakes conflict from the outset.
- **PURE ACTION:** We see this in action movies all the time. The story opens with the protagonist running from bad guys. Bullets fly. Buildings explode. Our hero narrowly escapes and by the time that first scene is over, the audience is hooked—wanting to know who this is and how he got so clever. On the page, however, action without context is a much tougher sell. Novel writers don't have splashy computer-generated imagery or explosive special effects to *wow* our readers into staying put until the real story gets going.

Action works in a story when your readers know what's at stake for your characters and why they should care about them. Achieving all of that in Chapter 1 is not a

small feat, but neither is it an impossible one. Look at how William Golding crafts the beginning of *Lord of the Flies*. The story opens on an island after a plane crash, with two boys clambering through the jungle trying to make sense of what just happened. We might not have *much* context, but we have enough to understand why these characters are at the center of the action, and we keep reading because we want to see what happens to them.

Many rough drafts begin too early in the story. Always ask yourself whether you're starting at the right point—right at the cusp of the action—and not too far before.

2 Essential Approaches

We've already established that Chapter 1 is like a contract between you and your readers. No matter how you start your novel, then, there are two things every writer *must* do: Trust your readers, and trust yourself. Your readers have faith that you'll follow through on those five promises you made. As such, they'll suspend their disbelief (at least for a while) and go along for the ride. In turn, you write your story in such a way that gives your readers the benefit of the doubt—crediting them with enough smarts to "get" your story, to fill in the gaps when you haven't told them every tiny detail. With this unspoken agreement, they trust you to take them by the hand and lead them through the landscape of your story. Trust them to follow.

1 Unputdownable First Chapter

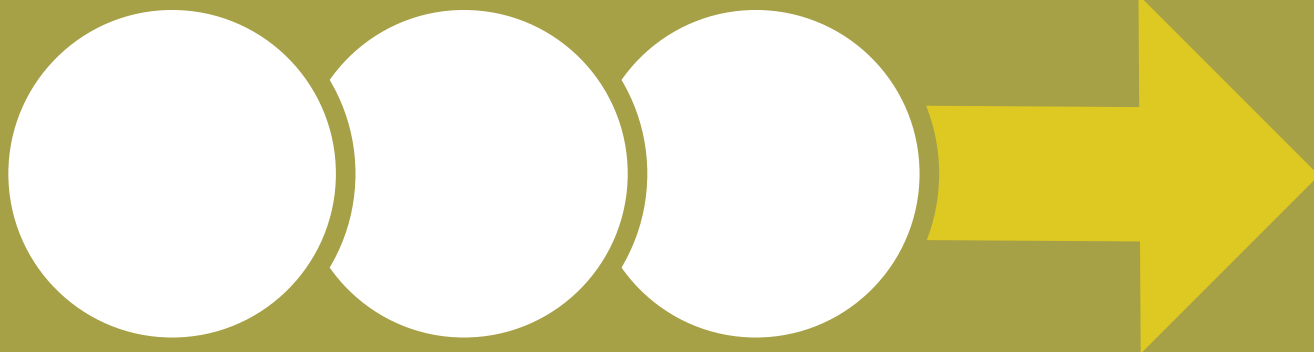
You've made your five promises, avoided the four pitfalls, mastered three tricky beginnings and embraced two essential approaches. The rest of your story's flight path is clear. What you have now is one unputdownable first chapter. **WD**

Gabriela Pereira is the instigator of DIY MFA (diymfa.com) and her book *DIY MFA* (WD Books) is forthcoming this summer.

WRITE A STANDOUT
1
CHAPTER

Story Jump-Starts

A first chapter doesn't *really* start with words on a page—it begins with an idea. But how can we best translate a concept into its true starting point, sidestepping false starts and wrong directions? Try these tips, insights and exercises.



COMPILED BY TYLER MOSS

Every book you've ever read—including that one that felt so real, you were surprised when you closed it to find you were sitting on your couch, your stomach rumbling with hunger—began in the same simple way: with a fleeting thought or image that caught the writer's attention, held it for a moment, and led him to begin asking, *What if ...?*

A story's creation begins not in a moment of work but a moment of play, with an intriguing idea or image nudging

the mind toward unexpected leaps and unanticipated connections. And for those of us stealing time to write (which is most of us), the implication is heartening: Your progress doesn't begin the moment you sit down in front of the computer, boring down on the blank screen, trying to "come up" with something. There are story ideas all around us—ideas rich enough to sustain a lifetime of writing—if we're willing to pay close attention to those things we glimpse out of the corner of our eye, as John Updike once put it, and then let our imaginations linger.

Pinpoint Ideas With Staying Power

A sustainable novel idea is one in which all other elements of story seem contained within it—or are at least suggested by it—and build logically one upon the other. This is how the mental process works when we encounter these glimpses or early sparks of stories and begin our purposeful daydreaming: The single image leads us to a reaction or thought, which suggests the next idea or thought, which suggests the next. Soon we're at an idea six or seven steps removed from the first but directly related to it in a clear progression we can trace back.

If this all sounds a bit mysterious, there's a reason for that: It is. The creative leaps the subconscious mind makes in those moments of daydreaming are worth a thousand sessions of sitting down to consciously dredge for ideas. Nevertheless—and this is the important thing—these creative leaps aren't random or unpredictable; the fact that we can trace our steps back to that first spark shows that the steps are incremental, that there's a method and logic.

EXERCISE: TRY UNLIKELY PAIRINGS

Choose an attribute from Column A and pair it with a character type from Column B. What does the combination suggest to you about character and conflict? What about plot, voice, tone, approach, possible scenes and images?

A	B
talentless	surgeon
suicidal	nun
kindhearted	circus clown
neurotic	suicide hotline volunteer
unfulfilled	celebrity impersonator
scheming	department store Santa
racist	sports mascot
vain	supermodel
depressed	hit man
self-conscious	relationship counselor
jealous	serial killer

Excerpted from *Writing Your Novel From Start to Finish* © 2015 by **Joseph Bates**, with permission from WD Books.

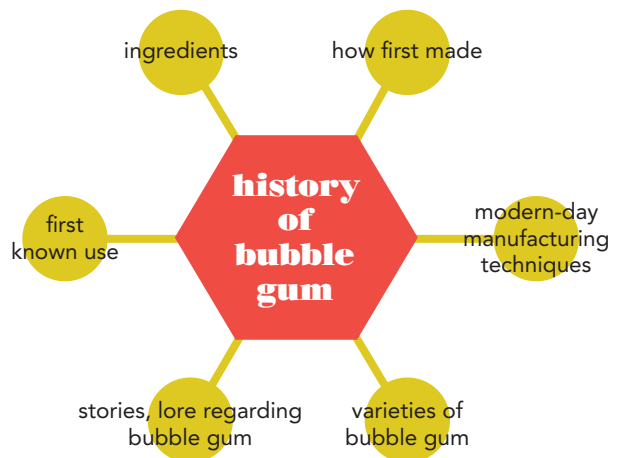
Make Yourself a Map

One useful brainstorming technique is to map out ideas. Idea mapping (sometimes referred to as “clustering”) is a kind of nonlinear outlining whereby subordinate ideas radiate in all directions from main ideas, like spokes from the hub of a wagon wheel—as in the illustration at right.

This adds a visual dimension to the abstract process of brainstorming. An idea “spoke” demonstrates the connection—indeed, a physical connection—between the main idea and its offshoot.

Idea mapping brings idea abstraction into the sensory limelight. It isn't that abstractions should be avoided, but that translating them visually makes them easier to work with, and more fun, too.

Try creating an idea map of your own for your next writing project. Begin by placing the topic in the center, and free-associate to generate subordinate ideas.



Excerpted from *The Daily Writer* © 2008 by **Fred White**, with permission from WD Books.

Find Your Own Starting Points

It's true that story ideas will come to *you* if you learn to pay attention and to recognize those moments when your mind has begun to creatively wander. But there are also other ways, and other places, you might look for inspiration when you need a boost to jump-start the process.

TITLES

Sometimes inspiration for a book begins with a title that starts the process of purposeful daydreaming. The likely reason for this is that good titles are often difficult to come up with (for supporting evidence, do a quick Internet search for the half-dozen titles F. Scott Fitzgerald considered for *The Great Gatsby*, which included such stinkers as *Gold-Hatted Gatsby*)—so when a really good title comes along, it can suggest possibilities for a full world and story immediately. Keep a page in your notebook just for title ideas that show themselves to you. You don't need to know automatically what story might come from it (though you might); it needs only to intrigue you enough to want to explore what story *might* be present within it.

HEADLINES

A well-written headline contains enough possibility to get our imaginations churning (and by design, as headline writers want us to be intrigued enough to read the story that follows). For the fiction writer, I'd advise this: When a headline piques your interest and makes you want to know what happened, *don't* read the piece. Dream up your own.

COMBINING IDEAS AND GENRES

Maybe you have a novel idea that can essentially be summed up as a coming-of-age story about a girl entering puberty who is not handling it well at school or home ... but perhaps the story seems a little cliché, with not much happening that the reader has not seen before. Additionally, you have this other idea about a character who can move things with her mind, a horror story—but you don't have an actual plot to go with it. What if you combined these? Your two kind-of-interesting ideas can be fused together to form one excellent idea that you could call Stephen King's *Carrie*.

READING

At the risk of sounding obvious, good writers are first and foremost good readers. I realize that in our rushed lives it can sometimes be difficult to slow down, sit down, and enjoy a good book, especially with the prevalence of film and television. The problem is that a novel is neither a film nor a show, and the rewarding relationship that comes through engagement of prose narrative, wherein a reader is both led through and co-creates the fictional world, can't be replicated by film. For the novelist, there can be nothing more instructive or inspiring to your work than reading a book from an author who does it right, and paying close attention to how the trick is being pulled off.

A story's creation begins not in a moment of work but a moment of play, with an intriguing idea or image nudging the mind toward unexpected leaps and unanticipated connections.

OTHER ART

Finding beautiful art that speaks to you—no matter what kind—can tweak your artist's brain and open you up for creative thinking. This isn't about anything more involved than simply reminding ourselves of that euphoric, elevated state we enter when we come across art that's so good it leaves us mystified. So if you ever find yourself bereft of inspiration, watch a classic film you've never seen. Spend an afternoon at an art show. Put on that old favorite album you haven't heard in a while, turn down the lights, and really listen (rather than having it on as background noise while you run errands or try to get chores done). You'll likely find a few films, albums or artists who particularly strike you and become your go-tos for new inspiration.

Excerpted from *Writing Your Novel From Start to Finish* © 2015 by Joseph Bates, with permission from WD Books.

Reveal Humble Origins

Most stories can be boiled down to a core idea—a cornerstone upon which the rest of the narrative is constructed. That’s not to say that such works are basic or lack complexity (they aren’t and they don’t), but simply that classics and bestsellers alike can be distilled to a fundamental premise. Which makes the act of creating a tome of your own seem less intimidating. See whether you can match the following works on the left to their one-sentence summaries on the right. If you can boil your own inspiration down to a simple one-liner, you may be onto something.

1. <i>Lolita</i>	A. Angsty teen can’t get over brother’s death
2. <i>50 Shades of Grey</i>	B. Orphan receives a fortune from a mysterious benefactor
3. <i>The Revenant</i>	C. Astronaut stranded alone on a distant planet must find ways to survive
4. <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	D. In the ‘60s, a white writer interviews African-American maids in the South
5. <i>Great Expectations</i>	E. Mad scientist determined to play God cannot control his creature
6. <i>The Leftovers</i>	F. Young lovers from feuding families carry on a clandestine relationship
7. <i>Frankenstein</i>	G. Professor marries a widow to be close to her attractive daughter
8. <i>The Help</i>	H. Fur trapper mauled by a bear seeks revenge on those who left him for dead
9. <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>	I. When 2 percent of the world’s population suddenly disappears, those who remain must deal with their absence
10. <i>The Martian</i>	J. College student’s life is turned upside down when she meets a handsome, kinky millionaire

ANSWER KEY: 1. G, 2. J, 3. H, 4. F, 5. B, 6. I, 7. E, 8. D, 9. A, 10. C

Listen Carefully

Have you ever overheard a snippet of dialogue that not only sounded as if it belonged to a great character, but sparked the idea for a whole story of its own? Eavesdropping can yield great story starters.

