

## FINDING YOUR AUTHOR IDENTITY



**WHAT'S  
YOUR  
STORY?**

- **WRITE A HOOK THAT DRAWS READERS**
- **CRUSH YOUR QUERY**
- **CRAFT YOUR AUTHOR BIO**



**INSIDE THE INDUSTRY:  
AUTHOR HEADSHOTS**

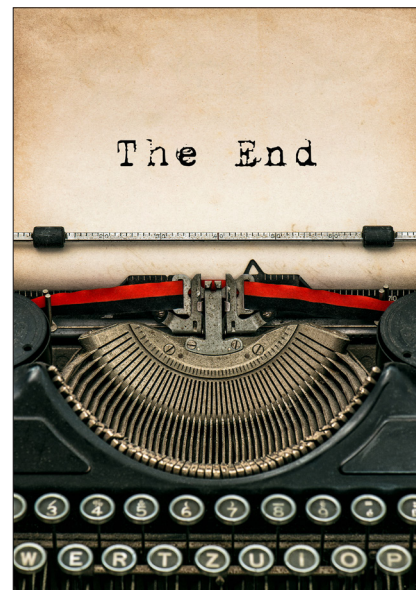
**AUTHOR PROFILE:  
LIBBY KLEIN**

**GUIDING SCRIBE: LET YOUR WHY LEAD THE WAY**

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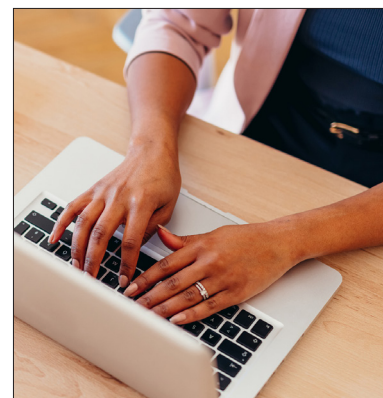
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## ABOUT THE WFWA

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



twitter.com/WF\_Writers



instagram.com/womensfictionwriters/

Join the closed WFWA Facebook group by sending an email to:  
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Craft Corner

**Debra Borchert**  
Connecting With Readers

### 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.

# Personally, Speaking

I am often asked how much of my personal life finds its way into my fiction. The honest answer is all of it, though rarely in a straight line. A neighbor's off-hand comment might become a pivotal confession in chapter 10. A note I scribbled during a red-eye flight can resurface months later as the seed of a short story.

Our minds are quieter thieves than we realize, gathering artifacts and stashing them in the recesses of memory until a scene demands exactly that detail. The trick is to honor the source while reshaping it into something new.

In my view, that is the heart of author identity. We study craft, analyze market trends, polish pitches, and line up comp titles, yet the raw material of our stories still comes from the same well: the lived, observed, and imagined experiences that shape us as people.

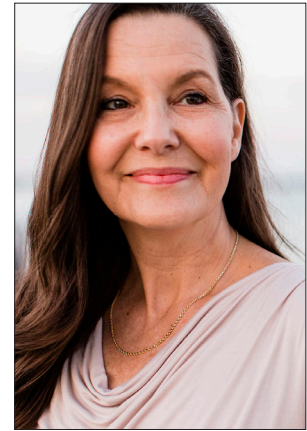
You do not have to be a detective to write a gripping mystery, or a serial cheater to explore the fallout of infidelity, but you do need access to the emotions those situations stir: grief, envy, hope, fear, and the thousand of shades in between. That access comes from the life you actually live, from the relationships that bruise you and the ones that buoy you, from the news that infuriates you and the art that leaves you speechless.

As you flip through this issue of *WriteOn!* and tackle the practical side of identity, remember the irreplaceable human behind the business card. The pages that follow will walk you through mechanics and best practices, but mechanics come alive only when powered by the electricity of the writer's heart. Let your curiosity about the world, your quirks, your cultural background, even that odd obsession your siblings still tease you about, find their way into your brand as deliberately as they appear in your prose.

Readers are hungry for lenses different from their own. When we lean into what makes each of us singular, we widen the doorway for everyone.



Kristi Leonard



**LET YOUR CURIOSITY ABOUT THE WORLD, YOUR QUIRKS, YOUR CULTURAL BACKGROUND, EVEN THAT ODD OBSESSION YOUR SIBLINGS STILL TEASE YOU ABOUT, FIND THEIR WAY INTO YOUR BRAND AS DELIBERATELY AS THEY APPEAR IN YOUR PROSE.**

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# YOUR AUTHOR IDENTITY IS A (CONSTANT) WIP

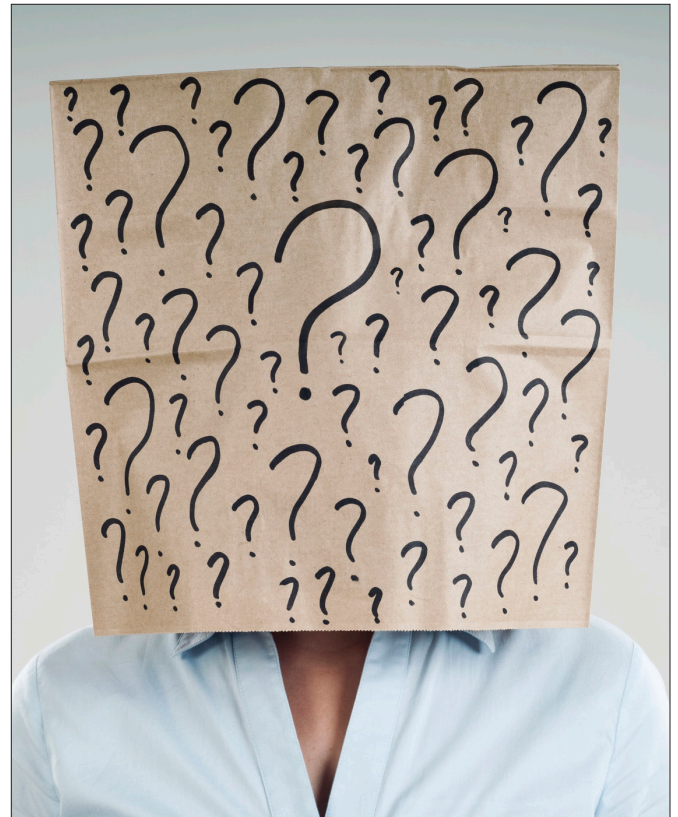
I have heard the terms “author brand” and “author identity” used interchangeably. I understand they speak to the same concept, and while the notion of a brand has validity in today’s competitive marketplace, there is something so expressive about the concept of “identity.” It evokes possibility. Character. Evolution. It is intimate and vulnerable, and it adapts. *Who are we as writers? Who are we to readers?*

I recently experienced changes in my career that compelled me to consider my own author identity in new ways—a task at once both intimidating and thrilling. WFWA has been an irreplaceable source of inspiration and knowledge for my thinking. The organization offers a breadth of opportunities to explore this massive concept, such as the countless webinars, workshops, and resources exploring topics ranging from author websites and platforms to newsletters, book reviews, and storytelling. And our membership is filled with writers discovering, rediscovering, redefining, and claiming their unique author identities in ways that resonate with them as people and also forward their careers.

This issue of *WriteOn!* is a new slice of that content and conversation. Read what Peggy Finck has to say about pitching women’s fiction. Or what Monica Cox shares about crafting a strong bio. Or Guiding Scribe Nancy Johnson’s powerful advice about writing with purpose. Or some of what Laura Drake has learned about loglines and hooks. Or photographer Melanie Read’s best tips for professional headshots. Witness how WFWA members are leaning into their author identities to grow their audiences, knitting different identities to cowrite, and looking at their writing through new lenses.

