

# SUMMER 2026 WriteOn!

The Quarterly Magazine of the Women's Fiction Writers Association

## Let Your Creativity Take Off

- Writing Small to Write Big
- Tap Into Your Senses
- Reading as Studying

**Guiding Scribe:  
Find Your  
Character's Fear**

**Author Profile:  
Debut STAR  
Award Winner  
Christine  
Gunderson**

**Q&A with  
QueryTracker  
Creator Patrick  
McDonald**



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Check out our calendar of events, workshops, and webinar information on our website.

# ABOUT THE WFWA

We began this organization in 2013 with the idea to create a safe, nurturing place for writers of women's fiction. The publishing industry is morphing—with new opportunities and, as yet, unknown futures. The founders of the Women's Fiction Writers Association wanted somewhere to amass and disseminate information to and about our chosen genre.

Defining women's fiction has proven as subjective as the types of books we read. For that reason, our guiding statement is broad and comprehensive: stories that are driven by the main character's emotional journey. Our stories may have romance. Or they may not. They could be contemporary. Or historical. But what binds us together is the focus on a main character's emotional journey.



facebook.com/WFWritersAssociation



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Join the closed WFWA Facebook group by sending an email to:  
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## IF YOU LIKE WHAT YOU'VE READ ...

Send us a letter! We'd love to hear your feedback and reactions on the stories and features. Email them to [writeon@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:writeon@womensfictionwriters.org). Submitted letters are considered for publication and may be edited for clarity or space.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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# The Edges That Ignite Ideas

Sometimes I dream about boundless creative time, days filled with energy, inspiration, and a firm block on the outside world.

At first glance, the idea of “no boundaries” feels like the ultimate freedom. But the opposite is often true. Constraints can be catalysts for creativity.

When we define a goal, set a timeline—even one we alone are responsible for—and commit to it, something shifts. The pressure of those boundaries does not confine us but rather propels us. It sharpens our focus, heightens our drive, and challenges us to do more with less.

More often than not, boundaries do not block creativity; they shape it. They are the frame that brings out the colors. They are the banks that give a river its direction. They are the spark that turns friction into fire. They help us find light in the dark, murky middle or examine why our opening pages aren't *quite* right.

We can drill down even further, moving beyond general constraints to ones that are tangible and immediate—like a short story contest structured around fixed prompts, required elements, and a compressed one-week timeline.

Genre brings its own set of expectations. In women's fiction, a character's arc must be transformational. In romance, a happy ending is not optional. In speculative fiction, there must be something otherworldly that reshapes the rules.

And then there are the pressures of the marketplace. Trends shift. Attention spans tighten. Certain themes rise while others fall out of favor. You may be asked to position your story within a recognizable space while still making it feel entirely your own.

These boundaries demand that we pivot, adapt, and in many instances, be bold. Creativity is not a finite resource, but it is not always easily accessible either. It often needs to be sparked, challenged, even cornered.

Consider what happens when constraints force innovation. A writer limited to a single setting must deepen tension through dialogue and interiority. A story told under a strict word count becomes sharper, more intentional, every sentence carrying weight. A familiar trope, when approached with a new perspective, becomes original. Even a rigid prompt can unlock an unexpected angle you would not have found otherwise.

Constraints do not just shape the work, they sharpen the creator.

So when you encounter limits, I hope you'll meet them with curiosity. Work within them, push against them, reshape them.

Because sometimes it is the very edge of the page that shows us how far we can go.

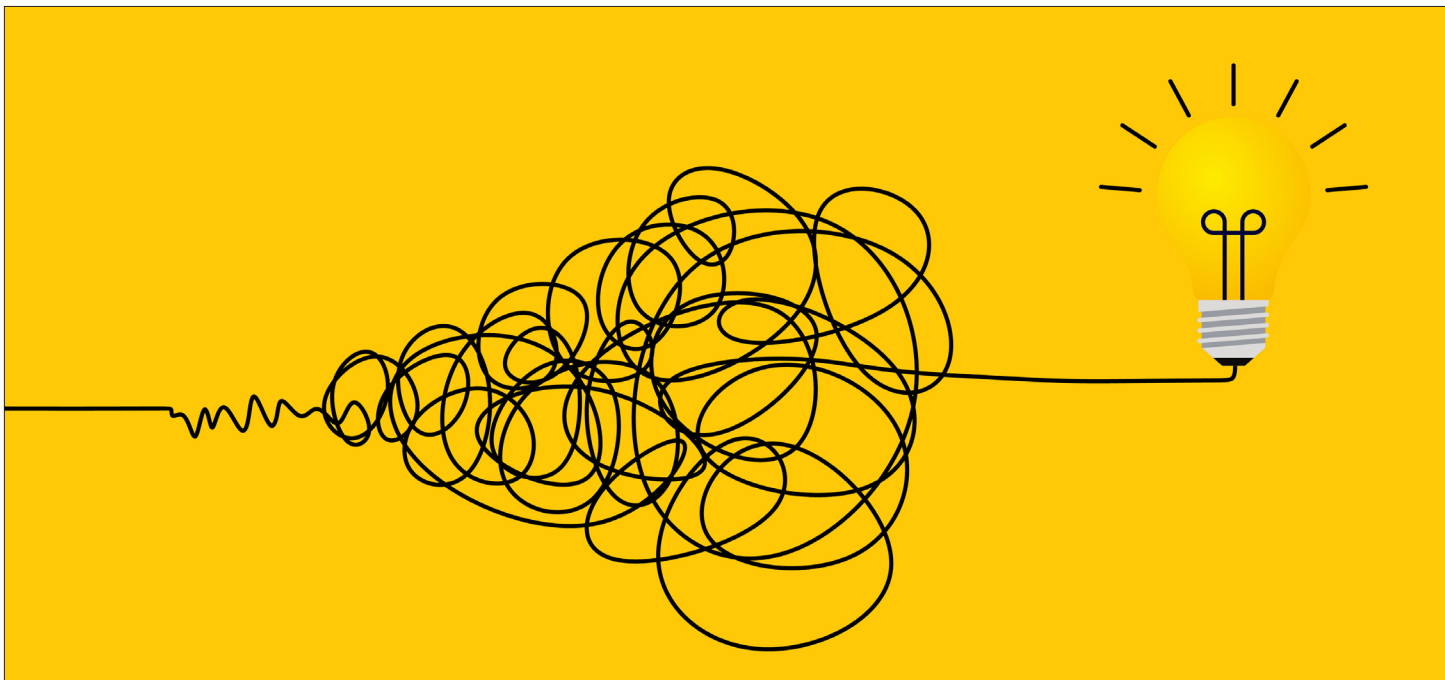


More often than not, boundaries do not block creativity; they shape it. They are the frame that brings out the colors. They are the banks that give a river its direction. They are the spark that turns friction into fire.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ginger Haggerty". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ginger" written in a larger, more prominent hand than the last name "Haggerty".

Ginger Haggerty



# Creativity Takes Practice

I'll spare you the details, but when our team originally planned this issue, I had no idea I would need its creativity content so badly. After spending months stuck trying to find the right direction for my next project, I read every submission that came in with eager eyes. Together, they reminded me that I *can* do this, and I *will* move forward.

Also: Even on days when I'm not churning out fresh pages, the time I spend devoted to my story and the craft of writing matters. Deeply.

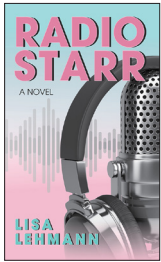
Creativity is not synonymous with productivity; it is often a meandering staircase. It demands patience, intention, dedication, and self-compassion.

In her book *The Creative Habit*, choreographer Twyla Tharp says that creativity is a practice and a skill—a habit we can cultivate and a muscle we can strengthen. Most of the time, creativity doesn't fall down on us in some glamorous, glorious, singular wave of inspiration. Instead, it derives from the body of work that supports our writing—not just the pages we draft. As writers, we cultivate our creative selves through the thinking we do, the connections we make, the things we pay attention to out in the world, the books we read.

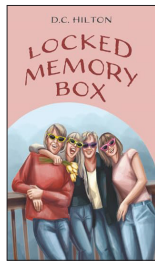
Whether you are in a creative rut, soaring high, or anywhere in between, I invite you to join us in exploring new ways to deepen your creative practice, strengthen your craft, and move forward, step-by-step. This issue features exercises that help you tune into your senses to sharpen your prose, play with short-form writing, and read with an author's trained eye. It also includes craft-centered pieces on tapping into your characters' fears, and Q&As with Patrick MacDonald, the creator of QueryTracker, and STAR Award winner Christine Gunderson. I promise you will be inspired and ready to train your own creative habit in new ways.

# MEMBER RELEASES

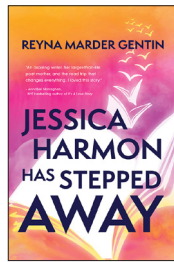
As WFWA continues to grow, so have our members' accomplishments. To be fair to everyone, all new women's fiction releases featured in the magazine must have been published within the past one year. If you are a new member with an older title(s), please still submit your books to be included on the WFWA Goodreads shelf and continue to take advantage of other opportunities to share your work with the membership, including the weekly newsletter and *TBR*.