"He's past his prime now, but in his heyday he put on a hell of a show."

"What do you mean, you don't have your ID?"

"That was the only time I truly feared for my life."

"I was expecting something ... different."

"We're paying such high premiums in case someone gets sick, someone might as well be sick."

"I won't ever forgive myself for the mistake I made that day."

"After that, I realized rules were meant to be broken."

"Then we kissed, and I never saw her again."

"I've tried everything I can think of to talk her out of it." **WD**

The WD Interview



Lisa Gardner

CATCH HER IF YOU CAN

Twisty plots, surprise endings and characters who've been to hell and back—never mind that it could all believably take place right next door. Lisa Gardner works double-time to keep her suspense fresh—and her readers up at night.

BY JESSICA STRAWSER

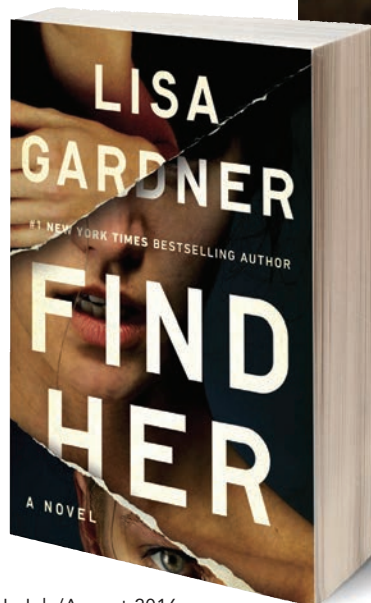


PHOTO © PHILBRICK PHOTOGRAPHY

Some writers just seem to have it all figured out. Lisa Gardner will tell you she's not one of them. No, not her. Even 25 years in, she still researches dead-end subjects, leans on editors, writes at the same book-a-year rate and struggles with social media.

Her self-deprecating nature is as genuine as it is charming—but unlike her characters, she's not fooling anyone. Because she's good. And she's proof that raising the stakes isn't just for plots, either. It's for writing careers.

Take, for example, her oft-told story of first committing herself to writing a novel when, as a waitress, she repeatedly caught her hair on fire serving a flaming appetizer. The footnote is that the resulting novel, begun when she was just 17, became its own spark that took hold quickly, launching her into a prolific career writing romantic suspense under the name Alicia Scott—13 books in eight years. “Granted, I worked on the [debut] for three years and rewrote it four times, so it's not quite an overnight success story,” she explains on her website. “In publishing, however, it's darn close.”

Her first novel attempt outside of the Silhouette Intimate Moments line was a domestic suspense one might say was before its time, given today's fandom enjoyed by Gillian Flynn and Paula Hawkins: *The Perfect Husband* sold at auction (“a small publishing auction,” she clarifies) and went on to win the 1998 Reviewers' Choice Award. Reviewers chose wisely—it launched her popular six-book FBI Profiler Series. Meanwhile, her second thriller, the stand-alone *The Other Daughter*, nabbed the 1999 Reviewers' Choice as well as the 2000 Daphne du Maurier Award, further solidifying her new status as both bestseller and award winner, book after book.

Even as FBI profilers became a hot topic, peppering prime-time TV and bookstore shelves with gusto, she decided not to stay safe on base. New series character Detective D.D. Warren, investigating urban crime in Boston, became an instant hit when she debuted in 2005's *Alone*, and an international smash with her second, *Hide*. (The 10th D.D. Warren novel, *Find Her*, just hit bookstores in February.) And when Gardner herself moved to remote New Hampshire, she invented new characters to roam the back roads with her: Tessa Leoni and Sergeant Wyatt Foster, in blockbuster page-turners *Love You More* (2011), *Touch & Go* (2013) and *Crash & Burn* (2015). The head count now is 16 novels (not counting the romance), a handful of anthology stories and two shorts.

And the body count? Well, you'd have to read them all to find out. If you're lucky, you might even see your name among them. Readers get in on the fun with her recurring “Kill a Friend, Maim a Buddy” sweepstakes, where “one lucky stiff is selected for literary immortality.”

With more than 22 million books in print across 30 countries, even as *Find Her* dominates 2016's hardcover bestseller lists Gardner looks ahead—or, rather, behind her. “I did a contest on Facebook to see what characters readers want to hear from next, and for 2017 they chose the FBI Profilers—which are books I have not written in eight years,” she says. “Now, for Detective D.D. and the others, I'll add details to a master character sheet [as the series progress]—but for those books, I didn't. So I'm embarrassed to say I spent my fall rereading my own novels, because you can't get those details wrong. Readers are going to call you on it, and that's just embarrassing.” She pauses for a moment, then laughs. “Having said that, I still live in terror that I've gotten something wrong!”

Your publisher is promoting *Find Her* as “Lisa Gardner on steroids.” So I guess my first question is: *What exactly are you on and how can the rest of us get some?* [Laughs.] You know, you write and you write and you write in this business, but every now and then you come up with—I think it's the magical part of the process—an idea that is either exceptionally fresh or good. And I think what is setting *Find Her* apart, and generating so much buzz, is that as a suspense novelist I've written so many books about what makes a predator, but *Find Her* is about what makes a survivor. [Protagonist] Flora Dane becomes so compelling. This is a girl who has been through the worst [kidnapped on spring break and held captive in horrific conditions], and five years later she's *still* trying to find her happily ever after.

The impetus for writing the novel was I read an article on the FBI's fairly new unit the Office for Victim Assistance. The whole point to having victim specialists in this day and age is that we're getting so many crimes that don't fit into our traditional perception of crime. If you've been kidnapped and held for over 10 years, which is just one of our more recent real-life cases, how do you get back to living? When you do arrest the guy—*Hey, the butler did it!*—it's almost the least of your problems. I've written all of these books where it ends

"I am a rewriter. ... I roll my eyes at it, but I actually don't consider myself the world's best writer. I think I am a good rewriter, maybe a great rewriter."

with catching the bad guy. But the point of *Find Her* is that for a lot of people that's just the beginning of a whole other story. And that's not fiction, that's sadly real life.

I read that this book actually came together in a rewrite, after you had feedback from your editor.

Yes, I'm a big rewriter. I've been an author for 25 years—[one day] I might get it right the first time. It's probably not going to happen, but it's good to dream. [Laughs.]

It's encouraging to be reminded that even established writers work a story over to get it right.

Hands down one of the biggest learnings I've had in this industry is that the writing *doesn't* get easier. And maybe that's good—maybe that means each book is fresh enough and unique and challenging enough that *of course* it's hard.

Each writer is on a journey to discover his or her own process. And there are authors whose process really is [to] get it right the first time—revision work, they'll tell you, deadens the story. My process seems to be a down- and-dirty six-month draft, and then I work with two great editors—Ben Sevier from Dutton [in the U.S.] and Vicki Mellor from Headline, my British publisher. They talk by phone and consolidate their comments, so I have one thing to work on—"We've pooled our editorial eye, and here's everything that's wrong with your manuscript!" [Laughs.] And then I take six weeks, eight weeks, it can be awhile—there have been books I've thrown out a third and redone.

For *Find Her* the thing I got right in the first draft was Flora Dane. The thing I had to perfect in the revision was the villain and some of the twists. And I like that, because you don't want to rest on your laurels. You don't want to say, "This character's so good, I don't care about the rest." You want every piece to be there: It also is a twisty plot, and you won't see the ending coming. Someday, maybe I'll get that the first try. But until then ... [Laughs.]

How did you arrive at that two-editor arrangement?

When I first signed with Dutton I'd also signed with a new British publisher, and Ben and Vicki came to *me* and said they'd always wanted to work together, and would I be amenable to that. And I *am* a rewriter. I've always considered that my strength—I mean, I joke about it, I roll my

eyes at it, but I actually don't consider myself the world's best writer. I think I am a good rewriter, maybe a great rewriter. And so to get two editors for the price of one—how could I say no to that?

Particularly now, books face a *lot* of scrutiny. Readers are smart—bloggers, the review community. I get reassurance from my editors. I figure by the time I'm done with this thing if I can get a *New Yorker* and a *Brit* to agree this works as suspense, I'm OK for the real world. [Laughs.]

That would be such an asset, with the right mindset.

Yes—but it does mean I'm resigned to my fate. I just turned in 100 pages of the new book, and guess what I'm rewriting right now? [Laughs.]

The best writers often seem to be striving to take their craft to the next level. Is there anything in particular that you've set out to achieve?

My hero in the industry has always been Stephen King. One of the things I admire is, as modern-day authors go, he has produced one of the greatest bodies of work. At this point, I'm not even sure there's a genre he hasn't written in. And some books, because he has a critical following, people tear apart—but the next book might be considered an instant classic. He's not afraid.

At the end of the day, you can't live and die on one book. We're all trying to build a portfolio. And to a certain extent, I have a messy portfolio, but it's there. I have the FBI Profiler Series, Detective D.D. Warren, Wyatt and Tessa Leoni novels ... They're all kind of different in feel—and I admire that my editors are along for the ride. For all the criticism of each book being the best it can, they have no objection to whatever I'm going to write next. We all just have faith that readers will go along.

Your dialogue is so on point. Is that a natural strength?

I actually think dialogue is something I'm good at. I have a tendency to picture books in my head like a movie scene, and I go for that level of short, quick. And I like colloquialisms—each character might have their own little thing.

What I have to work hard on is description. My editor coined me a "Goldilocks writer" years ago. The first time I include way too many details of what someone might

be wearing or how this might look, but then I realize it's too much and cut it all out—and now it's way too little detail. Anything involving description is going to take me three tries: too much, too little, just right.

I never can guess what's going to happen in your novels. Can you at all deconstruct how you manage to maintain that element of surprise?

My first few books, I outlined. Being a new writer and a scared writer, I didn't want the terror of the blank screen. So I mapped out the book. That's how I wrote *The Perfect Husband*, my first thriller. And I was lucky—that book did go to a small publishing auction, and sold, but the first comment I got from my editor was that it was the most linear plot she'd ever read, and she could predict exactly what was going to happen, and I needed to rip the whole thing apart and redo it. So that's where I got with outlining.

But to a certain extent it makes sense to me. If you outline a book, by definition, you're encapsulating all the really good ideas you have [at once]—which probably will be the most logical things, right? So you end up with a book that's pretty logical, but not very surprising.

Now, I research with experts, get a foundation of some forensic things that need to happen, that will be a cool turning point when I get there, but then I do write [by the] seat of the pants. When I was writing *Find Her*, was Flora Dane a victim or a vigilante? I didn't know. And I like that process better. I particularly like to write characters who are bits of shades of gray, so we don't know exactly where they're going to go. They're at a turning point in their lives and they're under extreme stress, because it's a thriller. So, will this break them? And not even just your main characters, but *all* the characters. And suddenly there's something interesting, for me, to show up for in the mornings.

To write psychological suspense, by nature you're tapping your reader's psyche. How do you know if you're hitting the right mark on the emotional barometer?

I'm not sure if this is going to make any sense, but for me to write, I can't be thinking about who's going to read this. It would be inhibiting. Character is the part that I'm fortunate happens the most naturally for me. To a certain extent, that's also committing myself to my character. In *Fear Nothing*, when the doctor starts removing slivers of skin from her one-night stands, that was news to me, too. But it felt so right, exactly like something she would do. And you can't stop and think, *Is it too horrible, to have a heroine engage in this behavior? Is it too off-putting, will readers close the book?* You just have to say, *This is who*



DOMESTICATING SUSPENSE

For more tips from Gardner on deciding what comes next when writing without an outline—and incorporating just the right amount of research—visit writersdigest.com/aug-16.

this is. And I'm going to write it the way I see it and the way she feels it, and have faith that readers will follow.

You've released Kindle Singles between novels. How is that strategy an asset, marketing- or creativity-wise?