This work is always ongoing, wherever you are in your writing journey. It doesn’t “happen” all at once, and it’s never “done.” It’s deeply personal work, but it’s also relational. So I invite you to reflect with us, reconsider, and refine your own author identity. And to share it, because that’s why we’re all here.

*Brittany*



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**OUR MEMBERSHIP IS FILLED WITH WRITERS DISCOVERING, REDISCOVERING, REDEFINING, AND CLAIMING THEIR UNIQUE AUTHOR IDENTITIES IN WAYS THAT RESONATE WITH THEM AS PEOPLE AND ALSO FORWARD THEIR CAREERS.**

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## 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).

# Lean into Your Community to Find Your Best Author Self

By Marie W. Watts

Developing an author identity is crucial to any writing career. When we share the humanity behind our book—why we write, whom we write for, and what we are trying to say—we develop a deeper association with our readers.

As attacks on the value of diversity become more common, we may feel compelled to hide our authentic selves and masquerade as someone we are not. But now is not the time to waver.

Our burden is small when compared to that of America’s first female published poet, Anne Dudley Bradstreet.

Anne was born in England in 1612 to a wealthy Puritan family who homeschooled her; she and her family arrived in the New World in 1630. At the time, Puritan society believed women’s bodies and minds were too weak to engage in intellectual activity. Furthermore, it was thought that “silly women” could never be held in higher esteem than men and should stick to the role of bearing and raising children. Those who chose to defy the hierarchical structure faced consequences from shunning to banishment.

Those societal rules forced Anne to do her writing covertly, late at night, so neighbors would not discover the activity that fed her soul. The public saw only her fulfilling her wifely responsibilities: raising eight children and attending to her husband’s duties, as her spouse was frequently away for his public obligations.



Fortunately, her brother-in-law, Rev. John Woodridge, supported her efforts. He took her poetry manuscript to England, where it was eventually published in 1650 as *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. While her name was not on the volume, the author’s identity as a female was.

To push back against those who felt Bradstreet had stolen lines from a male poet, her supporters included

testimonials from reputable men who attested to the “gentlewoman’s” ability to write and that she was a devout Puritan.

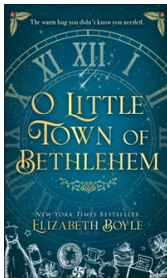
So proudly present your authentic self, knowing you have a support system like WFWA behind you. Don’t apologize. Instead, support your fellow writers and allow their genuine selves to shine, building a stronger community for everyone.



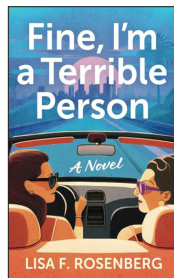
**Marie W. Watts** is a former employment discrimination investigator, human resource manager, and human resource consultant. Coauthor of *Human Relations*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Marie also penned the award-winning fiction trilogy *Warriors for Equal Rights* as well as the novel *Tough Trail Home*. Marie and her husband live on a ranch in central Texas.

# 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*.



**ELIZABETH BOYLE**  
O Little Town of Bethlehem  
10/1/24



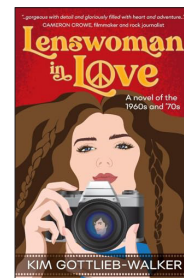
**LISA F. ROSENBERG**  
Fine, I'm a Terrible Person  
1/24/25



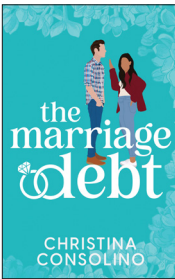
**CLAIRE YEZBAK FADDEN**  
Changing Lanes: A Roxy Adams Mystery  
3/17/25



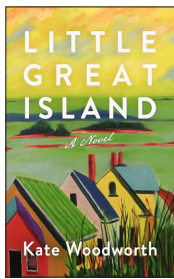
**BETH BROOKHART**  
The Four Queens of the Buttonbush Museum  
4/11/25



**KIM GOTTLIEB-WALKER**  
Lenswoman in Love  
4/24/25



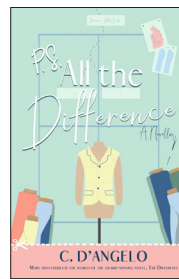
**CHRISTINA CONSOLINO**  
The Marriage Debt  
5/6/25



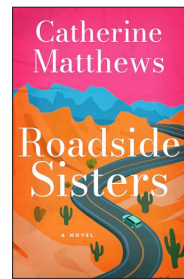
**KATE WOODWORTH**  
Little Great Island  
5/6/25



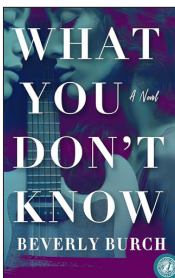
**WENDY HALLER**  
From This Day Forward  
5/7/25



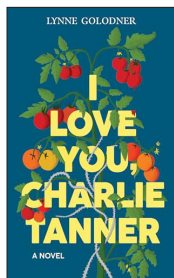
**C. D'ANGELO**  
P.S. All the Difference  
5/13/25



**CATHERINE MATTHEWS**  
Roadside Sisters  
5/15/25



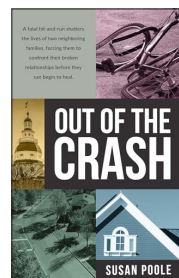
**BEVERLY BURCH**  
What You Don't Know  
5/23/25



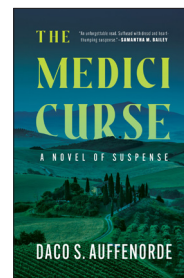
**LYNNE GOLODNER**  
I Love You, Charlie Tanner  
5/27/25



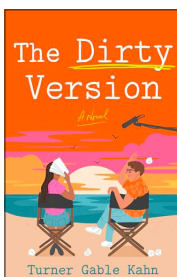
**AMY DRESSLER**  
The Best Advice  
5/27/25



**SUSAN POOLE**  
Out of the Crash  
5/28/25



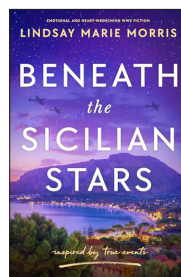
**DACO AUFFENORDE**  
The Medici Curse  
7/1/25



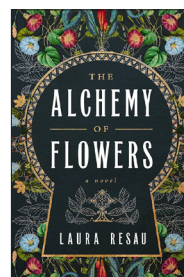
**TURNER GABLE KAHN**  
The Dirty Version  
7/1/25



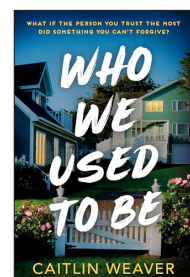
**JANN ALEXANDER**  
Unspoken  
7/3/25



**LINDSAY MORRIS**  
Beneath the Sicilian Stars  
7/8/25



**LAURA RESAU**  
The Alchemy of Flowers  
7/29/25



**CAITLIN WEAVER**  
Who We Used to Be  
7/29/25

# 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:

**"I used to get up two hours** before I had to get ready for work to write. That was 3:00 a.m. I've done it for so many years. It's a habit. My friends think I'm weird."

— *Laura Drake*

**"As a suspense writer** (plotter), I always draft the opening, gripping paragraph of my book and the LAST heart pounding paragraph before I write a book. This quirky habit developed because as a reader, I always read the last chapter of a novel first to garner how the author mapped the plot from its first chapter to its conclusion. Quirky, yes, but it works!"