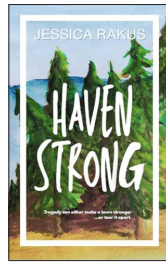
**Lisa Lehmann**  
Radio Starr  
11/4/25



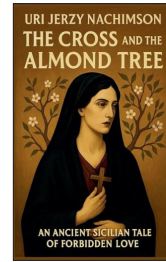
**D.C. Hilton**  
Locked Memory Box  
11/6/25



**Reyna Marder Gentin**  
Jessica Harmon  
Has Stepped Away  
11/18/25



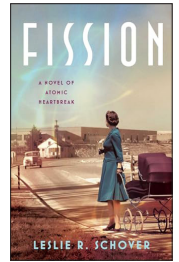
**Jessica Rakus**  
Haven Strong  
12/1/25



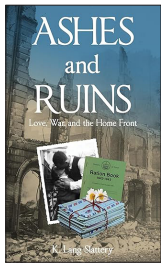
**Uri Jerzy Nachimson**  
The Cross and the  
Almond Tree  
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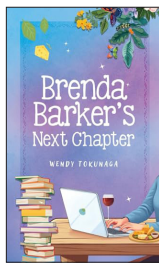
**Lucille Guarino**  
Lunch Tales:  
Teagan  
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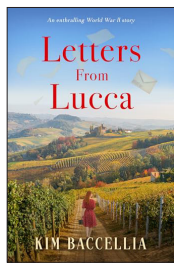
**Leslie R. Schover**  
Fission: A Novel of  
Atomic Heartbreak  
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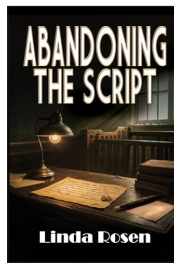
**Kathryn Lang-Slattery**  
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War, and the Home Front  
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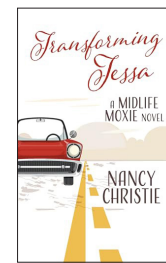
**Wendy Tokunaga**  
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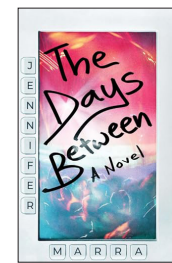
**Kim Baccellia**  
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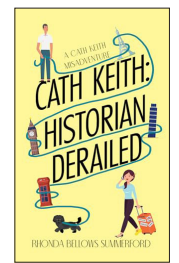
**Linda Rosen**  
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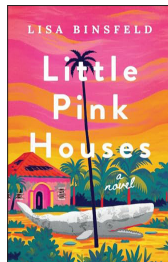
**Nancy Christie**  
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**Jennifer Marra**  
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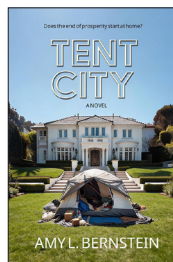
**Rhonda Bellows  
Summerford**  
Cath Keith: Historian Derailed  
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**Lisa Binsfeld**  
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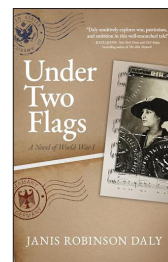
**Jill Hannah  
Anderson**  
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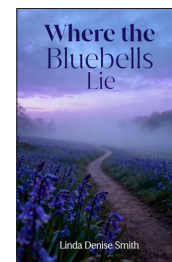
**Amy L. Bernstein**  
Tent City  
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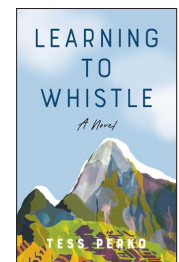
**Marissa McFarland**  
When Goodbyes  
Begin  
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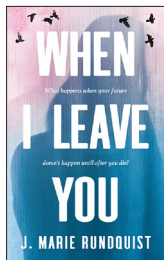
**Janis Robinson Daly**  
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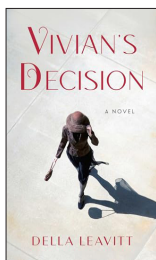
**Linda Denise Smith**  
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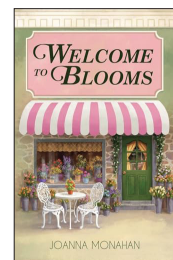
**Tess Perko**  
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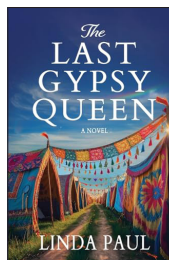
**J. Marie  
Rundquist**  
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**Della Leavitt**  
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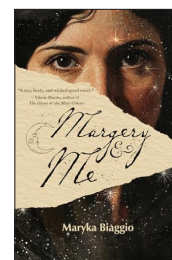
**Joanna Monahan**  
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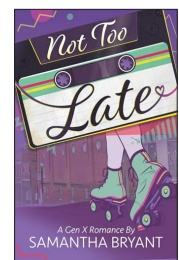
**Linda Paul**  
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**Debora Masterson**  
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**Maryka Biaggio**  
Margery and Me  
4/21/26



**Samantha  
Bryant**  
Not Too Late  
4/28/26



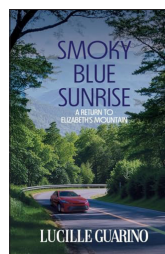
**Martha Conway**  
We Meet Apart  
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**Julee Balko**  
Square Hearts  
5/14/26



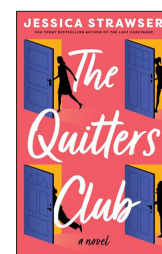
**Susan McGuirk**  
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**Lucille Guarino**  
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**Barbara Pronin**  
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**Jessica Strawser**  
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# CROWDSOURCED

Welcome to Crowdsourced, *WriteOn!*'s newest regular feature! Each segment will showcase member responses to a question framed around that issue's theme. Whether it be funny, serious, pragmatic, or something else altogether, every question will be crafted as a quick way to commiserate, laugh, and share our stories. We can't wait to hear from you! For this issue, we wanted to know:

**"If I'm stuck in a story,** I have pages and pages of prompts to choose from and think about how my character might respond to the situation. If I'm stuck in motivation, I question myself. Why am I feeling this way? Am I hungry? Do I need a nap? Am I trying to do too much? (The answer is always yes.) What do I need to do to get back on track?"

— Bri Nwosu

**"Physical activity—**specifically a walk outside, without the distraction of phone or music—is far and away the best way I've found to clear the cobwebs of writer's block. Pro tip: It also helps not to be self-conscious about talking to yourself out loud!"

— Kathleen M. Basi

**"I put it aside for a day or two,** do something fun and relaxing, and let my all-knowing subconscious mind bring it to the front part of my brain."

— Barbara Pronin

**"What's your favorite way to clear writer's block?"**

**"Shake up your routine!**

Write in a different room from a different chair with a different view, switch to longhand, go up the stairs backward (advanced move!), do 20 jumping jacks every 20 minutes, eat lunch outdoors in whatever weather."

— Kathryn Craft

**"My publisher had a great preventative** for the dreaded mid-chapter writer's block:

Make sure to start a new scene (even if you don't love it 100 percent) before you quit for the day. The next time you turn your computer on to write, you can pick up where you left off, already in the groove!"

— Sasha Arden

**"A 30-minute nap** is a great reset for writer's block!"

— Rhonda Bellows Summerford

**"My favorite trick is to abandon the keyboard** for a notebook and a pen. Handwriting feels more freewheeling and less formal, so the creativity flows more playfully. Once I sense that click of settling back into my groove, I go back to the laptop (typing is faster, after all)."

— Kristina Riggle

**"I love tapping into other forms of creativity** to clear writer's block. I enjoy watercoloring and diamond painting, and I often give my projects away as gifts, such as personalized bookmarks. As I focus on the craft, creative ideas flow, and I'm creating something tangible at the same time."

— Miranda Keskes

In the next issue, we're exploring THE ART OF FEEDBACK and we have a "choose your adventure" question (please respond to only one):

- A) What's the worst piece of feedback you ever received, and how did you respond?**
- B) What's the best piece of feedback you ever received, and what made it so helpful?**

Send your responses to [writeon@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:writeon@womensfictionwriters.org) for a chance to be featured in the magazine. Please use "Crowdsourced-Business" in the subject line and include your full name along with whether you're responding to question A or B and your one- to two-sentence response in the body of the email. If you prefer anonymity in the magazine, please indicate this as well.

## WELCOME TO “SPOTLIGHT ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION”

THE D&I COMMITTEE INVITES OUR GENERAL MEMBERSHIP TO SHARE STORIES THAT IMPACT THEM IN THE AREA OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION. WE WANT TO HEAR ALL VOICES. PLEASE SEND YOUR SUBMISSION TO [DI@WOMENFICTIONWRITERS.ORG](mailto:DI@WOMENFICTIONWRITERS.ORG).

# Humanizing Your Hero ... and Your Villain

By Roxana Trabulsi

When I started writing my novel *Of Mud and Honey*, I did not think of myself as a writer or call myself one. In my mind, this prestigious title was reserved for “real writers” who had writing degrees or an innate mysterious gift. The story I was penning had been living with my family for years, and it belonged to my parents—my only aim was to preserve it.

But when the universe wants you to take a path, it will throw everything it can in front of you to get your attention. And that’s how I found myself, a self-declared nonwriter, writing.

At the start, I constantly doubted my ability to write something that anyone might want to read. I almost gave up many times, but then something shifted.

It began when I changed the names on the page and filled in gaps in my parents’ descriptions of their time in Yemen with decadent scenes and eccentric characters, and it was as though my creative freedom unlocked.

Instead of just recounting my parents’ experience, I was storytelling, and the plot became mine to shape. Even so, imposter syndrome lingered in the spaces around me, gripping me every single step of the way. I truly had no idea what I was doing. Yet what I lacked in craft or formal training, I made up for in resolve and a strong desire not to let their story die with them.

Ultimately, it was not craft that cultivated my creativity—it was necessity. And through that necessity, a desire grew to tell the story from all sides.

My parents had, with no uncertainty, been treated terribly during their time in Yemen. However, to tell the complete story—especially for those with no background knowledge about the situations my parents faced—I also needed to step into the heads of those who had chosen to mistreat them. After all, no one is born evil; our opinions, views, and passions form as we grow and are shaped by our experiences and environments.