It's a good challenge on both fronts. When I started out, if you were a suspense novelist you were expected to write a book a year. The good news is, that time frame fits well for me. The bad news is that now they would like books, you know, quarterly, and that is not something I can do. So the compromise has been, *Can you deliver something else, so readers can at least touch base with the characters?* That's what those are about. They've been a good challenge—I never knew how to write short. I started at 17 with a book.

It's been awhile since you've done a stand-alone. Are you wholly devoted to your series at this point?

I have absolutely no game plan. If there's one weakness I have—you know, a game plan wouldn't be a terrible thing! I follow the ideas as they come. Certainly *Find Her* was unexpected to me: It's a D.D. Warren book that doesn't have a lot of D.D. Warren in it—it became Flora Dane's book. If the idea feels right, you want to see it through, and you want to do it the way it needs to be done.

You've discussed the "trust no one" fiction trend—the phenomenon of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*. Writers are told *not* to write to trends, but what's your advice for those who feel drawn to domestic suspense?

If it speaks to you, you should write it. I've been writing domestic suspense for years. Harlan Coben has been writing domestic suspense for years. Trends may be spiking now, but this isn't a new kind of thriller. ...

I'm a more psychologically driven writer, and I think the sense that the person you love the most may be the person you fear the most is very compelling. And if that's something that resonates [with you too], go ahead, because I don't think this is a trend that will disappear. It may ebb and flow, but these kinds of books have always been with us. **WD**

Jessica Strawser (jessicastrawser.com) is the editorial director of *Writer's Digest*. Her debut novel, *Almost Missed You*, is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press in March 2017.



MAPPING THE POV MINEFIELD

Stories told from multiple points of view are more popular than ever—but hidden dangers can await those of us who set out to write them. Sidestep these 9 land mines, and you'll carry your reader safely to The End.

BY STEVEN JAMES



TODAY, MORE THAN EVER BEFORE, authors are using multiple point-of-view characters in their fiction.

And for good reason. It's a powerful technique. It allows us to inject suspense, provides a natural way to propel the story forward, helps readers to more closely identify with multiple characters, opens up the opportunity to write more intricately connected story lines, and lets us include scenes in which the protagonist doesn't appear.

So what's the catch?

If not handled with care, multiple POVs can also confuse readers, diffuse the plot, throw off pacing and timing, and dilute a story's impact.

Over the course of my career, I've written 13 novels with multiple POVs and have read countless more. Along the way, I've picked up some practical tips that can help avoid issues that get in the way of readers' engagement with the story. I've seen these mistakes. I've made them. Here are the most common land mines to be aware of when working with multiple POV story lines—and how to avoid them.

TOP PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK.COM: JAN FAUKNER; BOTTOM PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK.COM: JGOLDBY

LAND MINE #1

FREEZE TAG

Remember playing Freeze Tag when you were a kid? A person would get tagged by whoever was *it* and then have to remain “frozen” in place until someone who was free tagged him.

When writing multiple POVs it’s easy to inadvertently freeze-tag characters in one story line while the rest of the characters run around throughout the other story lines.

For example, during a fight scene, just as one character raises the knife to stab the other guy, the author flips to a simultaneous POV story line for 10 pages before returning to the fight as the guy drives the knife into his opponent’s shoulder.

But what were the men doing for those 10 pages?

Nothing.

Poised in midfight.

Frozen in time.

Remember that, though time in the novel might be dynamic (the first 200 pages could span nine days, while the final 100 pages might cover only 14 hours), time will pass for all of the story’s characters at the same rate.

So, if something takes 12 hours for one character, 12 hours will have passed for every other character. And if it takes two seconds—well, two seconds will have passed for everyone else.

Avoid this land mine by verifying the timing. As you evaluate each transition from one POV to another, ask: *Is that the same amount of time it would take every other character to accomplish what they do in their story lines? If not, how can I recast things?*

LAND MINE #2

TIME WARPS

You’re reading about an exciting helicopter chase. We’re in the hero’s POV. He’s skillfully maneuvering through New York City, following close on the tail of the villain’s chopper.

The villain’s chopper disappears around a skyscraper. Then, the POV flip comes.

Now we’re in the villain’s POV as he climbs into the helicopter to take off 10 minutes earlier.

Wait ... *What?*

Readers expect that a story will progress forward, that one POV will pick up where the other left off. If that doesn’t happen, they’ll get confused about the timeline,

or simply annoyed by having to read things they already know. *Obviously he climbed into the chopper—he’s in the middle of a helicopter chase!*

Avoid time warps by constructing your story so that at the fraction of a second when one POV section ends, the next begins. Pick up the story there, and not 10 minutes earlier.

LAND MINE #3

AMNESIA

The last time we saw this character, she was vowing that she would try to lose some of the weight she put on over the holidays. But now she’s cheerily enjoying a donut and mocha chocolate chip latte while she sorts through her mail. Her actions are incongruous with her stated desire—and no reason is given.

It’s as if when she reappears, the last scene never happened. She’s a blank slate. The author has disregarded the character’s promise not just to herself but to the reader, and the impact that it would naturally have on her actions.

Often, this is a problem that authors run into when they outline their stories beforehand: They know where they want things to go, but they don’t always take into account the context of what just occurred.

Unless there’s good reason to believe otherwise (i.e., an explanation is given—she’s feeling guilty that she isn’t on a treadmill and is drowning her sorrows in self-defeating calories; she’s cheating “just one more time;” she’s feeling defiant or, conversely, self-assured because of a comment her husband made), readers will assume that a character’s state of mind at the beginning of a POV section is the same as it was at the end of her last one.

Delve into her current mindset every time you return to her POV:

- What’s she worried about? What’s she reeling from? What is she hoping to accomplish?
- Has she had a chance to process her feelings? What does she want at this moment in the story? How will that desire affect how she responds to the people who are present with her now, in this chapter?

Make sure that context affects how she thinks, feels and responds in every scene.

Your readers don’t have amnesia about this character’s attitude and goals, so make sure the character doesn’t have it, either.

LAND MINE #4

MIND READING

You could write:

I watched Andrea put the dishes away. She wished I would've remembered our anniversary and was thinking how disappointed she was that I forgot it.

But no, you wouldn't write that. Because how would the other POV character know what Andrea is thinking?

You'll hear some editors refer to this as "head hopping" and even if you know better, it can happen unintentionally in messy first drafts. Basically, it's when a character suddenly exhibits psychic mind-reading powers. As you write and rewrite and revise, remember: The character can assume, he can infer, but he cannot *know* what someone else is thinking.

Avoid this land mine by clearly (but unobtrusively) communicating that the character is guessing at the other person's thoughts. One of these, perhaps:

The way she banged the dishes told me she was upset.

It seemed as if she was disappointed.

She looked devastated.

LAND MINE #5

STEPFORD WIVES

The story you're reading is moving along fine, and the author has managed his POV transitions well, but by Page 300 the characters are all beginning to sound alike.

They use the same phrases, idioms and similar sentence construction. They've lost their unique qualities and mannerisms. The author has adeptly juggled the POVs for the purposes of the plot, but in the process, style and attention to detail have fallen by the wayside.

Remember, when we're in a character's POV, we notice only what that character would notice, and only *in the way she would notice it*.

It isn't just action that's rendered from her viewpoint; we also get her perspective, discoveries, questions, desires and observations—all in her voice.

Analyze your story, scene by scene, and evaluate whether this character would really describe things the way she does. Verify that the characters aren't responding uniformly, mechanically or robotically, but that each retains his own distinctive narrative voice.

LAND MINE #6

FALLING OFF THE GRID

You're halfway through reading the novel your friend recommended, and all at once it strikes you that you haven't heard from one of the POV characters since Chapter 3. You start thinking, *Whatever happened to Bob? I thought he was supposed to be key to this counter-terrorism project?*

It's as if the guy has gone on an unscheduled vacation.

This happens when authors accidentally forget about a character for 10, 50, 100 pages. Or when they purposely put that character on hiatus, but don't realize they're neglecting an implicit promise to the reader by doing so.

Readers keep wondering when he'll show up again. That's distracting and causes them to lose trust that they're in the hands of a competent storyteller.

Avoid this land mine by tracking the page numbers (or chapters) where each character appears, and then evaluate whether readers will expect to hear from him sooner (or later) than they do. Then recast the story as necessary so you don't let them down.

LAND MINE #7

GUESS WHO?

It's an exciting thriller. You're on Page 200, and so far the author has introduced four POV characters: the female detective, the female victim, the male kidnapper and the detective's male love interest.

Multiple POV Cheat Sheet

When alternating POVs, keep in mind that ...

- Every POV character should have an unmet desire that she's pursuing.
- It's confusing to have more than one first-person story line.
- Every character has a distinctive voice.
- Specificity and magnitude promise significance.
- A character can't know what's going on in someone else's head.
- Clarity about POV is vital to reader orientation.
- Time passes at the same rate for everyone.
- Pace and escalation of different POV story lines happens concurrently.
- Each character's state of mind is influenced by the events of the preceding scene.

So far, so good.

Then you come to a chapter that begins:

He walked slowly down the street, taking everything in. It was vital that he understood this city, this neighborhood. Everything depended on it.

Whose POV are we in?

The pronoun “he” indicates that the character is male, so he’s either the kidnapper or the love interest ... unless the author is introducing yet another POV character.

When readers don’t know who a scene is about from the very start, they won’t know what the character wants, what’s at stake, or whether they should cheer for or against him. That confusion will drive them out of the story.

So, every time you flip to a new POV, reorient readers. Don’t leave them wondering, *Whose viewpoint are we in? What time is it? Where are we?* If possible, include the name of the POV character in the first line, or if you’re using first person, let that be clear right off the bat:

I’ve never shot anyone before, and the moment I squeezed the trigger I knew things would never be the same again.

Even before her boyfriend said a word, by the look on his face Andrea realized that things were over.

The last time Greg had been in this grocery store he hadn’t come to rob it, just to buy a loaf of day-old bread for his pregnant wife.

LAND MINE #8

THE PENDULUM

The novel you’re reading has two POV characters, but the stories aren’t escalating at the same rate.

Every time you’re in Suzie’s POV, things are exciting and you can see the events building toward a climactic confrontation with the terrorists at the airport. But then there’s Alex’s POV: His coming-of-age story line is filled with brooding teenage angst and doesn’t seem to be going anywhere.

The pace of one story line is brisk. Crisp. Tight.

The other is laborious and slow.

When you step on this land mine the pace pendulum swings back and forth, the story lines reach their climaxes at different times, or one ends up dragging the rest of them down. You want all of your POV sections to escalate concurrently and reach their zenith, or their climax, at the same time. Also, just as with chapter end-

ings, POV sections should end with the forward movement of the plot (a new revelation, decision, discovery, action, etc.) rather than with resolution.

Carefully study the pace and flow. Make sure it fits your genre and that none of the story lines detract from the others.

LAND MINE #9

THE BAIT AND SWITCH

You start reading a horror novel that begins with a woman jogging alone on the beach.

We’re in her POV and we find out her backstory—where she went to college, the name of her first pet gerbil, and what she’s hoping to accomplish after graduating with her master’s degree in English. Then comes the amazing plot twist: *She’s killed off at the end of the prologue!*

*Every time you flip to a new
POV, reorient readers.
Don’t leave them wondering.*

Wow.

Didn’t see that coming.

Readers will not be thrilled when they invest their time and emotion in a POV character who’s introduced and then promptly killed off. They instinctively correlate time on the page with significance. If a minor POV character ends up playing a major role, or a major POV character just disappears, readers will likely feel frustrated.

Strive for significance in proportion to promise. Authors draw attention to characters through specificity (detail) and magnitude (number of words on the page). Readers naturally assume that a POV character with whom they spend a lot of time will be significant to the story.

Don’t let them down.

Every word is a promise. Every struggle is a promise. Avoid making narrative promises that you don’t keep, and you’ll navigate this minefield safe and sound. **WD**

Steven James is a popular fiction instructor, critically acclaimed novelist and author of *Story Trumps Structure* (WD Books). When he’s not writing, he teaches at conferences and retreats around the country.