— *Denise Jendusa*

**"Until I was 15 years old,** I wanted to be a writer and a concert pianist. I haven't played in years, but I still write my best work listening to classical piano solos featuring Chopin, Mozart, Debussy, and Beethoven on my Spotify list."

— *Janet Roberts*

**“What’s the origin story behind your quirkiest writing habit?”**

**"My quirkiest writing habit** is wearing an old, beaten sweater while I write. I'll never throw it out."

— *Lucille Guarino*

**"It's a bad habit, and it is quirky**

. . . because though I have a computer right in front of me when I work, I am constantly writing notes on paper and layering them on my desk. I have done this forever, but I am trying to break the habit and enter the notes on MY COMPUTER!! So easy to do, right? Wrong. Though I could create a file and call it NOTES, instead I am still piling up paper on my desk. Why? It feels quicker, like I might forget the exact wording if I am searching the computer. And I must confess . . . I have been writing notes on paper forever. It is hard to change a quirky habit."

— *Elizabeth Havey*

**"It is not uncommon** for me to wake up in the morning to find a surprise scene, solution to a problem, or bit of dialogue in my bedside notebook—or more recently show up in my email inbox as an email to myself. I tend to write late at night and my brain is still spinning when I crawl into bed. Ideas come just before I fall asleep, and if I don't write them down I won't remember I even had an idea, much less what it was I was thinking about. I love those morning surprises!"

— *Peggy Joque Williams*

**"For each manuscript** I write each chapter heading on Post-its and arrange them in a grid. My walls hold the grids of four books right now, because they've not all found a publisher yet and I believe in them so strongly I won't let them off my wall until they do."

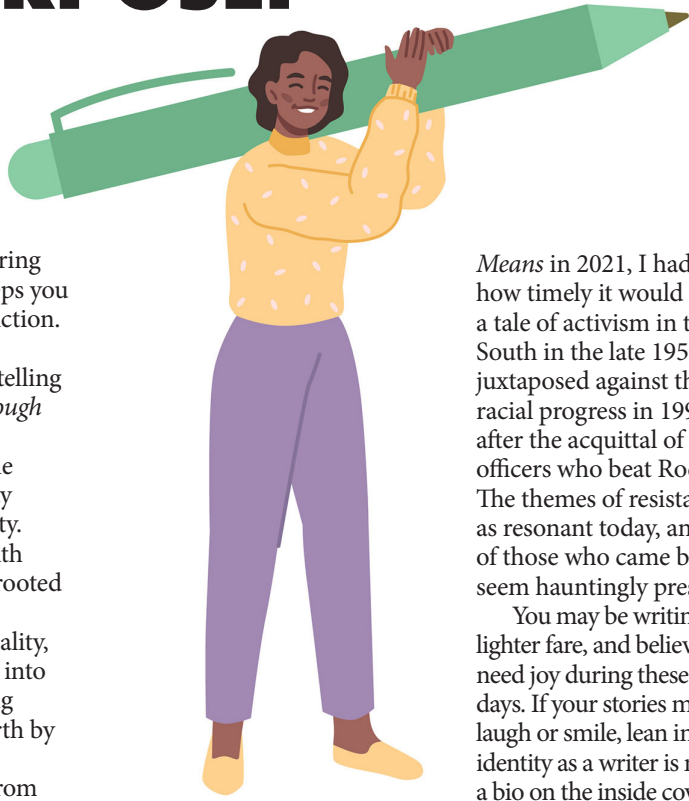
— *Krista White*

In the next issue, we'll explore what it means to start fresh with a new project and we want to know:

**What's the most bizarre thing that inspired a new story idea in you?**

Send your one- to two-sentence responses to [writeton@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:writeton@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 your one- to two-sentence response in the body of the email. If you prefer anonymity in the magazine, please indicate this as well.

# WRITE WITH PURPOSE: LET YOUR WHY LEAD THE WAY



Every writer has a reason to pick up the pen, and discovering that reason—your *why*—is one of the most powerful steps you can take toward writing with clarity, purpose, and conviction.

When you define who you are as a writer, you're not just choosing a genre or style—you're planting your flag. You're telling the world: *This is what matters to me, and this is the lens through which I see the world.*

I grew up Catholic, and the pastor of our parish asked me to write the Scripture reflections that appeared in the Sunday bulletin. At age 13 or 14, I felt the weight of this responsibility. While the priest delivered the homily, I, too, was charged with making sense of the world around me through storytelling rooted in our shared faith.

Every week, I wrote about racial justice, economic inequality, insisting that our faith move beyond the walls of the church into the public arena. To me, the gospel was not just about getting into heaven but required us to bring a piece of heaven to earth by challenging unjust systems.

One afternoon, my mother received a call after service from an elderly parishioner. With genuine concern, the woman said, "I read what your daughter wrote. Are these now the teachings of the Catholic church?" Laughing, my mother assured her they were just my musings, and not official church doctrine.

While this was an unpaid side project for me as a kid, my identity as a writer was forming. I knew I wanted, actually needed, to write about the societal issues that kept me up at night. I had so many questions, and I interrogated them through my prose.

In my debut novel *The Kindest Lie*, I explored the racial divide between Black and white America in 2008 at the dawn of the Obama presidency. I also held a mirror up to the working class during the tumultuous collapse of industry, exposing the fallacy of a post-racial country.

There's never an ideal time to be a truth-teller. In the deeply fractured world we live in right now, some of you may consider writing a luxury. You may wonder if your words are trivial when so much is at stake globally and here at home. In times of chaos or quiet, let your writing become your compass. In moments of strife, it should remind you of who you are and what you're here to do. As Toni Morrison so wisely said, "That's precisely when artists go to work! Not when everything is fine but in times of dread."

When I began crafting my recently released novel *People of*

*Means* in 2021, I had no idea how timely it would be. I weaved a tale of activism in the Jim Crow South in the late 1950s and '60s juxtaposed against the fight for racial progress in 1992 Chicago after the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King. The themes of resistance are just as resonant today, and the echoes of those who came before us seem hauntingly prescient now.

You may be writing much lighter fare, and believe me, we need joy during these difficult days. If your stories make people laugh or smile, lean into that. Your identity as a writer is more than a bio on the inside cover of your book or a pitch to literary agents—it's the thread that weaves through every story, every character you put into the world. Your identity is what brings you back to the page on days when your muse is elusive.

Your life experiences—every triumph, struggle, question, and revelation—are the soil from which your stories grow. No one else has lived your particular journey, seen the world through your eyes, or felt what you've felt in the exact same way. That means the way you tell a story, the themes you return to, the characters you create, and the truths you uncover are uniquely yours.

Whether you've navigated loss, resilience, joy, injustice, or transformation, those experiences shape your voice and give your writing authenticity. They don't just inform *what* you write—they empower *why* you write. You're not just telling a story; you're bringing your lived wisdom to the page in a way only you can.

So ask yourself: *Why do I write? What do I hope my words will shift or spark?* For me, I write to ignite meaningful conversations about race and class—to challenge silence and spark thought in a world that often resists both. When you know your why, lead with it. Let it guide your stories, shape your author brand, and ground you when the path feels uncertain. Tell that story everywhere you go.

Because that *why*—your *why*—is not just your purpose. It's your power.