Throughout his life, my father maintained that the people of Yemen were some of the kindest and most generous people he had ever met. When I challenged him, he would remind me that they, too, were human—reacting to what they believed—and there’s value in remembering that when we create the villains and heroes of our stories.



Writing intentionally means moving beyond the “villain” and truly attempting to understand the human behind the role in all their complexities. Once we do that, cultivating creativity becomes an exercise in empathy. It forces us to look past our own biases, experiences, and pain to see another’s point of view.

I used to think that creativity was something you either had or you didn’t. I have since learned that it is cultivated in the most unexpected places. It’s the stories that stay with you, a commitment to revealing the truth, the courage to bridge cultural divides, and an unequivocal desire to save a story from disappearing forever.

The title of “writer” is a privilege, and with it comes a responsibility to ensure that every perspective in a story is heard, especially when that perspective differs from our own.



**Roxana Trabulsi** is the author of *Of Mud and Honey*. Born in London, United Kingdom, but raised in Dubai, Roxana now lives outside of Boston in Massachusetts, where she works as a high school English teacher for students with learning challenges, a freelance writer, and graphic designer.

# WHAT'S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN?



I read a lot about craft: books, blogs, articles, websites. I'm always looking to improve. I know you are, too, or you wouldn't be reading this.

One of my weaknesses is plotting. I know my amazing characters: their dreams, their misunderstanding of the world, their backstory. But then I've got to find something for them to do.

Whenever I'm beginning to think through a new project, I consider a key lesson Donald Maass, James Scott Bell, and others have taught me:

**Take your character's biggest fear and throw them into a situation where they have to face it.**

Good novels are about a character's transformation, and I believe the best character arcs are the largest. Don't you? Think about one of your favorite characters. Do they have a tortuous and long arc to get to where they need to be by the end? Is there any way to make that transformation any more prominent in your story?

To see how powerful this suggestion is, I started thinking about great stories (either books or movies) to see how often this technique was used. The more I thought, the more I found.

■ *Gone With the Wind* – Scarlett is a spoiled, rich, entitled daughter of a Southern landowner. What's the worst that could happen? To lose her land, her money, her status, her culture. Yep. It happened.

■ *Hunger Games*: Katniss is her sister's protector. To Katniss, it would be worse if her sister was sent to the games instead of herself. So of course she volunteers.

## GUIDING SCRIBE

■ *The Wizard of Oz*: OMG, Baum, the masochist, does this to almost every character!

Straw Man's fear: Fire. Can you say torch?

Tin Man's fear: Water. Several times. Thank goodness for oil cans.

Lion's fear: No bravery. Poor thing was terrified the whole movie!

■ *Jaws*: Sheriff of a beach town is afraid of the water. Big fish wants to eat him. Why the heck did he take a job at the beach, anyway?

■ *The King's Speech*: What kind of karma makes a man with a huge speech impediment a king during a critical time for the nation? And this wasn't fiction! Yikes.

■ *Finding Nemo*: The father lost his spouse due to a predator's attack. Now he's overprotective of his young son. What happens? You can tell from the title.

■ *Lion King*: A lion cub watches his father die and believes it's his fault. Major self-esteem issues. What would be hardest for him? To have the responsibility of the entire pride on his shoulders. You guessed it! It happens.

What is your character's fear? It could be fear for their safety, fear for/of others. It could even be societal (dystopian, anyone?). Next: Where did it come from? What wound is in their backstory? Hopefully you drop hints for the reader, instead of offering a backstory dump.

Does every book or movie have to throw the protagonist into their worst nightmare to be successful? Absolutely not. But with the popularity of examples like the above, you might want to look at the possibility of trying it!

So how do you get the fear on the page in a compelling way? You can't just tell the reader your character is afraid. To be impactful, they have to feel it. But all our fears are different, right? For example, I'm afraid of spiders. They may not bother you at all. So how do you make the reader afraid of something that they're not? Stephen King is a master at this. I'm not afraid of pets, but while reading *Cujo* and *Pet Semetary*, I sure was! Why? Because I was so immersed in the character's world, I was experiencing the world through his eyes.

### Here are a few things to try.

The most powerful fear is not about what happens, but what might happen. That's why watching the blonde walk down the cellar steps scares us more than whatever is down there. This anticipatory dread connects directly to our brain's survival mechanisms. Add



stakes and tension to spark fear in the reader.

Draw out the tension. Add layers. This is from Jodi Picoult's *The Tenth Circle*:

*This is how it feels when you realize your child is missing: the pit of your stomach freezes fast, while your legs go to jelly. There's one single, blue-bass thud of your heart. The shape of her name, sharp as metal filings, gets caught between your teeth even as you try to force it out in a shout.*

*Fear breathes like a monster into your ear: Where did I see her last? Would she have wandered away? Who could have taken her? And then, finally, your throat seals shut, as you swallow the fact that you've made a mistake you will never be able to fix.*

Powerful, right? Even as expert as Picoult is, I'll bet she spent a while writing that. Take your time and layer in the fear. To do that, you have to dig deep—to remember being terrified. What did it feel like in your body? In your mind? How did you convey that fear to others?

David Corbett writes in his book *The Art of Character*, "Fear is primal, and often lurks behind other emotions. Anger in particular serves as a mask for fear."

So your character might display anger to disguise a deep-seated fear.

Donald Maass said, ". . . fears are rooted in a powerful, primary emotion: experiencing shame. Thus, building heroism starts with creating fear, and creating fear starts with shame."

Fear is a powerful deterrent, but it's also a powerful motivator when your character is in a situation where they can't avoid confronting it. It will help move them along their arc, transforming them into a wiser person at the end of the story.



**Laura Drake** was raised in snowy Michigan but got out west as soon as she could. She was a corporate CFO for 25 years. She fell in love with a crazy motorcyclist and rode behind him for more than 100,000 miles, propping a book on his back and reading on the boring stretches. Riding in central California, they came around a corner to see an old Victorian house on a hill like a shoddy queen surveying her territory. It captured Laura's imagination and she began writing. After 417 rejections, she secured an agent and sold in 2013. Her debut, *The Sweet Spot*, won the 2014 Romance Writers of America® RITA® award for Best First Book. She's since published 10 romances, 4 women's fiction titles, and in 2025 she indie-published a domestic thriller. Though she's genre-hopped, at their core every one of her stories is a woman's journey of becoming. Laura now lives outside Fort Worth, TX, and is working on her next novel.



# SENSORY SAFARI

By Kate MacIntosh

In real life, sensory details are how we make “sense” of the world. In fiction, those same details invite the reader into the story world by experiencing it through the character. This article will encourage you to go on a “sensory safari” to hone your skills in identifying details you can use in your writing to create a deeper understanding of your characters and connect the reader to the story.

Sensory details include external things in the environment (e.g., the sound of waves) and experiences within a character’s body (e.g., butterflies in the stomach). Your goal is to include details that are relevant and have an emotional impact on your character. One person hears fireworks and fondly remembers a summer vacation; another hears the same sound and flinches as they flash back to time in the military. Let’s explore the five senses and how you can use them in your writing.

## Sight

Sight is the most common sense that writers use, as we often see our stories as a movie in our minds. Try to describe things not as an impartial observer, but with the specific details your character would notice. For example, as writers, we pay attention when we see someone reading; we want to know the title. A fashionista notes whether someone is wearing a particular brand. A car person can instantly identify the make and model of what someone is driving.

■ Look around your space (or ideally go out) and see what your character would notice. What details would they pick out?

■ How would your character describe what they see? This likely depends on their mood and personality. One person describes a Christmas tree as an explosion of sparkling color and magic, and another as a plastic, spindly dust collector. A chef may describe something as cooked lobster red; a serial killer may describe the same hue as arterial blood.

■ Color has long been used to add meaning and symbolism, so consider how color may add to your theme or tone. Note the colors in spaces you visit, a hospital versus a child’s bedroom, for example.

*Continued on page 12*

## Feature

### Hearing

Sounds can be real or imagined and include volume, pitch, and rhythm. Heightened emotions can change the meaning of sounds. A character full of fear might imagine footsteps behind them; a pining lover might hear the voice of their lost partner in a crowd.

- Take time to notice the sounds around you, but not just the loudest. Challenge yourself to identify at least three.

- What sounds stand out to your protagonist? If they hear kids playing, does it make them smile, or did they lose a child and that sound breaks their heart?

- Is there a sound that instantly reminds your character of a place or time, for example, the song they danced to at their wedding?

- Is there a sound that has changed its emotional meaning? The sound of a door creaking open can be neutral, but not if you are home alone at night. If your character is in a high-stress situation, what sounds stick out?

### Smell

Research shows that scent has one of the strongest connections to memory. This can provide you with a great opportunity to include backstory.

- What scents does your character have positive or negative associations with?

- Train yourself to notice scents. Often, we pay attention only when something has a strong odor, but the café smells not just of coffee but also of wet wool coats as people come in out of the rain.

- If you struggle to describe scents, read wine blogs and perfume sites to build up your smell vocabulary.

- There's the concept of scent blindness, where you no longer smell something familiar. This is why you may not notice your own perfume, or a hoarder may not notice the smell of mold. Is there a smell your character doesn't notice anymore?

### Taste

We tend to think of taste as only food or drink, but we put other things in our mouths. We may fall and get a mouthful of dirt, or we may bite an attacker in panic. A sensory safari reminds you to try tasting a few different things, from the sharp wood of a chewed pencil end to licking a lover's neck.