THE *Sound* OF *Success*

The winner of the **16TH ANNUAL WRITER'S DIGEST
SHORT SHORT STORY COMPETITION**
used striking imagery to move readers
with "The Vows."

BY CHELSEA HENSHEY

The deficiency of one sense has been proven to boost the effectiveness of another. A blind person, for instance, may be able to hear more precisely than someone gifted with sight. For 25-year-old writer Kelly Dowling, in losing her hearing to meningitis as a child, she gained a unique ability to note other sensations in ways many people don't.

"I think that my strength as a writer is in my ability to paint an image through my writing," says Dowling, who earned a Master of Arts in creative writing from Southern New Hampshire University and now works as a high school English tutor and freelance copy editor. "Being profoundly deaf leaves me with a lot of time to observe sight, smell, touch and taste, which in turn allows me to incorporate vivid sensory details into my writing. Growing up, I spent a great deal of time trying to imagine all the different ways to describe a feeling or detail. I think this helped me develop a wide arsenal of storytelling tools."

Dowling's abilities shined in the 1,487-word story "The Vows," besting more than 6,700 entries to win the grand prize in the 16th Annual Writer's Digest Short Short Story Competition. Dowling will receive \$3,000 and a trip to the Writer's Digest Conference in New York City, among other prizes.

"The Vows" is told from the perspective of a man preparing a speech for the love of his life. As he decides

what to write, he considers their most important memories, and the reader experiences the emotional highs of their relationship through the story's delicate structure and deft descriptions.

"The unnamed male narrator is sort of my personal Frankenstein's monster," Dowling says. "He is made up of experiences and anecdotes I've gathered from love-struck male peers. ... For this piece, I really tried to stick with the 'write what you know' mantra."

While "write what you know" might sound like a safe approach, it's actually far from Dowling's comfort zone. She normally writes book-length historical fantasy and science fiction—including the self-published novel *Rogue Elegance* and a dystopian teen novel-in-progress. Realistic flash fiction was a departure.

"When I write short stories, they generally act as more of an exercise or a personal passion project," Dowling says. "As a storyteller, I like words, and I like a lot of them. Keeping things short and sweet has always been my Achilles heel. ... Challenging myself to make every word and every sentence count has been a great way to strengthen my storytelling abilities."

But in any genre or form, Dowling's observational skills are her constant strength—and her ability to apply them has been a lifetime in the making. "I spent a great deal of my childhood in total silence," she says. "While other kids were making friends, I was dreaming up imaginary worlds and figur[ing] out how to put them on paper."

PHOTO © SHUTTERSTOCK.COM: KOSTENKO MAXIM



Winner's SPOTLIGHT

KELLY DOWLING

What's your writing routine?

My writing routine includes tea, and a lot of it. (Depending on the time of day, that tea may or may not come with a dash of whiskey.) I work in my home office, usually choosing to handwrite everything in my notebook before typing it out. Call me old-fashioned, but the allure of Facebook browsing is just too strong when I'm working on my laptop. Writing by hand helps keep me focused on really developing the story without unwelcome notifications, emails and Candy Crush invitations getting in the way.

Who has inspired you as writer?

My dad, who spent endless hours reading the Harry Potter series aloud to me when I first received my cochlear implant. He gave me his hereditary love of stories, and has always encouraged me to put my wild imagination down on paper.

Where do you get ideas?

I think human emotion [is] such a vital part of storytelling, and as such I often find myself recording snippets of dialogue or emotional reactions that I experience or witness.

What's the key to a successful short story?

To dive feetfirst into the heart of the conflict. I can't claim responsibility for this bit of advice, since a graduate professor gave it to me when I was feeling particularly challenged by an assignment. Still, it's worked for me, and it definitely helps me gain my focus when pinning down the meat of the story.



'TIL DEATH DO US PART

To read "The Vows" and an extended Q&A with our winner, visit writersdigest.com/aug-16.

THE

Short LIST

The 16th Annual WD Short Short Story Competition received more than 6,700 entries. Authors Debby Mayne, Gina Ochsner and Michael J. Vaughn served as first-round judges, and the WD editorial staff ranked the finalists.

1. "THE VOWS," Ashley Nelson, Tampa, Fla.
2. "THE SNATCH," Suzanna Hyatt Marvill, Avon Park, Fla.
3. "THE MAYOR OF DORKVILLE," Adam Black, Brentwood, Tenn.
4. "PROPER OFFERINGS," Vincent Crampton, Gotha, Fla.
5. "THE BUS RIDER," Mike Diccico, Warrington, Pa.
6. "UNREQUITED SOMETHING,"
7. "FIVE AND FIVE," Bikram Sharma, Norwich, U.K.
8. "THE DOWSER," Hans Weidman, Torrance, Calif.
9. "WASHED UP," Jennie Bricker, Portland, Ore.
10. "THE PREDICAMENT OF PLANTING SUNFLOWERS: PERSPECTIVE I," E. Ellis Allen, South Jordan, Utah



YOU COULD BE NEXT! Enter your shortest of stories (1,500 words or fewer) in the 17th Annual WD Short Short Story Competition. The deadline is Nov. 15, and the early-bird fee is \$20 per story. For more information and to enter online, visit writersdigest.com/short. To purchase an anthology of the top 25 stories from this year's competition, go to writersdigestshop.com.



FUNNY YOU SHOULD ASK

A literary agent's mostly serious answers to your mostly serious questions.

BY BARBARA POELLE

Dear FYSA,

I've heard that including chapter titles in novels is passe and the sign of an amateur. What are your thoughts?

Yours, Passe the Potatoes

Dear Passe,

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IF THAT IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT?

It was 1983. Brett, that mulleted roller god, had just circled the Great Skate patrons for the prize round of "The Hokey Pokey." The music started. I put my right hand in. The rest should have been history. But no! As we put our whole selves in, he skated over, feathered bangs ruffling in the self-made breeze, and handed the jumbo pink bear to the girl next to me. To this day I am boggled, incensed, inflamed by this travesty of justice. I hokied! I pokied! *She didn't even turn herself around.*

Now *that* is an amateur.

Hmm? Oh. You with your chapter titles? It's fine to use them as long as they enhance rather than distract.

Dear FYSA,

Novels I've read by new authors lately—often, but not always, in the romance genre—seem to be really fast paced, with the characters having vivid sex, sometimes even before the end of the first chapter. Is that the new standard? I don't want

my characters to seem cheap, but I also want to keep readers engaged. I guess what I'm wondering is: How much is too much?

Sincerely, This Book Is Not Yet Rated

Dear Not Yet Rated,

First, let's pause for a beat here to allow my editor to slowly uncap his red pen with a look of utter terror ...

OK! So, actually, this is not the question you think it is. The fact of the matter remains that sex scenes, when done badly, are catastrophic to a novel. Therefore, it isn't about quantity, but *quality*. (Heh. That's [WD Editor: REDACTED].)

You should approach writing a sex scene the way you would approach describing a crime scene—because they both [WD Editor: REDACTED]. Am I right? Ha!

Think about it. The tension, the moment before, the gratuity level of the description, the atmosphere, and the construct of the characters involved are all integral to the crafting of a scene that "works." You can open a book with a crime as long as the moment is grounded in the *reality* of committing that crime, and not, *Guy enters, shoots, exits*. The same goes for a sex scene in an opening chapter. (Just don't kick it off with a [WD Editor: REDACTED—*this is getting exhausting.*])

Look, when writing plots peppered with the biggies—death, sex, fear and love—the most important factor is how relatable the motivations of the characters are. *That* is what the plot revolves around. People don't want to read about actions; they want to read about people making decisions that *lead* to those actions. Trying to write a scene that feels inorganic to the established construct of the character (regardless, by the way, of whether or not the character is likeable), isn't going to do readers any favors—whether the character is having sex or making an omelet.

And in both cases, [WD Editor: REDACTED].

Dear FYSA,

What's the key to staying supportive of writer friends when they find more success than you do?

Signed, PB & Jelly(ous)

Dear PB & J,

The publishing path is like a game of Plinko on "The Price Is Right": You all have the same chip to drop in, but it won't take the same course to its destination. Try to find the confidence to assert that your boots are exactly where they need to be on *your* path. Know, too, that those chips can take a sudden wild hop—for better or for worse. One day you and your friend may have switched places, so



ASK FUNNY YOU SHOULD ASK! Submit your own questions on the writing life, publishing or anything in between to writers.digest@fwcommunity.com with "Funny You Should Ask" in the subject line. Select questions (which may be edited for space or clarity) will be answered in future columns, and may appear on WritersDigest.com and in other WD publications.

People don't want to read about actions; they want to read about people making decisions that *lead* to those actions.

it's wise to act the way you hope he might if and when that time comes.

You can't ever truly control a reflex of envy, but here are some hypothetical scenarios to keep you self-aware, outwardly projecting more of the PB (Positive Buddy) and less of the J.

JELLY: A friend emails to say the manuscript she sent out on Friday has an offer of representation. It's Monday.

PB: Burn a printed copy of that email over the kitchen sink while hissing, "So glad I got that MFA." Then return to the computer and type, "Huge congrats! Let me know if you want to Skype with wine tonight so we can run through your list of questions to ask the agent." Bonus: It'll help you prep for your own eventual call, too.

JELLY: You've sold two books for \$10,000 each. Your friend's debut just banked \$250,000. Each. For a trilogy.

PB: Scream into a throw pillow until your spouse offers to take the kids out for dinner. When the house is quiet, call your friend and say, "My envy is

as green as the Kate Spade bag you will buy me for having helped you revise your earlier drafts." Then trade ideas for stops on her book tour.

JELLY: Your friend hit *The New York Times* list the week she debuted.

PB: Place your friend's book in the driveway and back over it. Then text him: "WOW! So happy for you! And for me, too, because now I know a bestseller who will blurb *my* book!"

It's OK to acknowledge the green-eyed monster—just don't let him linger. Consider it fuel for the fire—then get back to focusing on your own Plinko chip. **WD**

Barbara Poelle is vice president at Irene Goodman Literary Agency (irenegoodman.com), where she specializes in adult and young adult fiction.

ENTHRALL YOUR READERS, LOVE THE PROCESS, & BECOME THE WRITER YOU ARE MEANT TO BE

Writers are given a wealth of opportunities to cultivate a successful writing life, break out, and find an audience for their work. Yet so many writers, from beginners to veterans, find their careers stuck in neutral. The solution is simple: *Just write*. Write yourself past fears, doubts, and setbacks, and use your desire for writing excellence to deeply immerse yourself in the craft. In *Just Write*, you'll discover how to:

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"James Scott Bell is a master of writing craft ... I have learned more from James' books than any writing course, and this book is no exception."

—KAMI GARCIA,
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

First Things First

THE CHALLENGE: Write the opening sentence to a story based on the photo prompt below.



Out of more than 1,100 entries, *Writer's Digest* editors and forum members selected the following 10 story openers.

❶ Being lost and low on fuel didn't mean much once I saw the flash: too fast for a sunrise and too slow for an explosion. —*Dennis Collins*

❷ Only I know he never touched the brakes at the top of the pass, but my silence was bought by the

pine impaling the windshield. —*Carie Sherman*

❸ Scott drove slowly down the snowy road thinking he had committed the perfect crime, but the rising sun wasn't his only witness. —*Wanda Kiernan*

❹ *I'll never get away with it*, she thought as she watched him head down the mountain, the loosened lug nuts already working themselves free. —*C.W. Accetta*

❺ The things we do to get a decent cup of coffee. —*Joshua Albritton*

❻ Stopping the Jeep, our excitement turned to horror as we realized the fresh powder of the new year was not snow, but human ashes. —*Jamie Galapia*

❼ The Jeep rolled out of the burned-out forest completely without damage—or a driver. —*Lisa Spargo*

❽ David gunned the stolen Jeep around another curve on the snow-packed wilderness road, unaware of the sun-and-mist-hidden pedestrian ahead. —*Michael Hamer*

❾ Waving an enthusiastic goodbye as he peels down the mountainside, his mother turns to me and asks, "You made sure to cut the brakes, right?" —*Andrea Ritterbeck*

❿ Jacob gaped at his side mirror, where 200 yards back he saw Nina's truck emerge over a dip, 12-gauge still pointed out the driver's window. —*Laura Saienni*

→ ENTERYOURSTORY

WRITE A SHORT STORY of 700 words or fewer that begins with the sentence below. You can be poignant, funny, witty, etc.; it is, after all, your story.