A native of Chicago's South Side, **Nancy Johnson** worked for more than a decade as an Emmy-nominated, award-winning television journalist at CBS and ABC affiliates in markets nationwide. Nancy's second novel, *People of Means*, a story of race, class, and legacy in 1960s Nashville and 1992 Chicago, was published by William Morrow/HarperCollins. *People Magazine* named it one of its most anticipated books for 2025, calling it "beautifully crafted" and "propulsive." Nancy's debut novel *The Kindest Lie* was a Target Book Club Pick. It has been reviewed by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*, and was highlighted on *Entertainment Weekly's* Must List. Nancy lives in downtown Chicago where she manages communications and brand journalism for a large health care nonprofit.

# SIMPLIFYING THE ART OF THE AUTHOR HEADSHOT

Professional author headshots are no longer just for the book jacket. Today's authors (and aspiring authors) now have numerous social media accounts, from TikTok and Instagram to LinkedIn profiles, GoodReads author pages, personal author websites, and more that may require a quality portrait.

In today's digital age, having a face to match the words can go a long way in establishing your brand. A professional-looking author headshot helps your audience connect with you.

As a portrait photographer myself, I strongly suggest hiring a professional to do the job and want you informed about some key considerations.

Top issues to tackle are the background, the outfit choice, and any props. (Specific poses are also important, but a skilled photographer will offer you several choices to master the look you want.)

But before any of that, let's talk about photographers.

## HOW TO CHOOSE A PHOTOGRAPHER

The single most important step in choosing a photographer is to review their portfolio. This is the primary indicator of whether you will be happy with the outcome of your session. Narrow your search to a few choices where you feel a connection to their work.

From there, you will want to consider cost and rapport.

Costs for a headshot photographer can range anywhere from \$300 to \$1200, with averages varying based on geography. Make careful note of what the price includes.

Photographers tend to price in two ways: either an all-inclusive charge or a "Session Fee" with pricing for individual shots. All-inclusive pricing will give you a specific amount of time for the shoot (typically half an hour) and a set number of final portraits to choose from.

Look for a photographer that offers at least five different poses or pictures to choose from. The other typical pricing structure will charge a set price just for the actual shoot.

From there you pay per download, choosing only the ones you want. This can be a more expensive option if you have a hard time deciding which photos you like best, or if the per-download cost is high.

**Protip:** With either pricing structure, be sure to ask about allowing time for wardrobe changes, if that is something you value.



A final consideration when choosing a photographer is rapport. Many people are not "naturals" in front of the camera, especially when they are the sole subject of attention. Working with a photographer who has the experience and talent to break down that discomfort and help capture your true personality is a huge plus.

The best way to determine if you will work well together is to spend time communicating with them before signing a contract. Do they listen to you during the phone call? Do they ask questions to understand your vision of a perfect shot?

Reading reviews can also help you determine if a photographer will be a good fit. Look for comments like, "helped put me at ease," or "great with giving direction," or "she made me comfortable and confident."

With the photographer selection behind you, it's time to talk about the different options you'll have for the photo itself.

## INSIDE THE INDUSTRY



### BACKGROUNDS

Backgrounds can be lumped into three broad categories: plain studio, neutral nature, and environmental.

A *plain studio* background is exactly what it sounds like: a solid color background in front of a photographer's studio backdrop. Typical colors are white or grey, but a fun pop of color can add a dash of character. Having a solid color background is a great choice if you know your final picture will be in black and white.

*Neutral nature* is a term I use for any unassuming outdoor shoot. Trees, bushes, flowers, all in a softly blurred background make a wonderful choice, adding color and texture but not detracting from you, the main subject.

*Environmental* is a broad term that covers everything else. A graffiti-riddled wall is probably not right for an author, but a plain brick wall or pretty doorway can add just enough visual interest without overshadowing you. Also in that category is a bookstore or bookshelf. At the last WFWA conference in Old Towne, Alexandria, Virginia, we were lucky to have a beautiful independent bookstore a block from the hotel. They graciously allowed us to shoot a few pictures inside the store.

### THE OUTFIT

The choice of outfit is a second major component to consider for your author headshot. I can't stress this enough: **Always, ALWAYS choose something you are physically and mentally comfortable in.** If you are constantly worried about the skirt riding up or the blouse buttons separating, that will show in your photos. Most people find having their picture taken stressful enough without the added possibility of a wardrobe malfunction.

Choose a color that not only compliments your skin tone but also your energy. Bright and colorful clothes convey a completely different tone than a navy or black outfit. Neither is more or less desirable; it's a personal choice. Many websites and consultants offer color analysis. If you haven't determined your "season" yet, consider taking a free online quiz (like this [one](#)) to learn more about your ideal color palette.

Textures can also play into a well-thought-out headshot. Soft sweaters and patterns or fabrics like tweeds can add a visually interesting element to the picture without being overbearing. The use of textures can be especially helpful if you want a black and white final product. It is generally best to stay away from bold patterns on clothing, which can distract the viewer.

Putting together a great author photo doesn't have to be a painful process. Follow some simple portrait guidelines and take the time to find a photographer who works well with you to craft a headshot that shows you to your best advantage.

### A QUICK NOTE ABOUT PROPS

When done right, props can be a great addition to a headshot. Book lovers love other book lovers, so shooting with a stack of books can be a great idea. Holding glasses in your hands gives you something to do and can create a more natural pose. If you are fortunate enough to have a copy of one of your own books, holding that up in your shot can help the reader remember your book title. But a word of caution: Props can quickly become overdone or gimmicky. One way to tell if it's a bad idea is to run it past the photographer or a trusted friend, and be sure to take some photos without props in case the final photo doesn't resonate with you.



**Melanie Read** is a professional portrait photographer in northern Virginia. She has a background in marketing and social media for nonprofit organizations. She was featured in Design Mom's Living with Kids photo essay and recently held an exhibit titled "Faces of Sierra Leone." Melanie lives in Chantilly with her husband and has four adult children scattered around the globe. You can find her work at: [www.ivyandoakphotos.com](http://www.ivyandoakphotos.com).



## GROWING YOUR AUDIENCE WHILE CREATING AN AUTHOR IDENTITY



Sandra L. Young

Despite my background as an actress, I find in-person presentations to be stressful, and that sense of panic would carry over whenever I thought about in-person interactions with my readers. However, when I'm cooking I relax because I love talking about food. Writing a cookbook to market my historical novels was my secret sauce for handling anxiety. My author identity is a person who cooks, owns ten slow cookers, throws annual soup parties, and creates characters who share their recipes.

Now imagine one of your favorite authors. What's your first thought? For me, I envision Tom Wolfe, author of *The Right Stuff* and *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, wearing a white suit. Rumor has it that he donned the white suits to draw attention to himself at the beginning of his career, and because he also wanted to appear interesting.

Turns out, Tom was onto something, as two WFWA members can attest.

### BUILDING AN AUTHOR IDENTITY WITH VINTAGE CLOTHING

Early on, Sandra L. Young opted to wrap her author identity in vintage clothing. While marketing her books during singing gigs and appearances, she dressed in vintage clothes—sometimes as a Victorian era Lake Michigan lighthouse keeper, Harriet Colfax—and even presented programs on her amassed clothing collection at local events.

“Since my books are set locally, people love bringing me into book clubs, service organizations, and parties to discuss my books and clothing collection,” Sandra says. “I sell a good number of books through these venues, translating into many people buying the whole series.”

Sandra expanded her presentations after appearing as Harriet at a local library to a presentation for a Historical Society event. As word spread, she was asked to present another local historical event—Literary Ladies Night at the Barker Mansion.