- Next time you eat, take time to really notice the taste of each bite, including texture. Are there tastes that your character would find irresistible or stomach-turning? In university, I made a poor decision with peach schnapps. For years I couldn't eat a peach. What associations to taste does your character have?

- What memories do various tastes have? Was there a comfort meal their family made? A meal they will always remember from a trip to Italy?

- Food blogs and magazines can help you expand your taste vocabulary.

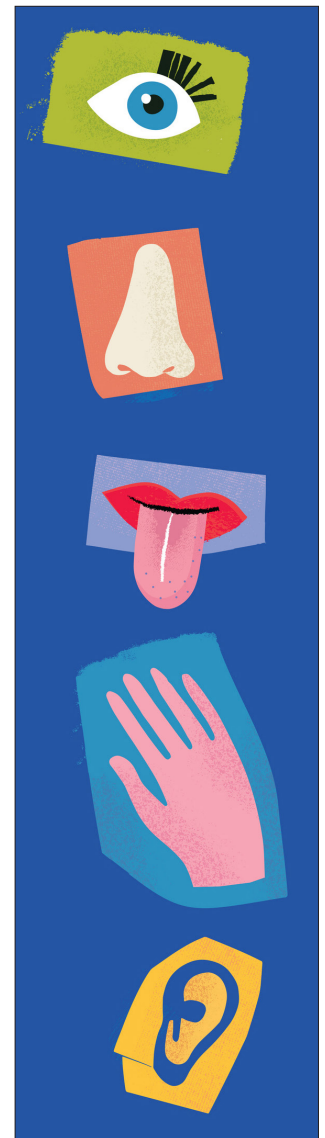
### Touch

Touch allows your reader to reach out and experience the character's world. It is more than detecting whether something is rough or smooth, hard or soft. Touch also includes temperature, vibration, pleasure, and pain. On this sense safari, be aware of how things feel; pick up an everyday item and close your eyes.

- Touch can be heightened at times—think sex or fear. For example, remember sitting in a movie theatre just bare millimeters apart from your crush. Will he hold your hand? Or perhaps you were floating in the water and “Dear god, did something just touch my foot?”

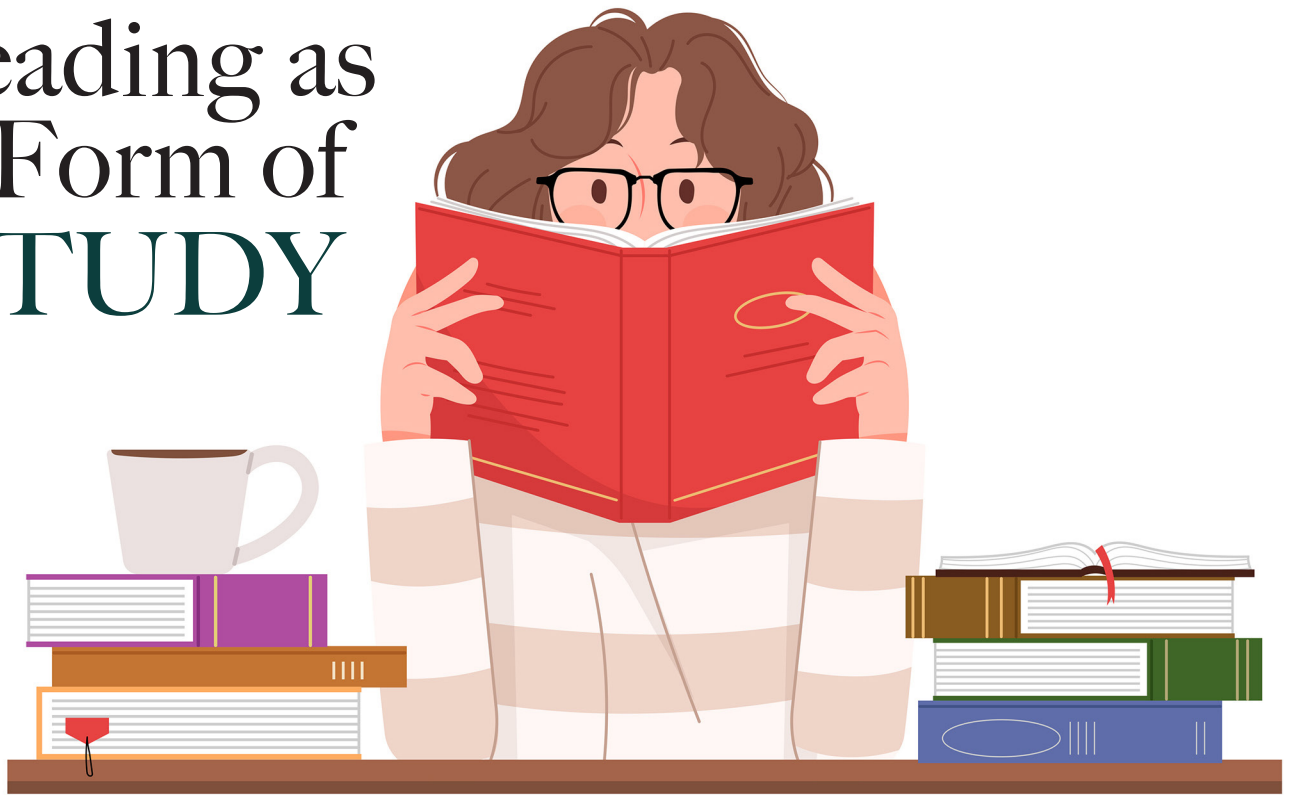
- Test how textures feel different in your hands and across your skin.

Paying attention to sensory details can help us as individuals be more present in our lives. In fiction, those same details help the reader sink into a character's point of view and feel immersed in the world you've created. Challenge yourself to go on a sensory safari next time you're out and see how many you notice.



**Kate MacIntosh** is a multi-published, award-winning author with novels appearing in nine languages. She's written YA, middle-grade, and nonfiction under the name Eileen Cook and most recently an adult historical novel *The Champagne Letters* that *People* magazine named a best book of December. She's an instructor/mentor with The Creative Academy and Simon Fraser University's Writer's Studio. Several of her books have been optioned for TV or film, but she has yet to walk the red carpet. However, she has perfected her Oscar speech into her hairbrush. Prior to turning to writing, Kate worked as a counsellor for over 20 years.

# Reading as a Form of STUDY



By Jill Caugherty

Many writers have enjoyed a lifelong relationship with books. Not only does reading regularly build empathy, broaden knowledge, and inspire ideas, but it also provides us with practical writing tools. By consuming books in multiple genres, we develop a solid understanding of genre conventions, as well as how to create fully fleshed characters, construct compelling plots, use realistic dialogue, weave in themes, and more. As Stephen King says in his memoir *On Writing*, you must read in order to build the skills you need to write.

However, reading with the goal of analyzing other writers' techniques takes practice. By deliberately reading as a writer, you'll learn how to evaluate which literary techniques in a given novel are effective (or not) and utilize them in your own writing. Below are several guidelines.

## Study the Competition

The publishing industry is highly competitive, so it's important to do your homework and evaluate the competition. Which novels are other authors in your genre(s) writing? Do they meet readers' expectations for the genre? For example, does a women's fiction story end on a hopeful note? In a murder mystery, does a detective or amateur sleuth solve the crime and tie up loose ends? Which five or six novels in your genre did you especially enjoy reading and why? Do they share strengths, such as compelling plots or clear, emotional character arcs?

By reading extensively in your genre, you can also identify comp titles for your work-in-process.

■ **Example:** You might admire the slow, startling transformation of the older protagonist in *The Correspondent* as she connects with children, neighbors, professors, former colleagues, and friends via old-fashioned letter writing. Or maybe you appreciate the rich, descriptive language and harrowing psychological and physical journeys of Charles Frazier's protagonists in his epic Civil War novel, *Cold Mountain*.

Conversely, if you dislike a novel, identify which elements didn't work. Did the author fail to meet genre expectations? Did the novel include too many info dumps? Did the characters lack credible motivation? Was the plot crafted through coincidental actions, rather than the protagonist's agency and choices?

## Read for Information

While reading, keep a notebook or an online document handy and jot down which elements—including character development, pacing, plot, dialogue, language, voice, and theme—work well and why. Does the author use a good balance of narrative, dialogue, and interiority? Or does the novel tend to favor one of these elements over the others?

## Feature

If a writer's choice of language appeals or strikes you as particularly effective, take note. How does the protagonist change? Is the pacing comfortable, fast, or too slow? Does each scene have a unique purpose, ultimately guiding the plot?

If you use Jessica Brody's *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel* for plotting, note which story beats occur in the novel. Do the beats and their placement propel your interest in the plot? What keeps you turning pages (or not)? Does the author pose intriguing story questions that drive you to discover the answers?

Brody's article "[How to Read Like a Writer](#)," on her website, describes the foundational story beats and recommends creating beat sheets for the novels you analyze. Notice big-emotion scenes. If a scene, chapter, or character moves or shocks you, pause and reflect why. Does a character glean an important insight? Is an emotion powerfully rendered? Does an interaction strike you as poignant? Why?

■ **Example:** You might be moved by characters like Ray, the young Black violinist in Brendan Slocumb's novel *The Violin Conspiracy*. Despite the barriers stacked against him, he continues to strive for a career in classical music, only to discover that the beloved Stradivarius violin he inherited from his grandfather has been stolen. Ray's struggles, coupled with his genuine kindness—even when confronted with greedy people vying for his hard-earned money—make him a sympathetic protagonist.

### Reverse-engineer Your Favorite Novels

Read back-of-the-novel blurbs and synopses to examine plot structure and identify the inciting incident, conflict, and stakes. How well are these elements reflected in the novel itself? Deconstructing blurbs can also be a useful way to learn how to distill complex plots into compelling hooks.