“You don’t have enough points, sir.”

TO ENTER: Send your sentence via the online submission form at writersdigest.com/your-story-competition or via email to yourstorycontest@fwcommunity.com (entries must be pasted directly into the body of the email; attachments will not be opened).

NOTE: WD editors select the top five entries and post them on our website (writersdigest.com/your-story-competition). Join us online in mid-July, when readers will vote to help rank the winners!

The winners will be published in a future issue of *Writer’s Digest*.
DON’T FORGET: Your name and mailing address. One entry per person.
DEADLINE: July 11, 2016

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WORKBOOK

EXERCISES AND TIPS FOR HONING SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF YOUR WRITING

Personal Essays

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF PERSONAL ESSAYS

BY PETER BRICKLEBANK

In some sense, personal essays are intended to give readers the impression that the writer is on a voyage of self-discovery. But if we have only a rough idea of where that expedition is going—no general theme or concrete thesis—then maybe our journey is more of a mystery tour. Which also implies that the literary essay—as opposed to a journalistic article—can wander. Thus the question arises, how do you manage to heel this wanderlust and provide your narrative with a clear and cogent sense of direction?

Effective personal essays can be broken down into these essential components:

- the personal presence of the author
- an engagement between the self and the world
- the author's self-exploration/self-discovery
- the need to both show and tell
- veracity and authenticity
- the mutability of form
- a sense of intellectual plot, quest, engagement or payoff.

Let's explore each in turn.

THE PERSONAL PRESENCE OF THE AUTHOR

Personal essays typically speak directly to the reader. They employ a casual, intimate voice. Each essay gives the impression of a *tête-à-tête* between author and reader. A writer's experiences, filtered through the limitations and strengths of his character, articulated in his own words in his own singular way, create a distinct vision of our shared existence as human beings. Your personal

essay is a window to the world, a microcosm of *our* shared human experience.

In the 16th century, Michel de Montaigne, the patriarch of the essay, said, "It is myself I portray." He was not suggesting that the essay was a nesting box for narcissists. In an essay, you often deal with both internal and external conflicts. In doing so, you reveal yourself, certainly, but readers' primary interest is not in the essay's confessional nature, but in the way it expresses things close to their own experience and confirms their humanity. Your individuality and the individuality of your readers are equally enhanced by being acknowledged, voiced, described and made plain in the light of day. The essay, then, provides an inner dialogue in an out-facing form. In seeking to make discoveries about your own life in an essay, aim to find patterns, meanings and understanding that extend beyond you.

TIP: You don't have to look for your voice—it's already inside of you. If you write with conviction and passion, the more you write, the more defined and distinct that voice becomes.

AN ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN THE SELF & THE WORLD

The best essays combine the isolated writer not just with the reader, but with the amorphous abstraction of society. That interaction between the self and the wider world provides the spark that makes reading an enhancement of reality itself—our reality.

Phillip Lopate, in his essay "Confessions of a Shusher," engages an aspect of himself he seems both

pleased and chagrined by: his annoyance with unceasing chatter and rustled candy wrappers once a film begins. He's implying, of course, that many of us are similarly irritated by such distractions. Some would like to chastise the offenders but restrain themselves, while others don't hold back and thus incur the wrath of the noisemakers (after all, is it even possible to shush someone in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental way?). Lopate's essay is simply a meditation on attitudes toward the shusher, a creature we love or hate, depending on whether we're the irritated or the irritating. It provides no deep insight, but the mild enjoyment of universal experience is recognized and explored.

By contrast, George Orwell's essay "A Hanging" describes the execution he took part in as a colonial military policeman. Between what Orwell observes in the scene (the barefooted, condemned man sidesteps a puddle, reminding Orwell of his humanity) and thinks (that in the moment the trapdoor opens, the man's hair and nails will continue to grow, utterly oblivious to the arbitrary justice he's about to receive), the essay ultimately provides an argument against capital punishment.

One essay rife with grumpiness, one with gravitas—both created from the interaction of an alert individual and a world that sleepwalks through the horrors of its own insensitivity.

TIP: You can be sensitive, rational and reasonable in an essay, but you don't have to be. In fact, just like in the real world, it often helps if you aren't. Aside from the times when you take on a particular disposition to attain a goal, don't feel obliged to be nice and well-behaved. No one's going to tell your mother.

THE AUTHOR'S SELF-EXPLORATION/ SELF-DISCOVERY

If you want your writing to surprise readers, then you must first surprise yourself, and that's achieved by unearthing who you really are.

Part of the strength and appeal of a personal essay comes from the intimacy a reader feels toward the writer: her quirky, personal, conversational voice and her candor. When the author allows readers to look deeply into herself as she acknowledges the inadequacy and ignorance we all feel, that openness and vulnerability is apt to convince readers of the essential decency of the author. We discover who we are in the smithy of worldly

experience by what we do or don't, by what we think or refuse to admit. The essay is a tool to explore that: who we were, who we are and who we will be.

In seeking to make discoveries about your own life in an essay, aim to find patterns, meanings and understanding that extend beyond you.

Lopate, in his essay "The Moody Traveler," describes with a true curmudgeon's delight the distastefulness of traveling and being expected to enjoy oneself. Nothing much happens in the essay; while taking part in (and commenting on) the usual shuffling to scenic overlooks and the snapping of vapid photographs, the author attempts to avoid interactions with those who see nothing but a delight in such run-of-the-mill tourism. But the reader is there not for the travelogue, but for the pleasure of acquaintance with the amusing and ever-so-human dyspeptic writer. The joy is in the *schadenfreude*. The scenic view is into the self.

TIP: As an essayist, you must be your own inquisitor, testing what is wise or foolish within yourself. You must be your own explorer, mapping the uncharted borderlands of your natural resources, and your own alchemist, discovering through words what is in your heart.

THE NEED TO BOTH SHOW & TELL

Although personal essays share many techniques with fiction, they go against what is possibly the most oft-used dictum of writing wisdoms: In fiction you need to show, illustrate, depict (that is, *craft*) a believable fictional world; in nonfiction, while you similarly need to construct a persuasive realm through skillful storytelling, you can also include commentary, analysis, reflections, opinions and viewpoints. Readers of the essay don't just want to feel the struggling creature in the sack—they want to know what it is. In an essay, then, you must give readers context: a structure of engagement, a framework within which to understand both *why* you are looking at a particular thing, and *what* you are coming to realize from the examination.

In her essay "I Feel a Spell Coming On," Harriet R. Goren details her life as someone prone to passing out

at inopportune moments. If all she did in the essay was simply string together incidences of fainting, pretty soon the reader would veer into inattention. Instead, she ponders what incidents like these symbolize, and thus provides context for the reader. Here's an excerpt:

After graduation, a friend's roommate invited me over for his first attempt at preparing Italian cuisine. We had salad with garlic dressing and, for the main course, garlic eggplant parmigiana, followed by an interesting soup made from a garlic stock in which I almost drowned as my body attempted to come to terms with the pungent bulb. It failed, and only my friend's quick reflexes saved me from being scalded as the room faded away and my head dropped precipitously into the bowl. Later that month my boyfriend and I found ourselves in a passionate embrace in his shower. I told him not to turn up the hot water, but he did anyway. This proved to be one too many bits of input for my sensitive bloodstream. Down from his arms I crumpled, an inelegant wet ball on the porcelain. He gathered me up and whispered into my ear, quite pleased. I didn't have the heart to tell him that my swoon had nothing to do with his prowess.

Amidst all these years of momentary excitement, I never did go to a doctor to learn the whole story, if any. In truth, I didn't want to put a name to my condition. It was much more interesting to wait to expire unexpectedly like my cousin Eugene, 72, who died in bed while making love to his 25-year-old girlfriend. I didn't want to know if something dull and long-lasting was brewing in my body.

Goren goes on to relate more incidents and her responses to them, and the meaning behind those responses. As she regularly loses consciousness, we—by contrast—are made conscious of what it is to live on the edge of a swoon.

TIP: If you're relaying a long anecdote, make sure the reader knows why up front. Often, in early drafts, an author details incidents and events, but fails to provide context. Answer this question when you look at your own essay drafts: *Am I both showing and telling what I'm thinking and feeling through all of this?*

VERACITY & AUTHENTICITY

I'd be lying if I said that accuracy isn't important. But for personal essays, we're not talking accuracy in terms of

letter-of-the-law fact, but a reasonable insistence to make sure that whatever is presented as true and accurate is just so: true and accurate. This sounds like fact-checking, but it is simply being responsibly fair to whatever memory of events you might have; faithful to the characteristics of action and speech that you have experienced; authentic, as far as you can be, in your representation of yourself.

Without suggesting that we're all a frightening batch of multiple personalities, we have to agree that each one of us is a walking, talking house of horrors, a multiplicity of shading and contradiction. Our sense of who we are comprises an array of selves that we proffer in everyday life, seen in the different hats we wear or the faces we present or the masks we hide behind, and even in those we shun. Acknowledging this, it's clear there's no one self to be entirely true to, but an aggregate of quirky selfhood from which we draw; we live and write with this comfortably loose adherence to a sense of authenticity.

Whether writing in first person or third, there's a narrator to a nonfiction piece. And because it's nonfiction, that narrator is essentially you, the author, but you in a particular guise or mood or hat. In other words, the voice of the essay, your voice, becomes almost a character in the piece. But if this feels like a drift toward fiction, toward making things up, then where is the veracity? Writers play up particular characteristics in certain pieces in order to play off this character, but unlike fiction, where unreliable narrators abound, in nonfiction, we rest easy knowing that the narrator is essentially the author, to which literary license allows only the latitude of minor exaggeration.

The authorial presence in a personal essay is felt as a persona, a temperament, a disposition—a whiff of charm, integrity, spirit or individuality. Beginning essayists tend to forget every essay has its own imprint of the author.

TIP: Many people waste needless energy fretting over definitions of what is or isn't nonfiction. Use this rule of thumb: Don't make up what didn't happen; re-create what did happen in a way faithful to your sense of the emotional terrain.

THE MUTABILITY OF FORM

The essay is a medium so amorphous that it encompasses every ugly rhetorical mode you ever had the misfortune to meet in a college textbook: the book review, the reportorial

article, the op-ed piece, the case study, the travelogue, etc. It has countless forms of narrative, as in Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels," a lyrical reflection, or Richard Selzer's "The Discus Thrower," which is almost a short story in disguise. It has its more unconventional forms, sometimes taking the shape of an arrangement in segments or organization around a random pattern. The essay can also simultaneously spin several narrative threads in parallel, or embody a list, or use numbered or subheaded components or fragments. The essay's multitasking fluidity makes a hopeless exercise out of trying to limn its structural borders. It's the user-friendliest hydra you'll ever come across. Enjoy it, feed it, ride it; it won't bite you.

Many people think the essay blithely wanders wherever it will, given its prerogative to closely follow the twists and turns of a writer's thoughts. While it certainly has this freedom, a reader trusts that a divergence from the point is never pointless. A detour on your bus route may be a delay, but it also brings the freshness of different streets, and whatever streets are taken, you know that the destination is still the same.

In any digression, the writer must have an eye on the narrative arc of the piece and the through-line of theme. He should keep an eye out along the way for extra or subsidiary meanings that may become apparent, so the whole forward movement becomes stronger, even though the piece may appear to be edging sideways. Think of J.R.R. Tolkien's Frodo, who wanders, but always toward Mordor. Detours are not digressions at all if they keep putting one large hairy foot forward, toward where the narrative intent must take us.