## CONNECTING WITH READERS

Based on her success, she developed a walking tour, The Divine Vintage Story Walk, during which she incorporates the history of local buildings—a mansion, church, library, city hall, shops, and the lighthouse, many of which she mentions in her books.

“I really enjoy the performance aspect and the interaction with happy readers, either when I’m focused on my books or portraying Harriet,” she says. “I even wrote a cameo for her in Divine Vintage and a poem about her that I’ll read at a community concert this summer.”

## BUILDING ON EXISTING OPPORTUNITIES

Another WFWA member, Margaret Porter, also has an acting background that she relied on to create book events and a TV show. Like Sandra, Margaret has a collection of vintage clothing that she put to use when she delivered presentations on her historical books.

During the pandemic, professional jazz and swing musicians started a Sunset Driveway Concert series in her New Hampshire neighborhood. Margaret collaborated with the musicians, and at her suggestion they produced a program of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire tunes mentioned in her fourteenth novel, *The Limits of Limelight*. For the occasion, she wore her own garden roses in her hair and a 1930s lace jacket from her vintage collection. Between numbers, she shared trivia about the composers, choreography, and Ginger’s costumes. And she sold lots of books.

“The outdoor concerts were a safe way to entertain friends and neighbors and fans at a difficult time,” Margaret says. “These concerts are quite popular and remain a treasured summertime tradition.” Even with the pandemic over, the performances remain popular, with in-person crowds of 50 to 100 people, plus a YouTube audience.

Margaret also co-produced two public events at a historical theater, featuring panels of authors who also sold their books in the lobby. The program was broadcast and received an innovative programming award from a local cable station.

For the same network in Concord, NH, she developed a literacy show and is the creator, producer, and cohost of “Turning Pages,” which is broadcast twice a week. In addition to published authors in all genres, interview subjects include publishers and editors, booksellers, and book festival organizers. By generously supporting other authors and her local literary community, Margaret built a huge network.

## HOW MIGHT YOU EXPRESS YOUR AUTHOR IDENTITY?

For Sandra and Margaret, embracing their author identities created myriad promotional opportunities for themselves and their books. But if you’re not an actor or the owner of a collection of clothing to match your stories, how can you develop your author identity?



Margaret Porter

### To get started, think about:

- How do you want people to perceive you as an author?
- What are you passionate or comfortable talking about?
- What themes of your books might provide a platform?
- What book marketing opportunities can you create based on your passions and book themes that support the way readers perceive you?

A key to unlocking your author identity, though, is to always ask yourself: What are you comfortable wearing? It might be vintage, like Sandra and Margaret, a white suit like Tom Wolfe, or, like me, it might be an apron! Once you find your “outfit,” your author identity will be easy to pull on.

## LINKS

### Sandra:

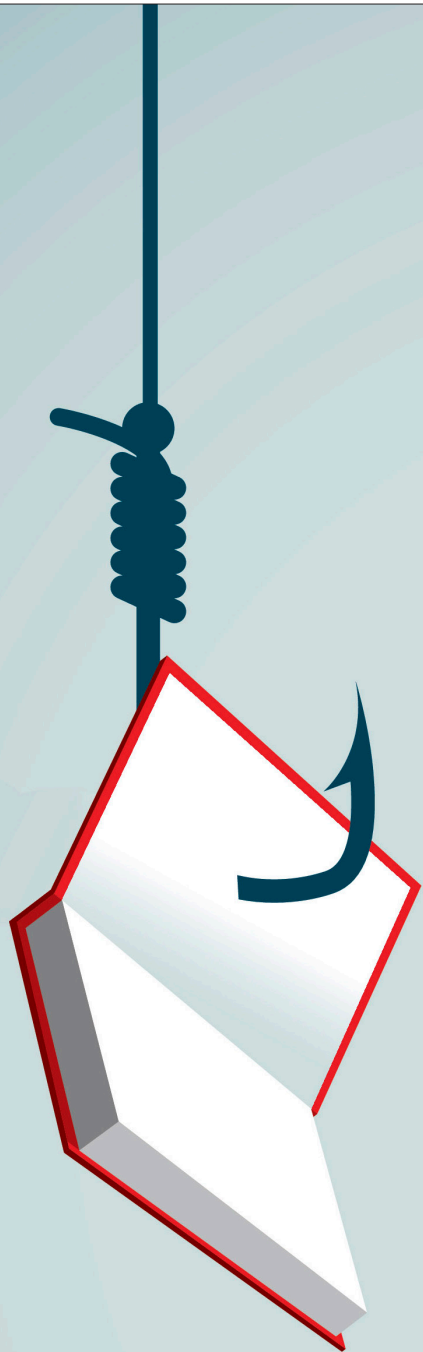
- <https://sandrayoungauthor.com/>
- Divine Vintage Story Walk audio version: <https://app.otocast.com/guide/DivineVintageStoryWalk>

### Margaret:

- <https://www.margaretporter.com/>
- Turning Pages TV show <https://www.youtube.com/@TurningPagesShow>



**Debra Borchert** is the award-winning author of the Château de Verzat series, its companion cookbook, *Soups of Château de Verzat*, and *Give 'Em Something to Talk About: Word-of-Mouth Drives Book Sales, A Marketing Workbook for Spreading the Word*.



# TIPS FOR WRITING A HOOK THAT DRAWS READERS

By Laura Drake

Someone asks what your book is about. Your brain freezes. You mumble and develop a tic while you stumble through an incoherent explanation. Soon, five minutes have passed and your listener's eyes are darting around the room, looking for a way out. In your head you're saying, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"—but you have to finish the part about your protagonist's sister's dog from thirty years ago.

Maybe that's just me—but probably not.

As a 40-year survivor of the writing trenches, I've seen a lot of confusion about the different methods of pitching your story. There are several terms often thrown around, and the three key ones are hook, logline, and pitch.

■ **A HOOK** is anything that captures a reader's/agent's/ editor's attention immediately—be it a line, phrase, question, or situation. Hooks are story bait, and they're essential everywhere: the beginning of a book, chapter openings and endings, query letters, and promotional materials.

■ **A LOGLINE** is a quick (often, a single sentence) summary of your story that reveals the central conflict, plot, and emotional stakes.

■ **A PITCH**, as defined by Avon Books in "How to Write a Pitch," is "a short, enticing description of your work that focuses on its USP (unique selling point) or the key thing that makes your book so special."

The differences between hooks, loglines, and pitches are nuanced—but really, they're all something that makes people say "Ohhhh" and pay attention. They're each around 25 or fewer words and should evoke emotion. In those few words, you need to give a compelling mental picture that will prompt people to crack open your story. For the rest of this piece, I'll use the term "pitch" for the sake of brevity.

On her podcast and in her teaching materials, novelist and book coach [Kitty Bucholtz](#) shares her top tips on crafting these all-important lines.

A good pitch is a description of **what actually happens**. It's a one-sentence summary of the plot. Not the theme. The danger of describing the theme in your pitch—instead of the plot—is that it invariably sounds generic.

Continued on page 15

## FEATURE

The pitch of *Eat Pray Love* is **NOT**: “A recently divorced woman searches for love and happiness.”

**INSTEAD**: “A recently divorced woman travels to Italy for pleasure, India for spirituality, and Bali for balance, but she finds love instead.”

Make your pitch **character-driven**.

**NOT**: “A burning skyscraper threatens the lives of thousands, including a pregnant woman trapped on the top floor.”

**INSTEAD**: “A former firefighter, fired for insubordination, races to save the lives of thousands in a burning skyscraper, including his pregnant wife.”