The blurb for Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* describes how beekeeper Nuri and his artist wife, Afra, live simply but comfortably in the Syrian city of Aleppo until "... all they love is destroyed by war," and they have no choice but to leave their home. "Afra has lost her sight, leaving Nuri to navigate her grief as well as a perilous journey toward an uncertain future in Britain."

Immediately, we grasp the inciting incident: War will force the couple to travel far from home, a prospect rife with conflict. The stakes are also high: Afra is blind, and Nuri must guide them on a dangerous trip to Britain, where nothing is guaranteed.

### Carve Out Time Each Day for Pleasure Reading

You only need 10–15 minutes. Many people read to relax before going to bed. Others devour several pages or chapters during breakfast. Pick a time that works best for you and incorporate it into your daily routine.



Read back-of-the-novel blurbs and synopses to examine plot structure and identify the inciting incident, conflict, and stakes. How well are these elements reflected in the novel itself? Deconstructing blurbs can also be a useful way to learn how to distill complex plots into compelling hooks.

Goodreads is an excellent tool for tracking novels you'd like to read. By leveraging your local library, you can check out as many books on your TBR list as you like, for free. At the same time, give yourself permission to put aside books you're not enjoying, without feeling guilty for not finishing them. Most writers have long TBR lists, so there's no reason to waste time on novels that don't captivate you!

By reading regularly, you'll begin to learn proven techniques for creating conflict and tension, weaving in appropriate doses of backstory and flashbacks, handling pacing, structuring plots, creating realistic dialogue and descriptions, and developing sympathetic characters—which you can use to improve your own writing.

Last but not least, if you've hit a temporary roadblock in your writing, you might even discover that reading inspires you with new story ideas, ultimately resparking your creativity. Happy reading!



**Jill Caugherty**, a former senior product manager, is the author of the historical novels *Waltz in Swing Time* (2020) and *The View from Half Dome* (2023). Her new contemporary novel, *The Throwaway Women*, will be published in February 2027. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina with her husband and daughter. Learn more at [www.jillcaugherty.com](http://www.jillcaugherty.com).

# A Q&A With QueryTracker's Creator

Meet Patrick McDonald, the technically minded creative behind QueryTracker, one of the most recommended tools for writers to locate, research, and query agents. As the 20th anniversary of the website approaches, Patrick sat down with *WriteOn!* to discuss how QueryTracker (and QueryManager) came to be, his favorite features, and his plans for the future.



**Q:** What's your professional background and how did it lead to the creation of QueryTracker? Is it your primary job or a hobby?

**A:** I was a computer programmer and an aspiring author. So when I saw the need for a tool to manage queries, I decided to give it a shot. Unfortunately, there never seems to be enough time to maintain the site and continue writing, so I had to put my fiction writing aspirations on hold. Hopefully I'll get back to it someday.

**Q:** When you created QueryTracker, what did you envision for the space?

**A:** There actually wasn't much expectation at all. I created it mostly for my own use, but decided to share it with others and they seemed to like it. I can honestly say my expectations were immensely exceeded.

**Q:** How long did it take you to build the original version of QueryTracker?

**A:** I slapped the first version together back in 2007 in about two weeks. It was sloppy and did the bare minimum. Yet people still seemed to like it, or at least found it useful. I rewrote it to make it easier and added features. Subsequent rewrites have taken up to a year each time. I think I've rewritten it from scratch five or six times now. Since technology keeps changing, it's better to rewrite than try to modify it in place.

**Q:** How many users are signed up for QueryTracker?

**A:** That's difficult to say precisely since the number who have signed up is quite different from the number who are currently using it. Many people sign up and never return. Some use it only periodically, taking long breaks away while they write their next book. That makes it impossible to tell how many users there actually are. Someday I should sift through and remove all the members who haven't used the site in years. Then I'd be able to get closer to answering this kind of question. Someday.

**Q:** How did you solicit early agents to participate in the space? Do they come to you now and ask to be on the page?

**Patrick McDonald** is the creator of QueryTracker and QueryManager, online querying tools for literary agents and for authors seeking literary agents. Once an aspiring fiction author himself, he has given up writing to vicariously publish through the authors he helps.

**A:** In the early days of QueryTracker they didn't come to me. I would list any agent I learned of, as long as they met the requirements. I still seek out new agents, but now they also reach out to me and ask how they can be listed. I have to be careful about who gets listed, though, so there is a strict vetting process. If anyone is interested in the listing requirements, they can be [viewed online](#).




**Ready to find a Literary Agent?**

QueryTracker has helped thousands of authors find agents for their books.

**And it's FREE!**

[SEARCH FOR AN AGENT NOW](#)

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 <p><b>Find Literary Agents</b></p> <p>Search our database of 1,912 agents to find the best agent for you.</p> <p><a href="#">Learn More</a></p>	 <p><b>Organize and Track Queries</b></p> <p>Stay focused on the right agents and avoid embarrassing mistakes.</p> <p><a href="#">Learn More</a></p>	 <p><b>Explore Agent Data</b></p> <p>Learn an agent's typical response time, reply rate, and much more.</p> <p><a href="#">Learn More</a></p>
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# INSIDE THE INDUSTRY

QueryManager is different. To use QM, agents must apply for an account and be vetted for legitimacy. In the beginning, all I could do was send out unsolicited emails telling agents about it. It felt a lot like querying, and we all know how miserable that can be. But a few gave it a try and liked it enough to tell their friends and it spread. Specifically, I would like to thank one of the earliest adopters, BookEnds Literary Agency, who were instrumental in spreading the word.

**Q: What's been the most surprising part of QueryTracker/QueryManager?**

**A:** That's easy. The most surprising part for me is that it's been successful. We always aim for success, be it a novel or a business. But for some reason, even though we dream about the success, people don't really seem to expect it. And that's sad. So don't just dream about your success. Expect it and make it happen through hard work and persistence.

**Q: What's the most underutilized feature in QueryTracker, and what does it do?**

**A:** Something a lot of the newer members don't know is that QueryTracker was intended to work with any agent, not just the agents who accept QueryManager queries. And QueryManager was initially completely independent of QueryTracker and can still be used on its own. That can sometimes cause confusion because to keep them separate, there are additional steps authors have to take. Even though the two sites have grown closer together, it is still important they remain separate because authors shouldn't have to join a site just to send a query. And all legitimate agents should be available to query, even if they don't use QueryManager.

So, I suppose one of the most underutilized features is the ability to record and track queries for agents who don't use QueryManager.

Query Status	Agent	Agency	Query Methods	Last Activity	Age	Tags	Priority		
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Cori Deyoe	3 Seas Literary Agency	🇺🇸	🔴					📄
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Stacey Graham	3 Seas Literary Agency	🇺🇸	🔴					📄
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Kara Grajkowski	3 Seas Literary Agency	🇺🇸	🔴					📄
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Michelle Grajkowski	3 Seas Literary Agency	🇺🇸	🔴					📄
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Eugenie Furniss	42 Management & Production	🇩🇪	🔴					📄
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Emily MacDonald	42 Management & Production	🇩🇪	🟢					📄
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Olga Filina	5 Otter Literary	🇨🇦	🟢					📄
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Ali McDonald	5 Otter Literary	🇨🇦	🔴					📄
<input type="checkbox"/>	? Cassandra Rodgers	5 Otter Literary	🇨🇦	🔴					📄

**Q: What is your top tip for users to get the most out of QueryTracker?**

**A:** A very useful tool is the ability to look up how long it takes an agent to reply to a query. You can use it to find the agents who reply the fastest and query them first. That allows you to get the quickest feedback possible. Even if the agents don't supply any specific feedback, you'll learn if your query letter is working or not. And if you picked the agents who reply in a few days, instead of months, you get that feedback much faster and can modify your query letter, then send it to the next fastest group. I made a video about how to do it, which [you can view here](#).

**Q: Just to confirm, QueryTracker began in 2007, right? If so, are you planning anything to mark 20 years?**

**A:** Sort of. After the first 10 years of running QueryTracker, I realized I had received and answered about every question about querying that you can imagine. I placed them in a catalog that I could refer back to, and ever since wanted to share all that accumulated information with the writers who needed it most. But it took me another 10 years to get to it. With the help of coauthor Alyssa Matesic, it is finally ready,

just in time for QT's 20th anniversary.

It is called *The Modern Guide to Querying Literary Agents* and [is now available for preorder](#).

**Q: At what point did you realize QueryManager was also necessary? How long has it taken to get solid agent buy-in?**

**A:** I actually built the first QueryManager back around 2009, and no one wanted anything to do with it. Agents were hesitant to trust it. Probably for good reasons, since QueryTracker was still new and unproven, and back then people weren't as comfortable keeping data online as they are now. After all, many agents back then hadn't even transitioned to email queries yet.

In 2016 I decided to try again and created a new version. It seemed to me that both agents and authors would benefit, so I had to try. This time, agents were ready for it. I also had gotten to know some agents by then and was able to get direct feedback on what they really needed.

**Q: What's your favorite part about these two websites?**

**A:** My favorite part is the success story interviews. It's very fulfilling to see when an author lands an agent.



**Katie Tammen** is a recovering news junkie who began her writing career at daily newspapers. These days she avoids all stories related to super obedient police dogs, but never misses an opportunity to highlight the unspoken realities of womanhood.



# TRY WRITING SMALL TO WRITE BIG

By Monica Cox

Sometimes to cultivate creativity, we need to take a step outside our normal writing routines. While that can often look like a physical change—writing at a coffee shop or going on a retreat—it can also look like shaking up the container of what or how we are writing.

I recently found myself between projects but not quite ready to dive into the next large manuscript. I wanted to keep my writing muscle active without a large commitment.