TIP: Experiment with various forms for your essay in early drafts. Commit your ideas to paper, no matter how fragmentary, even if you can't see all the connections or the overall direction. This creates a rough guide for you to follow and/or diverge from as you rework.

A SENSE OF INTELLECTUAL PLOT, QUEST, ENGAGEMENT OR PAYOFF

An essay strives to reach a deeper comprehension of things at the end than was apparent at the beginning. Your goal isn't to reach a judgment, but to engage in the *process* of reaching one. Solutions don't necessarily have to be found. Insights don't have to be had.

Profundities ... well, they're nice, but not obligatory. Stumble over one, then pick it up. As an essayist, you're a beachcomber: You walk aimlessly, you get your feet wet, you try not to step on a jellyfish; if you find something interesting you might carry it home. Even if all you've ever managed in life is attempts to get square pegs in round holes, you're still an essayist, as long as you can laugh at yourself, reflect on it or put a framework of meaning around your experience in an interesting, emotive, engaging way.

Anne Fadiman's wry essay "Marrying Libraries" deals with domestic trivialities. She describes the mounting tensions and decisions that occur when her new husband moves into her apartment. Both of them avid book lovers—she with Felix Ungar neatness, he with Oscar Madison sloppery—they now face a dilemma: how to merge their books and their disparate modes of being. Do they order alphabetically? Chronologically? By subject? What to do with books by their friends, or with dual copies of classics they both own? For bibliophiles, these are no small matters. And there's no right solution. What we get from the essayist is an appraisal of the problems and how this couple resolves them. Furthermore, the author and her audience come to appreciate something that isn't articulated in a profound epiphany anywhere in the piece: the subtle mesh of bonding that two people, in marrying, come to weave. Deeply cerebral? No. Warmly human? Ah, yes.

So if an essay in some sense kicks around an idea, it has an intellectual plot. If it shows the writer on a voyage of discovery, it presents a quest. And if it imparts insight from the author, it has a thematic payoff. All of these represent an intellectual component, however insubstantial, and that *frisson* of thought or theme a reader can carry away in his own head.

TIP: If you have an idea of what your essay is about before you begin, expect and trust that it will change and morph. Don't keep it too close to the vest. And remember that you don't have to reach great conclusions or profound insights in an essay. If your reader comes out with a larger or fresher sense of things than she originally had, that can be enough.

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CHARACTER & CONFLICT IN PERSONAL WRITING

BY DINTY W. MOORE

In the many college writing workshops I've taught, I've read countless essays from students reflecting on the death of a grandparent. Most of these essays center on how much the writer misses this grandparent, and how hard it is to believe that Gramma or Pop-Pop is actually gone. The better of these essays devote a paragraph or two to bringing the deceased relative back to life—"Grandma Sophia would cook for the entire family every Sunday, and I can still see the tiny smile she wore when her wrinkled hands carefully rolled the perfect meatballs, one after the other, and placed them in the pan"—so that the reader might feel the loss as well.

But it wasn't until this past year that one of my students, Kate, wrote a grandparent essay that rocked me back in my chair. Kate's grandfather had died the year before, in the same month that Kate also lost her white puff of a dog, Snowball.

"I miss Snowball far more than I miss my grandfather," she wrote, "because I barely miss my grandfather at all."

Now, I'm not coldhearted, nor do I want grandchildren to feel badly toward their grandparents, but this essay was suddenly far more interesting than all of the others of its ilk, because it embodied one important aspect of good storytelling that the other essays seemed to lack: conflict.

Kate felt bad about this revelation. She sensed it wasn't the way one was supposed to think or feel. She was conflicted, confused and entirely surprised by her own reaction.

And that's a good place to begin writing.

The French word *assay*, from which we came up with the word *essay* in the English language, means to try out, to seek an answer or solution, to attempt to make sense of something. Essayists are not pursuing ideas merely for the aromatic stew of words that might ensue. The center of the essay is some question or problem that the writer is trying to solve.

Acclaimed essayist and critic Phillip Lopate reminds us: "Without conflict, your essay will drift into static mode, repeating your initial observation in a self-satisfied way. What gives an essay dynamism is the need

to work out some problem, especially a problem that is not easily resolved."

Kate worked through many drafts of her essay and finally concluded that she misses the dog more than she misses her grandfather for a very good reason: The dog showed her more love. Her grandfather was not a bad man, neither evil nor abusive, but he tended to retreat into his chair at family gatherings and go silent. She loved the man well enough and even felt sorry for him at times, but the truth was that he never rose to the affectionate grandfather role, and she was not going to pretend any longer.

INJECTING CONFLICT INTO THE STORY

Charles Isherwood, theater critic for *The New York Times*, wrote this in a 2009 review:

A primary aim of good theater is to hold the proverbial mirror up to nature, and natural man is a vexingly complicated being: a mixture of virtues and foibles, healthy impulses and irreducible neuroses, petty desires and solid ideals. Virtually nobody in life is a simple villain or a plain-vanilla saint. ... The best drama holds fast to the messy truth about human motivation, and the two must-see productions to open during this chilly winter offer rich material for ruminating on the endless surprises of character in the crucible of circumstance.

Although Isherwood is talking about new productions of Broadway plays, he could just as well have been speaking of the personal essay. Ruminating on the endless surprises of character always offers rich material, and though the inherent conflict within the human character is not the only place to find energy for an essay, it remains one of the best.

How do you bring conflict into your personal essay and avoid what Lopate called the "static mode"? Let's look at how various classic and contemporary essayists have solved the problem.

BE THE PROVOCATEUR

A key difference between the essay and the fictional short story is that you, the author, are the protagonist

EXERCISE "I Just Don't Understand You"

Too often we write about other people because we think we know something about them, or because we feel that we can weigh in on their actions or the choices they have made. And too often we end up sounding like know-it-alls. Whether we are writing about a celebrity or a politician, a neighbor or a relative, the assumption that we actually know someone's motives and understand the reasons behind his behavior is a dicey one at best. Life is complicated, and people are hard to fathom.

So think a moment about the people you do not comprehend, and would never claim to fully understand. My list includes two friends who struggled to keep together a marriage but simply could not. Neither one of them was bad or at fault; they just couldn't find the working formula, and I have no better take on what they should have done instead. Still, it seems a shame.

A less serious but equally baffling example concerns the folks in my neighborhood (and in most neighborhoods, I imagine) who treat their front lawns and driveways as if they were hospital operating rooms, hosing away every leaf and acorn first thing in the morning, painstakingly digging out each dandelion and virtually every green shoot that does not look like perfect Kentucky grass. Now I like my yard to look nice, but I can't see putting eight hours a week into it, and a few leaves and twigs and weeds are, to my mind, inevitable.

Make a list of the people who make no sense to you. You aren't firmly against their choices, and you don't have all the answers; they just baffle you. Now write an essay on what you *don't* understand about the mind and heart of this person. Don't attack or suggest that you know better—just explore.

in the essay, the consciousness through which the world is viewed.

In fiction, readers prefer a main character with some fire in her belly, someone who sees the world in a particular way, feels strongly about whatever problem she is trying to solve and takes bold actions. Think Scarlett O'Hara from the novel *Gone With the Wind*.

Readers of the essay are no different: They will tolerate some wishy-washiness in an author because they recognize that self-doubt and second-guessing are an honest part of human thought, but they still want some fire in the belly, and they still want a distinct point of view.

British essayist William Hazlitt, writing in the early 1800s, knew how to gain an audience's notice during a time when numerous British magazines and tabloids were in fierce competition for readers. Consider the title of one of Hazlitt's better-known essays, "On the Pleasure of Hating." The conflict is right there, in those five words.

Hazlitt begins his essay by remarking on a spider that has just crossed his desk. After introducing his wandering arachnid, Hazlitt writes:

As he passes me, I lift up the matting to assist his escape, am glad to get rid of the unwelcome intruder,

and shudder at the recollection after he is gone ... I bear the creature no ill will, but still I hate the very sight of it.

And then:

We learn to curb our will and keep our overt actions within the bounds of humanity, long before we can subdue our sentiments and imaginations to the same mild tone. We give up the external demonstration, the brute violence, but cannot part with the essence or principle of hostility.

Hazlitt has made his claim: Hatred must be hidden in polite society, but it remains inside us all the same. And while the average reader would likely be balking at this point, protesting that certainly they are not of a hateful sort, Hazlitt plunges on:

Nature seems (the more we look into it) made up of antipathies: Without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions, of men.

He backs up his claim with examples relevant to his time and place, mentioning the enthusiastic crowds that gather at public executions, the gleeful persecution

EXERCISE

"Almost Impossible"

You've heard, or perhaps spoken, the words, "It is almost impossible to put into words how I feel right now." People say this about certain tragedies and disappointments, about the first throes of love, about hilarious or spontaneous moments, about the feelings a new father has when first holding his infant daughter.

There's nothing at all wrong with that common expression—unless you are a writer, in which case you simply cannot hide behind that excuse. It is your job to take the most difficult-to-explain experience and bring it to life, in detail, for readers who have not shared that same experience.

What in your own experience do you find "almost impossible" to explain?

of witches, the annual burning of Guy Fawkes effigies and various other ways that British citizens enthusiastically rallied around a common enemy. If he were writing today, he might have cited the "unruly passions" American or European football fans focus on the opposing team, the attack ads and exaggerated claims that have become the staple of national and local elections, or the ways in which we (and our media spokespeople) turn on disgraced celebrities.

Hazlitt is provoking the reader, suggesting that we are not as free of antipathy as we like to believe, but he is also plumbing the depths of human nature, showing how the hatred of something or someone, often in a symbolic form, can be pleasurable, and claiming that such ill feeling is an essential part of our character.

I won't go on to quote any more of Hazlitt's stimulating essay, though it is tempting to do so, because Hazlitt, despite his archaic diction, has a great gift for the fiery, passionate sentence. I will, however, share Hazlitt's final words. The man has a subtle sense of humor, despite his exaggerated zeal, and when he finally runs out of targets, he turns a critical eye on himself:

Seeing all this as I do, and unraveling the web of human life into its various threads of meanness, spite, cowardice, want of feeling, and want of understanding, of indifference towards others, and ignorance of

ourselves ... have I not reason to hate and to despise myself? Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and despised the world enough.

PUT THOUGHT INTO ACTION

Hazlitt had his vigorous opinions, but some folks go even further by using those opinions to fuel their own actions. For instance, Henry David Thoreau spent a night in jail because he refused to pay his taxes in opposition to the Mexican-American War and to slavery, and that defiant act resulted in the classic work "Civil Disobedience."

Similarly, in his desire to make a point about simplicity, technology and the effects of societal "progress" on nature and man, Thoreau moved to a cabin near Walden Pond for two years, and from that experience created the still-celebrated *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*.

Here is his central claim:

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. ... How many a poor immortal soul have I met well nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn 75 feet by 40, its Augean stables never cleansed and 100 acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot! ... The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost ... It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before.

Tough words, indeed, and still remarkable in their decisive opposition to the widespread notion that hard work leads to financial wealth, a big home and ultimate happiness. Like Hazlitt, Thoreau knew that feeble claims and hesitant opinions were not going to gain a reader's attention.

The two years spent near Walden Pond allowed Thoreau to illustrate his ideas and gave him plenty of material, whether from his daily walks or his various encounters with the machinery of progress. His lifestyle was in conflict with societal forces, and his writing couldn't help but reflect the conflict.

This form of participatory essaying lives on today, of course, when writers plunge into their subject matter and test out their theories. You don't need to move into the woods for two years; you might simply adopt a new habit, like stopping to talk to folks on your busy commute to work, buying only locally raised meats and vegetables or turning off the Internet for a week.

SEEK SUBTLE FORMS OF CONFLICT

Not all conflict is based on philosophical or political disagreement. Look, for instance, at the opening to Joan Didion's essay "The Santa Ana," from her wonderful collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*:

There is something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon, some unnatural stillness, some tension. What it means is that tonight a Santa Ana will begin to blow, a hot wind from the northeast whining down through the Cajon and San Geronio Passes, blowing up sandstorms out along Route 66, drying the hills and the nerves to flashpoint.