**NOT**: “A man falsely imprisoned on death row will die at dawn if the governor doesn’t pardon him.”

**INSTEAD**: “An intrepid reporter has only 24 hours to save an innocent man she’s fallen in love with from execution.”

In each case, we know who the hero is and what their quest is. By focusing on character, **you will not only show what your book is about but also engage your listener emotionally in the action and the stakes**. Do that, and your pitch will be a winner.

The last essential element is **voice**: adding a dash of flavor to your pitch gives it a unique personality. Ideally, you find a way to deliver some key details with a sense of your voice and the story’s emotional tone (funny, scary, intense, tragic, etc.).

## OTHER TIPS

■ **Use Backloading**: This concept suggests taking the word in your sentence with the biggest emotional punch and placing it at the end. (If you haven’t yet attended a [Margie Lawson](#) class on this, you seriously should!)

**Example**: Smoke rolled into the sky, spreading over the dairy like an angry fist.

■ **Use Power Words**: Very simply, these are words that carry extra emphasis. In the above examples, *smoke*, *rolled*, *angry*, and *fist* hold power because they evoke emotion.

■ **Keep It Simple**: You’ve slaved over this story for a *long* time. You know it inside and out. But your listener comes cold to the story, so complexity will lose them. One setting. One central conflict. Few characters (I’d suggest no more than two).

Don’t expect this part to be easy. The pitch—in all its various forms—is one of the hardest things you’ll tackle as a writer. It’s hard to stand back from a 100k-word novel and distill it to one or two sentences.

If you need a starting place, ask your “critters” (critique partners) or beta readers what they feel the essentials of the story are—what makes your book different/interesting/compelling? Once you have your sentence, analyze Every. Single. Word.

Would *crisis* be more evocative than *danger*?

Is an *and* or a *but* more forceful?

Go back and edit until every word is strong and purposeful.

Great, then do it again.

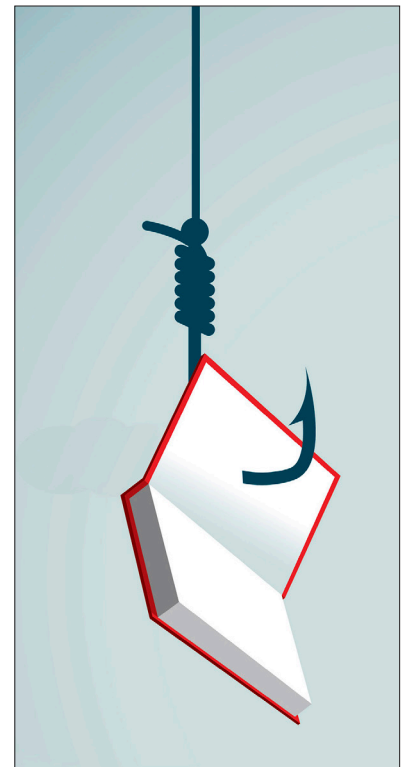
And again, and again, and again . . .

Many writers repeat this revision process for weeks on end. Not kidding—I spent six months on my pitch for *The Sweet Spot*, which won the Romance Writers of America’s RITA Award (named for RWA founder Rita Clay Estrada).

## THE FINAL STEP

Once you have a pitch you like, you need to test it. Share it with your friends, your family, your letter carrier. No, really, your letter carrier. You’re looking for the “Ohhhh.” If you don’t hear that, work on it until you do.

I promise, it will be worth it.



**A HOOK IS ANYTHING THAT CAPTURES A READER’S/ AGENT’S/EDITOR’S ATTENTION IMMEDIATELY—BE IT A LINE, PHRASE, QUESTION, OR SITUATION. HOOKS ARE STORY BAIT, AND THEY’RE ESSENTIAL EVERYWHERE: THE BEGINNING OF A BOOK, CHAPTER OPENINGS AND ENDINGS, QUERY LETTERS, AND PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS.**



**Laura Drake** is a hybrid author of eleven romance and four women’s fiction novels. Her debut *The Sweet Spot* won the Romance Writers of America® RITA® award. A city girl-turned Texan, she’s currently working on her accent. She’s a wife, grandmother, and motorcycle chick in the remaining waking hours.

# CRAFTING AN AUTHOR BIO THAT SPEAKS TO YOU

By Monica Cox

Whether you are a published author or in the query trenches, an author bio is an important document to have on hand, ready to share with agents, publications, and readers. Your bio tells the story of you: the writer, the creative, the person.

In *The Business of Being a Writer*, Jane Friedman outlines four bios every author should prepare:

- The **"Kitchen Sink Bio"** is a long-form bio that tells your complete story. This bio would appear on your website, for example.

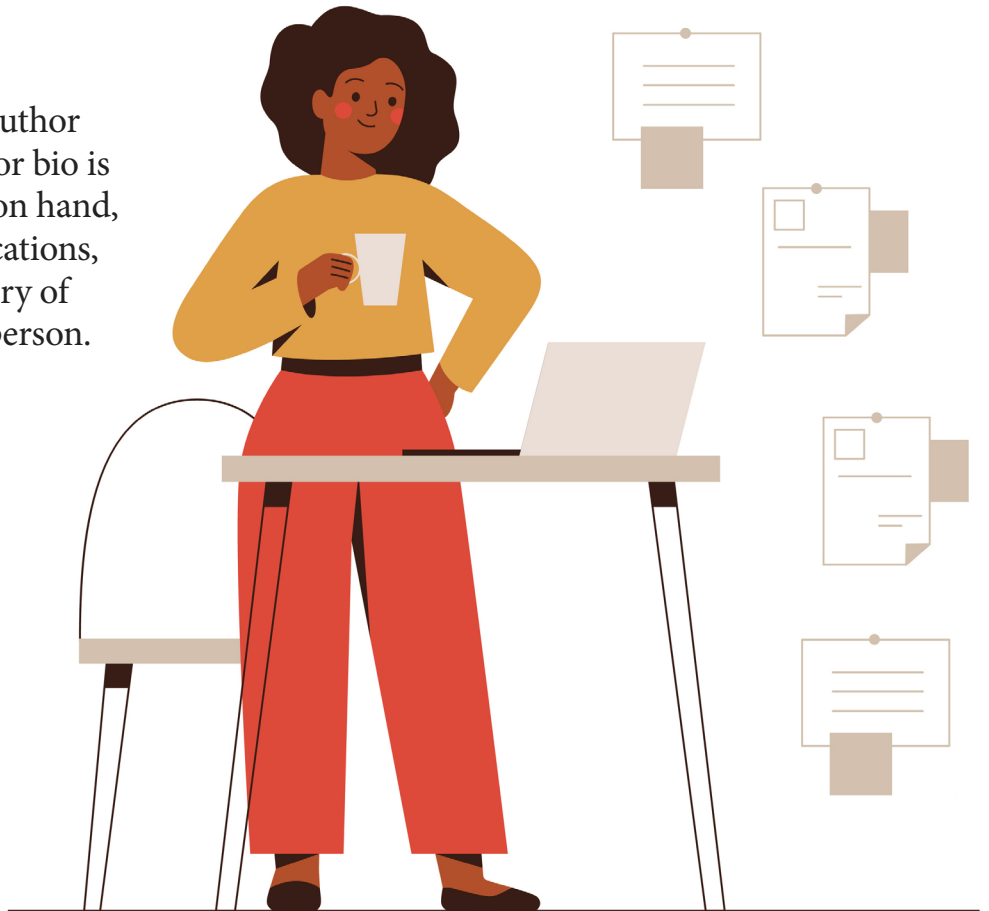
- The **"Capsule Bio"** is shorter and would accompany your byline in an article or guest blog post. This bio covers major credits (books you've published) and a bit of your author voice, but more succinctly and relevant to where it is appearing.