Then I discovered the NYC Midnight Flash Fiction contest. This competition challenges writers to create stories no longer than 1,000 words based on an assigned genre, location, and object. Writers are broken into groups and have 48 hours to submit their stories once the assignments are given.

The deadlines and prompt parameters were different from my normal novel-writing routine where I have the power to decide the who, what, when, where, how, and why. Add in the hard and fast word-count parameters, and this was a whole different beast from what I was used to writing during my writing time.

And I loved it.

## Feature

Writing short-form fiction taught me things I could take into my longer-form scene writing. Flash is all about showing; concise and precise language is key, and conflict is at the heart. I started looking at other flash prompts and even did some flash nonfiction essays to keep practicing.

“Understand that there may be times when you really need to rotate crops. Maybe you write only fiction, and that’s all you *want* to write,” Elizabeth Berg writes in *Escaping into the Open: The Art of Writing True*. “Still, it may happen that the well is suddenly dry and you need to try something else: essays, for example.”

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott prescribes short assignments for when we are stuck or procrastinating in our writing: “. . . all I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame.”

What Elizabeth Berg and Anne Lamott preach, and my foray into flash demonstrates, is that sometimes we need to write small in order to write big.

Writing novels gives us the luxury of space, but our words should still be carefully curated. Each idea, scene, and sentence should be maximized for the greatest impact, whether we have 1,000 or 100,000 words to tell the story.

Maureen Sherbondy, WFWA member and poet, encourages writers to try poetry to hone our skills.

“Poetry trains writers to paint with words. This makes fiction more engaging, layered, and sensory,” she says. “Writing poetry will improve your fiction writing by helping you write poetic prose via the use of concise and figurative language.”

Types of figurative language include similes, metaphors, hyperbole, personification, allusion, and idioms, to name a few. Incorporating this type of figurative language will elevate your prose.

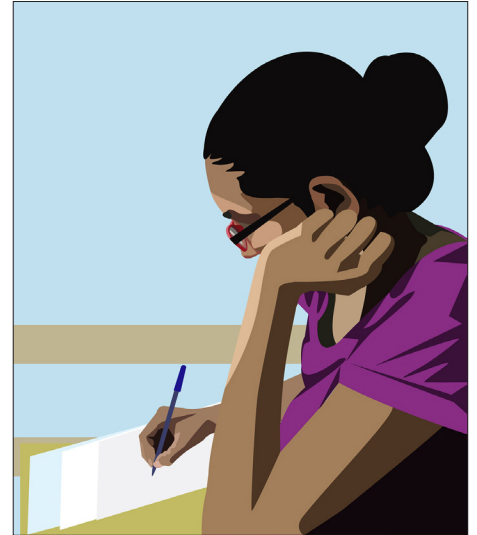
Similarly, poetry focuses often on the sound and look of a line. The rhythm of a piece is just as important as the imagery and content. Analyze your prose with a similar eye and look for the balance of long and short sentences. In a high-paced action scene, for example, a languid writing style might be a disservice to your pacing.

If you’d like to practice, Sherbondy suggests a few exercises from her poet’s tool kit to hone your figurative language skills for your novels:

- Write a poem or paragraph about an emotion without mentioning the actual emotion
- Take inspiration from a painting or photo and write a poem related to the image
- Take a page from your novel and circle any dull or flat sounding words and replace with more interesting word choices
- Add imagery to your scene
- Read your work aloud to analyze the rhythm

Stuck in a scene? Try writing it as a poem. Unclear on a character’s motivation? Eliminate the added scene elements and get straight to the emotional heart by refashioning the scene as a flash story. Practice describing plants, birds, or the weather with unique language in your journal.

The good news: Drafting short pieces is relatively quick. Perfecting them, however—well, it might be easier to draft that novel after all!



### Resources:

#### Short Fiction Opportunities

- [Press53 Monthly Contest Prompts](#). Stories must be *exactly* 53 words.
- [NYC Midnight Challenges](#).
- [WOW! Women on Writing](#) hosts quarterly contests for flash fiction and nonfiction.

#### Writing Prompts

- *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach* by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell
- *5-Minute Daily Writing Prompts: 501 Prompts to Unleash Creativity and Spark Inspiration* by Tarn Wilson
- *Room to Write* by Bonni Goldberg

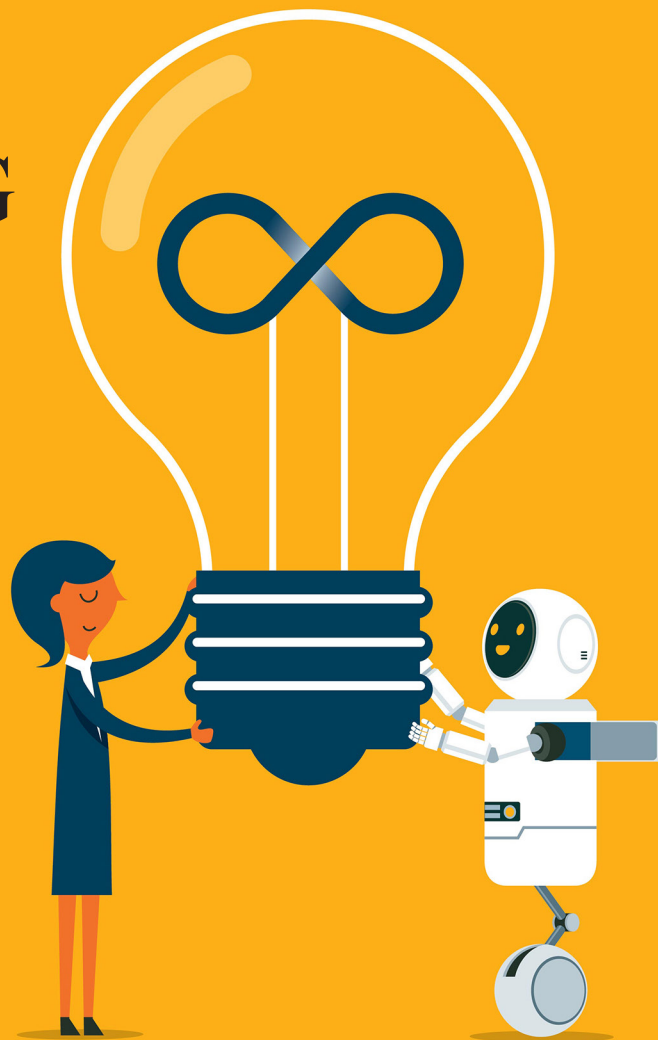


**Monica Cox** is a writer and Author Accelerator Certified book coach who loves helping writers through the thorny process of revision to find the rose of their story. Monica is a former public and media relations executive and a graduate of the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is represented by Hailey Stephens at Rosecliff Literary.

## THE NEXT CHAPTER:

Transitioning From Dream to Career By Christy Matheson

# HOLDING ON TO YOUR VOICE IN AN AI WORLD



I am writing this during a visit to Oberlin College, where 300 concerts are performed per school year and students jam the Irish way on the main green after soccer practice. These young people spend hours a day in rehearsal and practice rooms, but in a world where we all carry our favorite music in our pockets, does any of this work and passion matter anymore?

To all of us who work in the arts, that answer is a resounding yes, even though writers as well as musicians have seen their passion challenged by technology.

In the past few months, the clamor and terror over AI has escalated in the writing community. It turns out that some literary agents put submissions into AI checkers, D2D is adding fees because of an “onslaught from automated content farms,” and a Big 5 publisher pulled a

book because of AI allegations.

These incidents obviously have terrible implications for everyone in the arts, but this isn’t an article about AI. It’s about the steps you can take as you launch your writing career to protect your writing “job” from AI. The answer for both writers and musicians? Voice.

Musicians work to gain technical skills so they can put their own creativity into performances. You write books that no one else could write. Meanwhile, readers and listeners are coming to the arts because they yearn for someone to lead them deeper into their own soul and what it means to be human. As a writer, you want to build a catalogue of books that does just that, where readers can pick up any of your books and know what kind of emotional experience they will get.

So how do you develop your voice—and hold on to it?

*Continued on page 20*

## THE NEXT CHAPTER: Transitioning From Dream to Career

### Step One: Strategize Your Vision

How do you expect readers to approach your work? In the future, when you have multiple books or series, can a reader flip to the inside of a book and know that it's a "you"?

Here are several points to check that go beyond sentence structure:

- How do you draw readers into the story?
- What emotions do your characters make the reader feel?
- What mood might your reader be in when they pick up your book? What do you want their mood to be when they finish it?

If a reader has an emotional expectation for your book, they are more likely to pick up your next one to suit their feelings, *and* they are more likely to continue reading if you give them that experience immediately.

For instance, perhaps your reader picks up your books because they want an escape. Your openings always give them a specific, relatable character; within the first couple pages, they know they will find a moment of whimsy that makes them smile and details that root in a beautiful place.

None of these traits are about particular characters, plot points, or even genre—it's about voice, and it's something you can refine over your long-term catalogue and that AI will likely never truly replicate. Once you understand what type of promises you're making, you continue to develop stories that deliver on that promise.

### Step Two: Controlling What Critique Enters Your Writing Voice

Many writers struggle with imposter syndrome. No clear standard exists for when fiction is "not enough"—unlike, say, if someone performed a Mozart sonata and missed the left hand leaps and played the trills off the beat. Lacking an external compass, we often judge our writing based on the feedback we hear.

Critique is essential to polished writing, but what voices are you listening to? One popular option is to start with editing software like Grammarly, AutoCrit, ProWritingAid, and native word processing grammar checks. But it's worth asking yourself how you respond emotionally to the suggestions offered, especially since AI moves writing toward the "middle." When you read the responses, do you instinctively feel that they are more "correct" or "approved" than what you come up with yourself? Is it possible that the suggestions are flattening your voice?