Didion begins with the weather, but notice that one word: *nerves*. Soon enough in her essay she is talking about how the eerie silence and intense heat cause people to act strangely, fearfully, sometimes violently.

EXERCISE "On the Pleasure of ..."

Two words that one wouldn't naturally pair, *hating* and *pleasure*, form the heart of Hazlitt's essay and provide a straightforward springboard for conflict. What else can you plug into the phrase "On the pleasure of ..." that might encourage the reader to keep turning the pages, just to see what you have to say?

You can be serious, as Hazlitt is for the most part, or you can have fun with this exercise. But your claim must incite initial skepticism in the average reader. (For instance, "On the Pleasure of a Sore Throat.")

Two suggestions:

1. Back up your provocative title with tangible examples, as Hazlitt did.
2. No one likes a lecture, so if you are claiming some flaw in the human character, strive to expose your own complicity.

Her natural conflict—the weather—is the glue that holds her essay together, but within the frame she can explore any number of fascinating human stories, including her own reactions to the Santa Ana.

Here's her final sentence:

The wind shows us how close to the edge we are.

Ruminating on the endless surprises of character always offers rich material, and though the inherent conflict within the human character is not the only place to find energy for an essay, it remains one of the best.

LOOK INWARD

Yet another of Didion's exquisite essays, titled "In Bed," attempts in fewer than 1,500 words to explain the extraordinary sting, disorientation and disruption of severe migraine headaches to those who have never before had them.

Although the description can be excruciating, just like the pain itself, what particularly fascinates me about this specific essay is a passage near the conclusion, in which she writes:

And I have learned now to live with it, learned when to expect it, how to outwit it, even how to regard it, when it does come, as more friend than lodger. We have reached a certain understanding, my migraine and I.

It's that understanding of the underlying relationship that drives the essay.

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two or three opposing ideas in your mind all at the same time and still manage to write elegant, detail-filled, fiery sentences.

Essayists don't have all the answers. If they did, they would have no reason to write. **WD**

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STANDOUT MARKETS

An exclusive look inside the markets that can help you make your mark.

BY CRIS FREESE



↑ WHAT STANDS OUT & WHY:

A two-time finalist for the Association of Writers & Writing Programs Small Press Publisher Award, *Creative Nonfiction* is the first and largest literary magazine to publish exclusively nonfiction prose. It boasts an editorial advisory board composed of such literary masters as Annie Dillard, Diane Ackerman and Jonathan Franzen, as well as a meticulous process: Every submission is reviewed and scored by multiple readers. It's heartening that new authors are regularly featured here, as contributors have nabbed Pushcart Prizes and been featured in *The Best American Essays* and other anthologies. —CF

WD PITCH LIKE A PRO

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Creative Nonfiction

THE INSIDE STORY FROM: Hattie Fletcher, managing editor

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FOUNDED: 1994. **PUBLISHES:**

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What frequently crosses your inbox that you do not want?

We get straightforward family histories and travelogues ... Often, [these submissions lack larger context] and feel like a series of events rather than fully realized stories.

What would you like to see more of?

We would love to see more diverse voices, reflecting a wider variety of experiences. We’re also happy to see work with strong research or elements of reportage.

Does the author’s bio carry any weight?

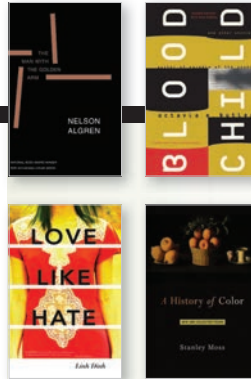
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FOUNDED: 1995. **PUBLISHES:** About 15 titles per year. **PRINT RUN:** Varies. **ADVANCE:** Varies. **ROYALTIES:** 7–15 percent of retail price. **ADDITIONAL IMPRINTS:** Triangle Square books for young readers and Siete Cuentos Editorial, a Spanish-language imprint. **HOW TO SUBMIT:** Submit cover letter and two sample chapters with SASE to Acquisitions, Seven Stories Press, 140 Watts St., New York, NY 10013. **DETAILED GUIDELINES:** sevenstories.com/contact.



WHAT STANDS OUT & WHY: Though small, Seven Stories Press has an impressive list of authors, including Nelson Algren, Octavia Butler, Linh Dinh, Hwang Sok-yong, Stanley Moss and Lee Stringer, and a reputa-

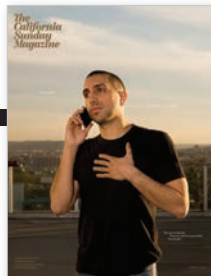
tion for publishing edgier works such as the award-winning *All Things Censored* by Mumia Abu-Jamal. Recent titles *The Body Where I Was Born* by Guadalupe Nettel, *Mundo Cruel* by Luis Negrón and *Censored 2014* (an annual compilation of the top media-censored stories) took home the 2014 Herralde Novel Prize, a 2014 Lambda Literary Award and the 2014 Pillar Award for Journalism and New Media, respectively. —CF

FOR YOUR FREELANCE WRITING:

The California Sunday Magazine

ABOUT: "The California Sunday Magazine roams across California, the West, Asia and Latin America, telling stories for a national audience. ... We explore science, business entertainment, politics, technology, art, social issues, sports, food and more. We're curious about everything. We publish stories regularly on the Web and in print."

FOUNDED: 2014. **PUBLISHES:** Bimonthly. **READERSHIP:** 400,000. **PAYMENT:** Competitive. **LENGTH:** A typical issue will include five to six shorts (800–1,500 words) and three features (2,500–5,000 words). **HOW TO SUBMIT:** Send your pitch in the body of an email to stories@californiasunday.com. **DETAILED GUIDELINES:** Email writers@californiasunday.com for guidelines. **WEBSITE:** californiasunday.com.



WHAT STANDS OUT & WHY: Launched in 2014, *The California Sunday Magazine* has a

unique business model: The print edition is distributed with select Sunday copies of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, while subscriptions to a bimonthly edition are also available. Although the magazine is young, its small staff is experienced, with editors hailing from *The Atlantic*, *Wired*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Los Angeles* magazine and *LA Weekly*. As the publication has no staff writers as of yet, opportunities abound for freelancers to get in on the ground floor. —CF

Cris Freese is an associate editor for WD Books and the Writer's Market series.

CONFERENCE SCENE

Events to advance your craft, connections and career.

BY DON VAUGHAN

1 Historical Writers of America Conference 2016

Satisfy your thirst for history while improving your craft at this inaugural conference in Colonial Williamsburg.

WHEN: Aug. 19–21, 2016. **WHERE:** Williamsburg Lodge, Colonial Williamsburg, Va. **PRICE:** \$445 for HWA members, \$545 for nonmembers. Fee includes Friday welcome reception, Saturday meals and Sunday breakfast. **WHAT MAKES THE**

CONFERENCE UNIQUE: A strong emphasis on all things historical. Sessions delve into a wide range of specifics, from portraying historically accurate food, clothing and speech, to better understanding such subjects and periods as 15th-century Europe, ancient Rome and Victorian funerals. **WHO IT'S PERFECT FOR:** Fiction and nonfiction authors who write within a historical context. “The conference is ideal for aspiring historical writers looking for tips and insight, published writers eager to promote their work or take their writing to the next level, and historians who want to write for the commercial market,” executive director Theresa Guzman Stokes says. “Journalists and history bloggers will also find it of interest.” **HOW MANY ATTEND:** 250–400.

FACULTY: Authors T.K. Thorne (*Noah's Wife*), Avraham Azrieli (*The*



Jerusalem Inception), David Langum (*The Litigious Life of Mary Bennett Love*) and Margaret George (*Elizabeth I*); History Channel chief historian Dr. Libby Haight O'Connell; author/actor C.C. Humphreys (*Shakespeare's Rebel*); and more. **HIGHLIGHTS:** The conference teaches historical writers to appeal to modern readers, with sessions on specific periods in world history offset by broader conference staples such as craft talks on research, publishing and promotion. Pre-conference workshops and events are an additional \$80. There is no extra charge for agent/editor pitches. **IF YOU GO:** Colonial Williamsburg is “a Disneyland-like adventure for history buffs,” Guzman Stokes says. It's also just minutes from historic Jamestown and Yorktown. **FOR MORE INFO:** historicalwritersofamerica.wildapricot.org.



2 HippoCamp: A Conference for Creative Nonfiction Writers

Sharpen your nonfiction skills at this boutique conference sponsored by Hippocampus Magazine.

WHEN: Aug. 12–14, 2016. **WHERE:** Lancaster County Convention Center, Lancaster, Pa. **PRICE:** \$389. Includes opening reception with drink ticket, two breakfasts, lunch and beverage/snack breaks. Pre-conference workshops are \$49 each, and the post-conference agent/editor pitch session is \$35. Lodging is available at the Lancaster Marriott at Penn Square at a conference discount of \$157 per night. **WHAT MAKES THE CONFERENCE UNIQUE:** “Our format is varied—it's not always a group of speakers seated at a table,”

conference chair Donna Talarico says. “That aspect adds a different level of speaker-attendee engagement.” **WHO IT’S PERFECT FOR:** Beginning and established writers in the broad field of creative nonfiction. The schedule features sessions and panels on topics ranging from truth in creative nonfiction to the dos and don’ts of re-creating real-life dialogue. “This year’s programming includes sessions about journalism and science writing, too,” Talarico says. **HOW MANY ATTEND:** 150–175. **FACULTY:** Authors Sarah Einstein (*Mot: A Memoir*), Kaylie Jones (*Lies My Mother Never Told Me*), Lisa Jakub (“*You Look Like That Girl ...*”) and Mary Karr (*The Art of Memoir*); author/agent Eric Smith (*The Geek’s Guide to Dating*); essayist Ashley C. Ford; editors Laura Apperson (St. Martin’s Press) and Nicole Frail (Skyhorse Publishing); and more. **HIGHLIGHTS:** The conference opens with an inspiring keynote by Ford, followed by a reception and selected readings by debut authors. “Attendees find tremendous value in hearing from other people who just went through the publishing process,” Talarico says. **IF YOU GO:** Lancaster is in the heart of Amish Country, so plan a visit to The Amish Experience. It’s the county’s largest touring center, and provides a glimpse into a simpler way of living that just might translate to your writing. **FOR MORE INFO:** hippocamp2016.hippocampusmagazine.com.

3 Willamette Writers Conference

No writing genre is left unexplored at this long-running conference held in the City of Roses.

WHEN: Aug. 12–14, 2016. **WHERE:** Sheraton Portland Airport Hotel, Portland, Ore. **PRICE:** \$195–499, depending on days attending. Fees include meals and networking events. See website for details. **WHAT MAKES THE CONFERENCE UNIQUE:** “The conference is a crossroads marketplace and educational mecca for writers who are looking to find their communities, develop their craft and advance their careers,” conference director John Clark Vincent says. **WHO IT’S PERFECT FOR:** Those eager to meet and learn from well-respected writers, agents and editors whose insight can propel their careers to the next level. “We’ve been expanding our curriculum in order to inspire poets, playwrights and songwriters, as well as those who write nonfiction, screenplays [and] graphic novels,” Willamette Writers President Jenny Schrader says. **HOW MANY ATTEND:** 600–800. **FACULTY:** Authors Chelsea Cain (*One Kick*), Hallie Ephron (*There Was an Old Woman*), Lidia Yuknavitch (*The Small Backs of Children*) and Robert Vivian (*The Tall Grass* trilogy); short story writer Eric Witchey; TV writer F.J. Pratt (“*Sullivan & Son*”); publishing expert Jane Friedman; and more. **HIGHLIGHTS:** Movie buffs will enjoy the premiere of a short film written by the winner of the organization’s annual FiMLaB Script-to-Screen Contest. **IF YOU GO:** Powell’s City of Books, a block-sized bibliophile’s paradise, is just an hour train ride from the conference hotel. **FOR MORE INFO:** willamettewritersconference.org.

Don Vaughan (donaldvaughan.com) is a freelance writer in Raleigh, N.C., and founder of Triangle Association of Freelancers.