- The **"Social Media Bio"** can be more casual, is typically very brief, and should be written to the demographic of each social media site.

- Finally, there is what Jane calls the **"Professional Bio,"** which is used for media, publicity, and book launches. This bio is more formal, lengthier than your capsule bio, and written in an inverted pyramid style, like a news article, with the most important information at the top. It will paint a picture of you, but keep in mind it will be edited by journalists or bookstore owners so they can highlight the most pertinent information to their audiences.

## HOW DO YOU CREATE A BIO?

First, read the bios of your favorite authors. Go to their websites' "about" pages, read their back of book and inside cover bios, check their social media bios, and look for blog posts or articles. Start analyzing how their various bios are the same and how they differ.



Now, think about your story as a writer. Consider what readers would connect to as it relates to you and your books. What you choose to highlight and the tone in each bio depends on the audience and what story you want to tell them about yourself.

"Writing from the reader's perspective will influence what you include in a bio and its length," says Heidi Scott Giusto, PhD, writer, and owner of the communications consulting firm Career Path Writing Solutions. "Is this bio for a paid speaking engagement? If yes, write a snappy paragraph or two focused on credentials and your expertise. Doing so builds your credibility and the organization hosting you. Or, if the bio is for your website, consider writing a longer piece that includes more details about your background and briefly delves into personal interests. This approach can

help garner goodwill and make you more relatable. As with all good writing, be a ruthless editor of your work. Don't use five words when three will do."

## REAL-WORLD APPLICATIONS

Barbara Claypole White writes books challenging the stereotypes of mental illness. Her capsule bio on the front page of her website references her work as an advocate for the OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) community, and her longer-form "about page" bio delves into more detail about her personal experience raising a son diagnosed with OCD.

Colleen Oakley is a writer with several book club books. Her website capsule bio includes a list of all her books and wraps it with: "While working, she often wears jammies and drinks wine out of a straw."

## FEATURE

That's a fun and inviting line for connecting with her book club audience. However, she also does a fair amount of freelance article writing and her bio for *Reader's Digest*, for example, lists her magazine writing experience first and ends naming just one of her book titles—the most recent. No personal information or pithy lines about PJs.

Querying authors have a different challenge. They may not have books to list or credits to name just yet.

"Of all the parts of a query letter, I think maybe the bio causes writers the most stress," Angie Hodapp of Nelson Literary Agency says. "Many worry they need but don't have a laundry list of impressive things to say about themselves. Others have impressive things to say about themselves but don't because they fear coming across as arrogant. But everyone has valid information about themselves to include in a query-letter bio."

### NECESSARY COMPONENTS

The query bio should be brief, only one to three sentences. So how do you decide what to include?

Angie (who reads query letters for her agency) recommends prioritizing the following:

■ **Prior publications:** Previously published novels, short stories, or nonfiction book-length works should come first. You may also include professional writing credits like articles, essays, poetry, blogs, or even content for your company newsletter or website. "If you write or have written for an audience of strangers, that's good for us to know."

■ **Awards and accolades:** Include any awards, contests, scholarships, fellowships, or residencies you've won for your writing.

■ **Prior representation:** "If you've had an agent before, mention who. You can say you parted amicably and stop there. Or you can disclose circumstances if they are benign . . . but don't go into lengthy detail here. It's also useful for us to know whether your former agent took the project you're querying out on submission and whether you have a list of which editors saw the manuscript."

■ **Identity:** "If your novel centers characters of a particular ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or other marginalized personal or social identity, then it is appropriate to include a note about your relationship to that identity."

■ **Content knowledge and education:** If you have experience with the topic, occupation, geography, and so on of what's in the book, include that in your query bio.

■ **Fun fact:** If you don't have a lot of credits or accolades yet, don't worry. You can share a fun fact that helps tell your story as a writer or gives a taste of your personality, if that feels comfortable.

And, of course, include your membership to writing and professional organizations such as the Women's Fiction Writers Association.

Regardless of where your bio appears, consider your ideal reader and introduce yourself to them. Remember you're a storyteller simply telling a story—a story about yourself.



### THE ANTI-QUERY LETTER LIST

By Angie Hodapp

- How your book would make a great movie or Netflix series
- How long (or not long) it took you to write the book
- Your age
- Criticism about a particular genre or readers of that genre
- How agents, editors, or publishers you've worked with in the past were unprofessional, held you back, or failed to support or market your prior books
- How a particular bestselling author inspired you to start writing because you knew you could do better and if they can get published, anyone can
- How the agent will make a huge mistake if they reject you because this is a sure thing worth millions of dollars for everyone involved
- That the agent is on a short, exclusive list of publishing professionals you are inviting (congratulations!) to receive a first look at your manuscript, but they'd better act fast because you are currently scheduling preliminary meetings with prospective agents as early as Thursday
- How you've been writing stories since you could hold a pencil or how your high school English teacher always told you that you were destined to be a writer
- How you hope to make a living solely from your writing



**Monica Cox** is a writer and Author Accelerator certified book coach who resides in North Carolina. A former public and media relations executive, she now guides fiction writers through their writing and revision process. Her goal is to give writers the encouragement, feedback, and tools they need to keep writing, finish their manuscripts, and strengthen their craft. Monica is a graduate of the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



By MM (“Peggy”) Finck

Women’s fiction has long dominated the celebrity book club. As we know, celebrity book clubs dominate the bestseller lists. Our plots fill airport store bookshelves and Target end caps. Women’s fiction is and has always been in high demand by readers, booksellers, literary agents, and publishers.

Now, search “query tips” in your web browser. Several familiar sources will top the search results. Numerous tabs of advice will follow those. Most of the advice is accurate, if repetitive, sometimes outdated, but mostly solid. We’ve done our research. We follow it all. *So why aren’t every one of our queries raking in the requests?*

Here’s why.

We’re querying as writers.

It’s natural. It’s how we define ourselves.

“Hi. How are you? What do you do?”

“My name is Peggy. I’m fine. I’m a writer.

You?”

Not today.

Writing and querying are completely separate skills.

**Writing is creative.** Writing is personal. Writing is fun. Writing is for ourselves and makes us feel high.

**Querying is tactical.** Querying is publishing. Querying is selling. Querying is for the marketing machine.

When we’re querying, we’re not writers. We’re publishing professionals positioning our work for sale.

For the purposes of this article, let’s define **story** as the protagonist’s transformative emotional journey toward a more fulfilled self, and **plot** as the events that drive the protagonist toward a specific external goal.

Since this article is about pitching, allow me to reorder for today.

**Plot** is the series of events that drive the protagonist toward a specific external goal (in short, the WHAT).

**Story** is the protagonist’s transformative emotional, internal journey (in short, the WHY).

In pitches:

■ Plot drives story.

■ External things drive internal change.

This is not intuitive for women’s fiction writers, and it shouldn’t be. Our work is driven by the internal: backstory, pain, flaws, hopes, yearnings, needs.

But in querying, in publishing, pitches are plot.

Think about the components of your manuscript and try to put them into two categories: story and plot.

### STORY EXAMPLE

*A protagonist with no interest in a long-term relationship faces the potentiality of one.*

What plot would force this protagonist forward? Innumerable plots. Story is familiar. Plot is *you*. Plot is your imagination. You imagine the setting, conceive the barriers, layer the conflicts, draw from personal experiences, devise the conflict, and so on.