As a beginning writer, you had to learn how to use grammar and punctuation to create a nondistracting experience for your reader. Now that you have the basics down, focus on your goals from Step One—creating an emotional experience for the reader that always sounds like you.

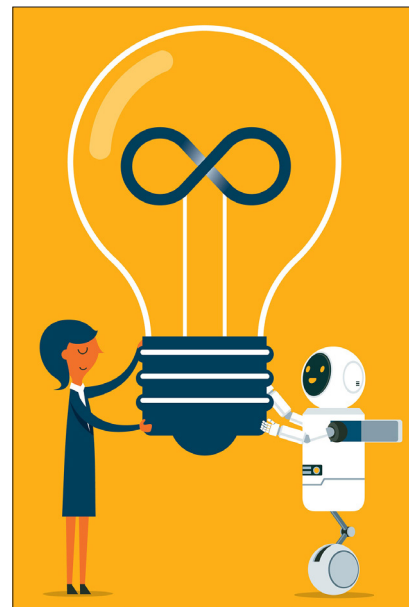
An aspiring madrigal singer wouldn't take lessons from a Broadway star. Similarly, be selective about what feedback you allow into your frame of reference.

### Step 3: Fill Your Mind's Ear with the Music You Want to Make

What we create is only as rich as what we put into our minds. I started my career as a musician, and I am positive those thousands of hours of practice inform everything I write today. It's no coincidence my writing style is often described as "lyrical."

Despite that background, if I read too many bullet-point AI-style articles, I start to think in a short, bland rhythm too. We skim book-club emails or AI "reviews" and, at first glance, they sound smooth and impressive. But when we spend a moment using our writer-brains to analyze, we realize that they lack detail and, thus, emotional resonance.

A fellow writer who works in tech reports that, by the end of this year, more than 80 percent of content on the internet will be AI generated. Instead of attempting the impossible task of avoiding



If a reader has an emotional expectation for your book, they are more likely to pick up your next one to suit their feelings, and they are more likely to continue reading if you give them that experience immediately.

it, focus on filling your mind with writing that you want to emulate.

Many writers think of their story like a movie. I challenge you to fill your mind with an aural medium instead of a visual medium. Focus on the sounds of the world around you: the ocean, the squelch of footsteps, the rhythm of the wind. Many writers check their own writing by reading it out loud. Try reading out loud passages of other books you admire.

Most of all, listen to music. Listen to what is creative, what is passionate, and what is human. In that, you will find your own voice and resist AI's attempt to flatten what makes your writing uniquely you.



When **Christy Matheson** is not throwing ordinary characters into fairy tales, she is busy raising five children. (Very busy.) She writes character-driven historical fiction with and without fantasy elements, and her "fresh, smart, and totally charming" stories have won multiple awards.



# HOW FEAR HIJACKS a Character's Body and Brain (and How to Show It)

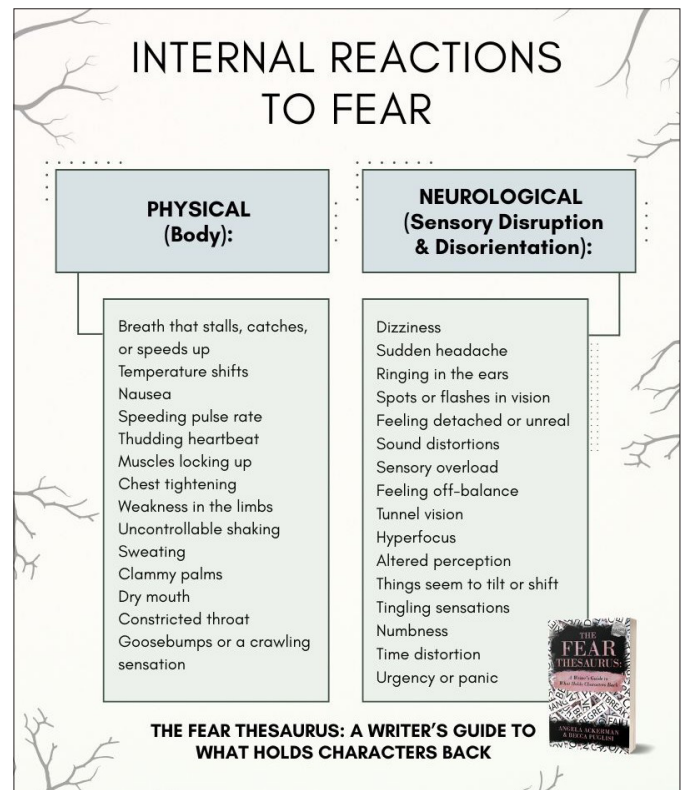
Fear is more than an emotion; it's a built-in survival mechanism that alerts a person to danger, kicking off a chain reaction of automatic body responses. This reaction—a hammering heart rate, breathing fluctuations, muscle tension, dizziness, etc.—is immediate, raw, and often beyond the ability to control. And, luckily for us writers, it's also a universal experience, meaning we can use this response to tap into the reader's psyche!

When fear takes hold of a character, not only will readers recognize it, but it can also trigger memories of their own past experiences. They will feel more involved in the moment, immersed in the character's perspective, and invested in what happens next.

Sounds great, right? But it all hinges on two things: describing the way fear hijacks the body and brain in a true-to-life way and describing the chain reaction in a way that mirrors how fear unfolds.

## How Fear Hijacks the Body

When fear takes hold, all sorts of internal reactions happen. Some are physical, tied to muscles, breath, and organs. Others are neurological, affecting perception, balance, and sensory processing.



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# THE PROMPT

Using physical or neurological cues (when point of view allows) lets you bypass telling entirely. You don't need to name the fear—these reactions reveal exactly what's going on. Be choosy about which to use, though, as less is more. Select one or two that fit your character and keep the writing tight.

## How Fear Unfolds in a Specific Way

Another important factor to writing authentic fear is to pay attention to the order of details you share that show fear's progression. It starts with a cause—a stimulus or trigger that sets everything in motion and ends with your character acting to escape or neutralize the threat.



Sourced from *The Fear Thesaurus*

The order is important because we process fear in a specific way, and we want to show it unfold the same way it happens in real life so readers more easily slip into the character's experience.

To play this out, imagine our character Emma is finishing her shift at the local pub. Last one out, she shuts off the lights, locks up, and carries a bag of trash to the dumpster. It's late, a moonless night, so she quickly tosses the garbage and then moves toward her car, a murky lump in the dark parking lot. Halfway to it, a sound disturbs the quiet: the scrape of boots against gravel. Her pulse starts to race. Her ribs crush her lungs, trapping her breath. *Someone's there!* She digs in her pocket for her key fob, and once it's in hand, she runs.

- **Stimulus:** the sound of gravel
- **Emotion:** fear
- **Internal Physical Sensation:** racing heartbeat, a tight chest, halted breath
- **Awareness and Thoughts:** Someone's there, a threat.
- **Action:** (Flight) She gets her key ready and then runs for the car.

Notice how the body reacts before her thoughts fully form—that split-second difference is what makes her fear feel immediate and real. Now, a different order:

Halfway across, a sound disrupts the quiet—the scrape of boot against gravel. *Someone's there!* Her pulse races and her ribs crush her lungs, trapping her breath. She digs in her pocket for her key fob, and once it's in her grasp, she runs.



**Angela Ackerman** is a story coach, international speaker, and coauthor of the bestselling book *The Emotion Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Expression* and its many sequels. Available in ten languages, her guides have sold more than 1.4 million copies and are used by editors, novelists, and screenwriters around the world. Angela is also the cofounder of [Writers Helping Writers](#)® and [One Stop for Writers](#)®, portals to game-changing tools and resources that enable writers to craft powerful fiction.

Swapping awareness and thoughts with internal physical sensations feels disjointed, right? It no longer matches how our internal warning system works.

Describing fear can be challenging because we know from experience how it feels like everything is happening at once. Time seems to speed up. We're paying attention to everything, scanning for threats. We feel intense internal pressure to restore safety: fight, flight, freeze (and sometimes fawn). Keeping this order in mind can help us focus on what to describe and when.

Sometimes your description will have parts missing too. A situation could be so urgent your character won't have room for thought, or you're not in the POV of the character experiencing fear, meaning you can't share internal physical sensations and thoughts. But whatever is there should mirror the true unfolding of fear. One part you should always show is the trigger, as this helps readers understand the cause for your character's fear, even if they don't yet know why it's setting them off.

Fear can also cause long-term [patterns of avoidance](#) that hold your character back in bigger ways. Understanding what this looks like for your protagonist—and why—will be a key part of their arc as they confront their greatest fear and break free of the patterns that are limiting their growth and happiness.

For more ideas on how fear shapes a character's behavior and choices, [The Fear Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to What Holds Characters Back](#), which I cowrote with Becca Puglisi, explores 80-plus human fears, from betrayal and heartbreak to powerlessness and death, and how they are at the center of meaningful inner struggles.



# Author Profile: Christine Gunderson

By Brittany Clair

Every time I have the opportunity to interview a WFWA author for these profile pieces, I am blown away by the resilience and resolution I find in their stories. Christine Gunderson epitomizes this—and learning about her publication journey filled me with not only hope but also a more directed sense of determination. As a busy mom with a professional background in media-communications, her path to success was demanding, to say the least. But after years of writing and rejections, her novel *Friends with Secrets* earned the 2025 STAR Award in the debut category. Read on for Christine's honest answers to our questions about drafting, inspiration, and publishing.