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CONFERENCE GUIDE
JULY/AUGUST 2016

- Keep in mind that there may be more than one workshop in each listing.
- These workshops are listed alphabetically by state, country or continent.
- Unless otherwise indicated, rates include tuition (T) only. Sometimes the rates also include airfare (AF), some or all meals (M), accommodations (AC), ground transportation (GT), materials (MT) or fees (F).
- When you find workshops that interest you, be sure to call, email or check the website of the instructor or organization for additional information.
- All listings are paid advertisements.

CALIFORNIA

ANNUAL GREATER LOS ANGELES WRITERS CONFERENCE, produced by West Coast Writers Conferences. June 17–19, 2016 at Los Angeles Valley College, Van Nuys, CA. Writers of all genres and disciplines benefit from this popular educational and inspirational three-day event focused on the craft and business of writing. The conference (our 15th) features individual program tracks for what we call the 3-A's (Aspiring, Active and Accomplished) for writers. Topics are presented by more than 40 veteran educators, bestselling authors, industry professionals, editors and literary agents in progressive streams of seminars, workshops, and panels so you are immersed in an educational environment all weekend. If you have a work-in-progress, you can participate in Advance Submission ProCritiques™ to have your work reviewed/edited by professional editors and literary agents. Attendees can also meet with literary agents and publishers looking for new talent with polished manuscripts. There is an informative session with the "agents du jour" to help prepare for your actual meeting. Writers may also enjoy the optional daily Keynote Address (with complimentary lunch). Open to all levels of literary and screenplay writers. *Early registration discounts and financing available for all three days.* Visit the website for details.
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THE CENTRAL COAST WRITERS CONFERENCE & BOOK FAIR, September 29–October 1 at Cuesta College, San Luis Obispo, CA is an essential annual destination for writers, teachers, students, editors, and publishers. Each year writers join our community for three days of insightful dialogue, networking, and unrivaled access to our staff. The 2016 conference features over 60 presenters offering workshops, screenwriting, panels, critiques, keynotes, and craft lectures. The book fair hosts

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MARYLAND

MID-ATLANTIC FICTION WRITERS INSTITUTE (MAFWI). Join other fiction writers August 12–13, 2016, at Hagerstown Community College in Maryland. The annual MAFWI summer conference offers workshops and breakout sessions by bestselling authors, college faculty, and experienced public relations professionals. The 2016 keynote speaker is bestselling author Brad Parks. From story fundamentals like plot and point of view to seasoned advice on how to market your work, there is something for writers of every genre at MAFWI. MAFWI also features the Hub City Teen Writers Institute. Register or learn more at: www.mafwi.org.

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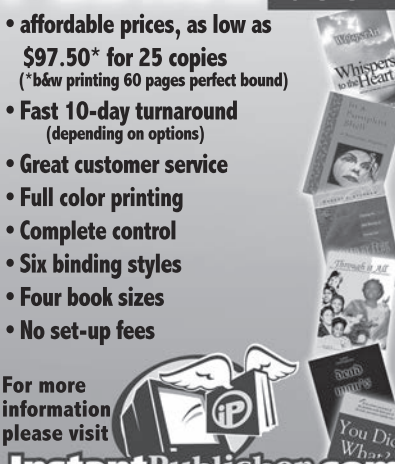


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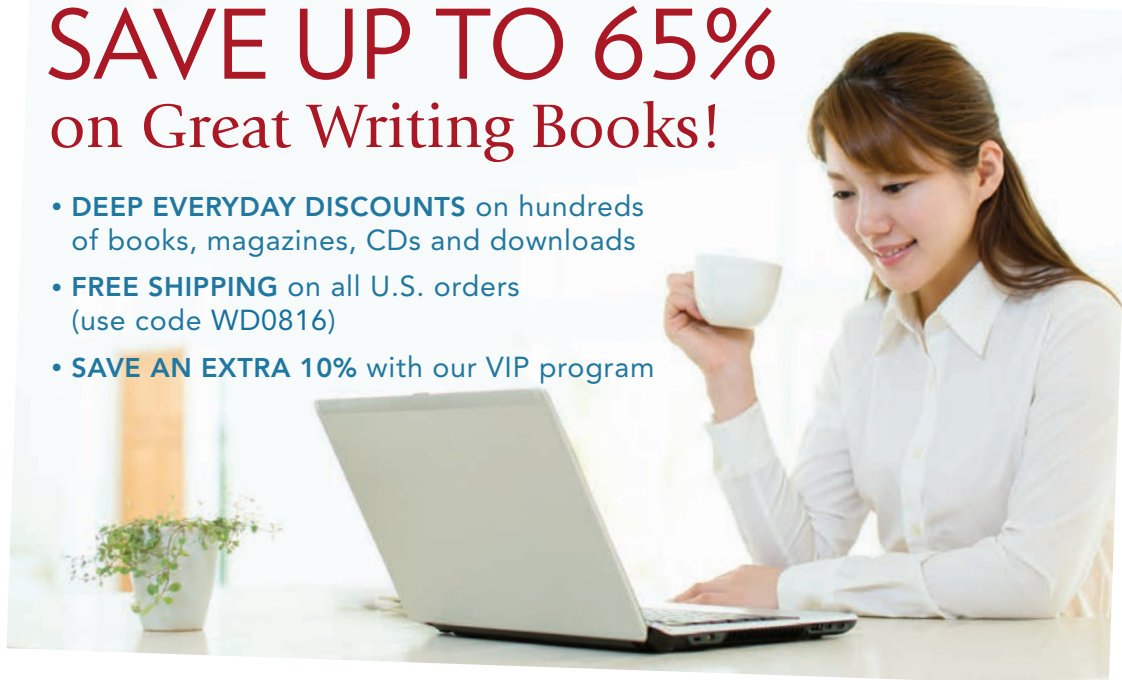
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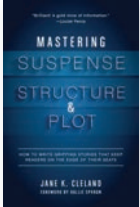


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Suspense is one of the most powerful tools a writer has for captivating readers—but it isn't just for thrillers. From mainstream fiction to memoir, suspense creates the emotional tension that keeps readers on the edge of their seats. Award-winning author Jane K. Cleland teaches you how to navigate genre conventions, write for your audience, and build gripping tension to craft an irresistible page-turner.

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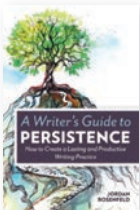
By Martha Alderson

Plotting a story filled with engaging scenes from beginning to end can feel like an insurmountable challenge—but having a plan and the right tools in place can make all the difference. Pull back the curtain on story structure with step-by-step strategies that turn scene writing into a no-stress endeavor—enabling you to write a story that deserves a standing ovation.

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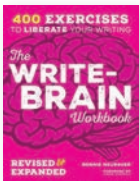
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Persistence is often the key ingredient separating authors who successfully publish and those who don't. *A Writer's Guide to Persistence* teaches you how to sustain a writing habit, weather rejection, avoid discouragement and embrace the journey. With advice and shared experiences from bestselling authors, you'll want to turn to this easy-to-read manual for tips and encouragement time and time again.

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BELLS, BALLS AND BULLS | The Official Online Home of Ernest Hemingway



f **Ernest Hemingway**
 May 23 at 6:27am ·

At first light I rise and I walk to the coffee shop to start a day of writing. The customers are coming in for breakfast—bagels, croissants, slices of quiche heated on plates in the microwave. The smell of bacon is inescapable. I turn and speak to Gustavo, but he does not hear it. There is a glaze in his eyes. We have been awake for three days drinking daiquiris and smoking Cuban cigars. He goes to order and I sit down with my pen. The words come heavy and fast. Gustavo returns with oatmeal and offers a critique over my shoulder, so I punch him in the nose.

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Will Faulkner Another classic passage from a man who has never been known to use a word that might send a reader to the dictionary.
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Ernest Hemingway
 @dontcallmeErnie 4h
 I do not believe in hashtags. A man should be as precise with his words as he is with his steak order. I order mine rare. Always.

Ernest Hemingway
 @dontcallmeErnie 10h
 For sale. New book. Never read.

Ernest Hemingway
 @dontcallmeErnie 1d
 @FSScott Found Gatsby to be a sissy and Daisy, a weaking. I'd have written him a girl with more moxie. Like husband's girlfriend, though ...

Hadley Richardson
 @thepariswife 1d
 @dontcallmeErnie @FSScott Why does that not surprise me?


Ernest Hemingway
 @dontcallmeErnie 3d
 Oysters in Idaho are crap. The only place this feast will be moving is the garbage.

Ernest Hemingway
 @dontcallmeErnie 6d
 Passed a store in Key Largo called "For Whom the Bell Tolls." They sell doorbells. Clever.

Ernest Hemingway
 @dontcallmeErnie 12d
 Always do sober what you tweeted you'd do drunk. That will teach you to control your fingers.

Ernest Hemingway
 @dontcallmeErnie 22d
 I prefer to shoot things that tweet.

i **BigPapa** 4d



1062 likes

BigPapa A man can kill a lion, if his aim is true and he is brave in his heart. A man can then skin that lion and make his pelt into a handsome vest that matches his linen trousers.

RealGertrudeStein There are many things I admire about you, Ernest, but your fashion sense has always been the worse for wear ...

TheMarkTwain #thepunalsorises #twaintrolling

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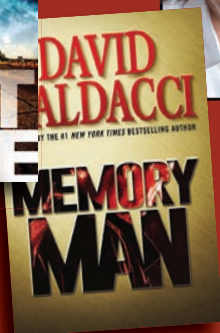
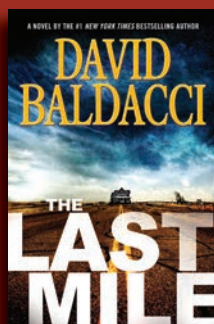
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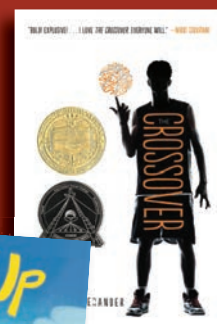
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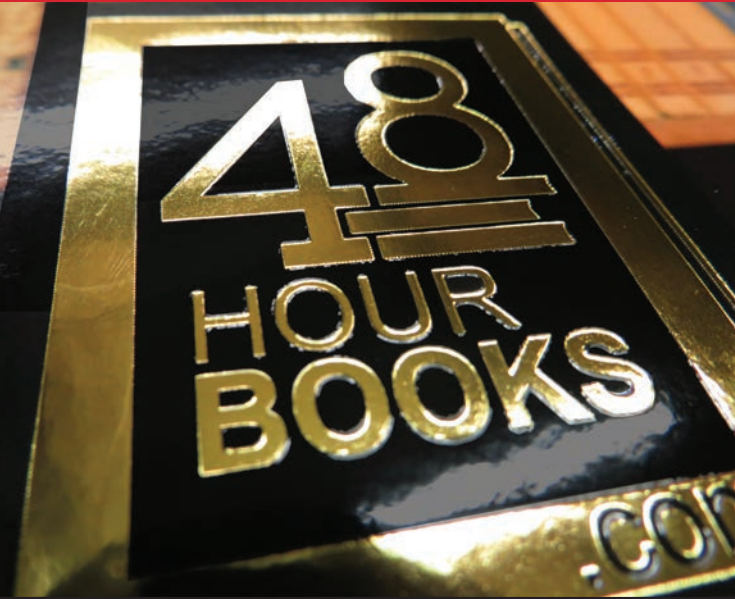


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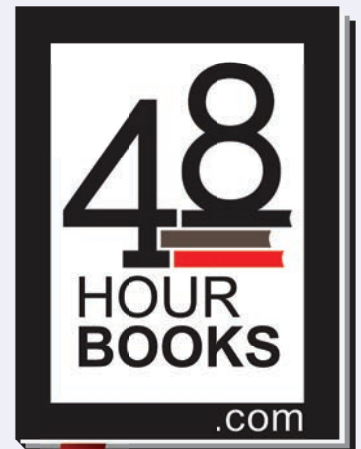
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