**WO: How do your ideas for a story usually begin, and what does the path from that first spark to a finished draft actually look like for you?**

**Christine:** For reasons I don't fully, or even partially understand, most of my story ideas are visual, just a quick image flashing across my mind. Or they start with a "what if" question in the shower or when I'm driving.

I write a brief description of several different ideas and send them to my agent. Then we do a call and separate the wheat from the chaff, which is North Dakota farmgirl-speak for separating the good, marketable ideas from the crazy ones. Once we have a concept we like, I start writing the first few chapters to make sure the voice is there and that the characters are speaking to me.

When I have those first three or four chapters nailed down, I flesh out the synopsis. When the proposal is done and the book is under contract, I write the rest, using the synopsis as a guide.

I always have a really hard time writing the first draft, even with a synopsis. I force myself to write about a thousand words a day and gut my way through it. But once that ugly first draft is done, I get to rewrite, and that is my reward. Revising and rewriting are my favorite parts of the process. A writer friend calls it "playing with words," and that's a beautiful way to describe it.



**WO: What was your journey to publication like?**

**Christine:** It was soul crushing, demoralizing, and long. I feel it's important to be honest about how hard this process can be. Writers who find success with their first books are the exception, not the rule. It took me ten years and six or seven unpublished novels before I finally got an agent and a contract with a large publisher. I started out writing young adult novels and had zero success with those books. When I switched to women's fiction, I finally found the genre that seems to match my voice.

**WO: What surprised you along the way?**

**Christine:** The publishing industry is extremely competitive, yet it's also surprisingly kind. Maybe it's because we all love words and stories, so we share a common passion, but everyone I've encountered is genuinely supportive. You don't always find kindness and camaraderie in highly competitive industries, but we do have it, I think, in the publishing world.

**WO: What part of publishing has been most rewarding for you?**

**Christine:** Readers are the most rewarding part of this process. Every time I get an email from a reader, it amazes me. I still can't believe that someone loves a book that I've written in the same way I love the books other people have written.

**WO: What's been the most challenging?**

**Christine:** When I signed a contract for two more books, I had to become a lot more disciplined about my writing. I had to dust off some old habits that served me well when my kids were little, like writing early in the morning. And even though I'm a pantsier at heart, I'm rereading craft books and taking classes and trying to become better at plotting so I can be more efficient. Contracts and advances and deadlines transformed writing from a hobby into a job, and I've had to adjust my thinking and my writing habits to reflect that.

I'm a slow writer, and I'm a mom, with all the driving and sports and activities that kids entail. Writing a book a year means I sometimes have to say no to fun things I'd love to do, like workshops and conferences, because they eat into my writing time. I have to trust that everything else will follow if I protect the time I need to write the best book I can write.

## Feature

**WO: If you could go back in time and give your earlier writing self one piece of advice, what would it be?**

**Christine:** Figure out what you want and *why* you want it and stick to your guns. What's right for you isn't right for someone else, and vice versa. I spent a lot of time wondering if I should be doing what other people were doing, but we each want what we want for a *reason*. Do we want control? Validation? Money? The want is different for each writer. I wish I'd spent more time honoring my own want and less time second guessing myself.

**WO: This issue we're thinking about creativity. Can you talk about a moment when your creative vision for a project was challenged—either internally or externally—and how you navigated that?**

**Christine:** Every time I start a new book, I forget that the creative process is a *process*. I forget that the first draft will be awful, that I won't know where I'm going when I sit down to write, that it won't make sense, that I'll write thousands of words I end up cutting later.

I compare the first draft of every new book I'm writing to my edited and published novels. I compare my first draft to *everyone else's* edited and published novels too. And I have to remind myself that every painting, every sculpture, every building, and every book started with an idea that someone molded and drafted and reworked, over and over again, into the version we see today. But it's a process. And that creative spark is just the first step.

**WO: How has being a part of WFWA shaped your career?**

**Christine:** Launching a book is a strange experience and the only people on the planet who understand that experience are other writers. I am so grateful I debuted with Sharon Wishnow, Hadley Leggett, Rosa Kwon Easton, and Jennifer Jabaley. We are all WFWA members acquired by Lake Union [Publishing]. We had each other and that made everything so much easier and a lot more fun.

When I had questions, I turned to Kristin Kisska, who debuted the year before me and is also a WFWA member who debuted with Lake Union. She took me under her wing at a WFWA conference and helped me more than I can say. Thanks to WFWA, I have

## Chapter One

Nikki

Nikki Lassiter stood in the baby formula aisle at Target, weeping softly into the downy hair of the four-week-old baby strapped to her chest. Her six-year-old twins did not notice this emotional breakdown. They were too busy giving glass baby food jars to their three-year-old brother, who joyfully chucked them to the floor from his seat in the shopping cart when his mother turned her back. None of the jars had broken—yet. But it was only 8:47 a.m. The day was still young and ripe for disaster.

The tears made it hard to focus on the endless varieties of formula on display in the shining aisles of Nikki's vast suburban Target. She scanned the shelves, trying to remember the name of the formula she'd used when her other children were babies, but the words blurred together, shifted, then broke apart again, phonetic clouds drifting across a landscape of extreme fatigue.

She rubbed her forehead and tried to think. Was it Immune Support? Fussiness and Gas? Or Non-GMO DHA? And did DHA make your baby smart? Or was DHA that terrible thing in plastic? No. That was BPA. She'd just read about it in *Perfect Mothering Magazine* as she'd waited in her hospital room for the lactation consultant.

A brand called Pro-Total Comfort caught her eye. She removed it from the shelf and examined the label. *Nikki was pro total comfort*. She was also pro undisturbed sleep and pro being alone in an empty room without another human being touching her for five minutes at a time, but unfortunately these comforts were not available in a can. Which is probably why people used drugs.

She cast a doleful glance at Baby Joe strapped to her chest as a septic smell rose in the air, like porta-potties at high noon at an outdoor festival for people with gastrointestinal problems.

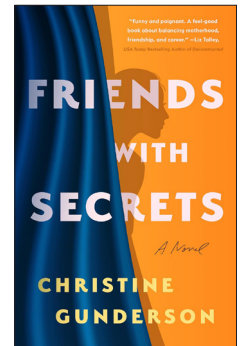
Putting Pro-Total Comfort back on the shelf, she reached for Fussiness and Gas. It sounded like the name of one of those children's musical groups. Here's another song about dinosaurs from Fussiness and Gas!

The cart was full, but she managed to wedge two cans into the small space between her three-year-old son, Daniel, a box of diapers, and a mountain of school supplies. Blue folders *with prongs*, red folders *without prongs*, yellow folders with a *clear window on the front*, and *four* highlighters when they only came in packages of three. School supply shopping was a treasure hunt where you paid \$100 to participate and the prize at the end was unfocussed anger and a gigantic headache.

It was also a test. Would she be the only mother in the school district who could not track down the clear plastic six-inch ruler? Would her children be mocked for their inadequate, non-conformist school supplies?

Probably not.

But then again...what if they were?



mentors, colleagues, and wonderful writer friends. And I firmly believe we are far more successful together than we could ever be on our own.

**WO: What was the driving question or emotional core behind *Friends with Secrets*—and what kept you returning to it as you wrote?**

**Christine:** There are so many books celebrating romantic love and relationships between men and women, but I wanted to write a book that

celebrates female friendship.

I also wanted to write a book that honors all the choices we make as mothers. The choice to work and/or the choice to stay home, and the role that female friendship plays in building the proverbial village we all need to raise happy children, no matter which path we choose.

I believe that mothers are truly heroic people, and I wanted to write a book that recognizes the sacrifices we make, the guilt we carry when we fall short, and the friendships that carry us through the long days and short years we spend raising our children.

# Roxana Trabulsi Uses Her Family History to Guide Her Writing



Roxana Trabulsi, who was born in the UK and raised in Dubai, has lived first-hand the inequities that communities can experience, and that's why WFWA's D&I committee was a natural fit for her. Initially, she served as the coordinator for the book club, but she was recently appointed vice president.

"When you start to pay attention, you begin to see your own implicit biases, and what I love about that is that it provides an opportunity for self-reflection and self-awareness, and within that the space for empathy, understanding, and ultimately growth," she says.

Over the years, Roxana's interest in inclusion became even more personal as her children grew. She dove in, taking formal classes in DEI and then starting a DEI program at the school where she worked.

Eventually, she decided to write a novel based on her family's experiences in Yemen in the late 1960s, when the British left and a communist regime took over. Her initial goal was simply to create something for her family and capture her parents' stories before they faded away, but it quickly turned into something more.

"It became clear to me early on that this story wanted to be written, and in many ways I feel that it chose me," she says.

But it wasn't always easy to write, so walking while feeling the sun on her face and listening to the rhythm of her steps with the sound of the wind catching leaves really helped seal her creative processes and thoughts together.


"I truly believe that the lulls, those moments, hours, or even days without creativity, are necessary for our creativity to thrive," she says. "It's in those spaces that we have to work the hardest, searching for the next line, character, or plot twist. Our stories take pause to give us time to develop them. It is part of the journey, and I feel it is important to honor those gaps which provide the necessary space for our stories to evolve."

Roxana found WFWA after publishing her novel *Of Mud and Honey* in 2023. "Authoring can be a very lonely profession, and I was desperately craving community."

When she's not writing or heading up D&I for WFWA, Roxana works as an educator and business owner. She lives near Boston with her husband, three children, and their seven-year-old cockapoo.



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A silver laptop is open on a light-colored desk. The screen displays a quote in a black serif font. The background is a blurred office or home workspace with a bookshelf, a plant, and a desk lamp.

**“You can always  
edit a bad page.  
You can’t edit  
a blank page.”**

**— Jodi Picoult**