**PLOT EXAMPLES**

■ The protagonist is an old widower who sees no further value in his life and plans to end it, but the new neighbors keep interrupting him (*A Man Called Ove*).

■ The life of a happily-single-and-mingling starlet ensconced in all things celebrity is interrupted by the news that her sister and brother-in-law have unexpectedly died and left their three children to her (*Raising Helen*).

■ A teen boy on his own pleads desperately for his beloved uncle to take him in. The uncle, in deep mourning for his lost children, struggles with the request (*Manchester by the Sea*).

While reading those three plots, I bet your minds immediately recognized:

- The What (& stakes) = external
- The Who (& why) = internal

I bet the plots grabbed you more than the story. The same will be true for agents. (But don't worry. The story is still there. You inferred the story when reading the plots, didn't you? Agents do too.)

**Querying advice is often solid. It just isn't nuanced for women's fiction.**

**TIP ONE: CREATE A ONE-LINE LOGLINE USING ONLY PLOT. BUILD YOUR PITCH FROM THERE.**

The most common misstep in women's fiction queries is highlighting internality and overarching themes when everything else/plot (events, setting, characters, conflicts, antagonistic forces) is what makes the work unique and special. Focus on plot. Then add your special sauce: interesting details about your characters, setting, and voice.

If you are considering using the words "theme" or "journey," reconsider.

Stop at the climax or even just past the setup. Be sure to include complications.

**MANY OF US LOOK UP TO AGENTS. DON'T. THEY ARE PUBLISHING PROFESSIONALS. SO ARE WE. WE ARE EQUALS. STOP. READ THAT AGAIN.**

**TIP TWO: MULTITASK WHEN INTRODUCING YOUR PROTAGONIST.**

Another common misstep is making protagonists so relatable for the reader that the pitch starts off on a weak foot. Pitches are short: 250–275 words. Multitask. Give the first sentence as much as possible: protagonist, character, agency, a goal, setting, and so on.

*First draft:*

In 1989, a restrained, gray-haired woman hunkered over files in the storage room of the shipping facility office where she has spent her career, discovers something surprising, something her bosses have been hiding.

There is nothing technically wrong with this opening sentence. The next sentence would surely expand on what was hidden and maybe more about the bosses.

But would it grab busy, rapid eyes?

The second part of this sentence hints of intrigue and action, but it's buried after a clause full of boring words such as hunkered, storage, restrained, and so on.

*Second draft:*

In 1989, while sifting through ashes and debris for surviving manifests in the storage basement of her employers' New York City shipping company, Ester's boss shoves her aside and snatches this one from her hands.

Focusing on plot fixes the first draft. It frees us from introducing the protagonist and her situation on the first pages and focuses instead on how the plot unveils. We feel the tension of a fire and lost things. We see secrets instead of hearing about them.

We see the lack of respect for her when her boss shoves her instead of hearing that she is gray-haired and restrained and spent her career there and is still working with files.

**TIP THREE: BIO. YOU ARE ACTIVE IN THE WOMEN'S FICTION WRITERS ASSOCIATION. END STOP.**

This one is not specific to women's fiction queries, not even close. Query bios by men, women, all genders, and all genres wax on (and on.)

Skip the personal details unless they relate to your work. If your story takes place in Appalachia and your family roots are Appalachian, include it. If you have three kids, love to knit, enjoy surfing, your day job is fixing cars, or you quit your day job to raise your kids or care for your elderly parents . . . leave it out.

Include degrees, brief details if your life experience is germane to your work, membership in writing associations, recognizable publishing credits, and that's about it. When it comes to bios, briefer is better.

Many of us look up to agents. Don't. They are publishing professionals. So are we. We are equals. *Stop.* Read that again.

Yes, agents are gatekeepers. They hate that term, but it's true. What is also true is that our work is the key to that gate. They have no career without writers. They are always on the hunt for the next big book. If we don't believe that could be ours, we need to change our attitudes. We need to believe in ourselves and our work. Confidence in ourselves and our work brings on confidence in us and our work.

Querying can be hard. (Writing is harder, and you already did that!) Now you know how to do it specifically for women's fiction. Keep at it. Those airport bookshelves and celebrity book club stickers are waiting.



**MM Finck** is a niche editor specializing in queries, pitches, opening pages, and overall story analysis. She established her practice as the [Query Quill](#) in 2014. Among MM's clients' successes are chart rankings, bestsellers, and two adaptations to television series—one Apple, one Prime. Two-time Vice-President of Women's Fiction Writers Association. Past-Chair Advisor for Rising STAR Award for Unpublished Women's Fiction. Founder of [Penning Suspense](#), a group for suspense and thriller fiction writers, and [togetHER](#), a Facebook group for women. Also active in James River Writers, Sisters in Crime, and Writer Unboxed. Represented by Katie Shea Boutillier. On social media as @MMFinck. <http://mmfinck.com>



# FOUR ON FOUR: WFWA MEMBERS CO-WRITE NOVEL

Writing a two-person point-of-view (POV) novel can be tricky. Three POVs would be difficult. For true insanity, let's make it a four-person POV novel—written by four authors.

Maybe insanity doesn't begin to cover such an idea, but for four WFWA members—Sara LaFontain, Julie Mayerson Brown, Marina DelVecchio, and Jen Sinclair—the challenge was too tempting to pass up. The end result? *The Accidental Life of MF Ascher*, written under the pen name Ivy H. Booker.

The story premise is even wilder. The four main characters—Sophia, Talia, Max, and Chelsea—are also authors, all writing in different genres, who, after a few drinks at a retreat, create a novel by giving ridiculous prompts to an AI program. After the book is posted on Amazon, people start reading it and offering kudos, and a novel that was written for laughs

and giggles turns into a bestseller. And a nightmare. So was fiction imitating reality?

Not quite.

Sara, Julie, Marina, and Jen met during WFWA write-ins. After one particular session, all were frustrated with their output and decided to meet via Zoom.

“When we first got together, it wasn't really to write a book,” Jen says. “We wanted support and another writer's ear to work out issues we were having in our writing.”

As writing chats often do, it went slightly off track, and one Zoom conversation turned to AI and the problems it creates for writers and other creative people.

“We started throwing out scenarios and ideas about a writing group jokingly using AI to create a book that accidentally goes viral,” Jen writes in an email.

And that joke... well. It became their novel.

## PLOTTING VS. PANTSING

Of the four women, one is a plotter and everyone else is a pantser, so the group started with a loose outline, and a whole lot of freedom.

“The process was pretty straightforward in that each one of us owned the POV of one character,” Julie says.

Each would write a chapter in their character's POV, including conversations and actions of one to three of the other characters, and they shared each chapter via Google docs. Then, the group made changes to make sure the other characters were represented as their writers imagined. Next, they would write another chapter then share and revise based on the one before it.

## WRITING TOGETHER

“And we just built and built. And by the time we got about halfway in, we were at a really good rhythm,” Julie says.

But it wasn't always easy. Julie, the one plotter of the group, constantly pleaded for a more specific outline. But the pantsers wouldn't give in.

“We were having these entanglements,” Marina says.

Julie would call for an outline and the other three would say, “We're gonna make things up. We'll see what happens.”

The more Julie wanted to know what a character was going to do, the more the other three would shrug.

Jen, who wrote the Chelsea character, remembers Julie asking what Chelsea was thinking about a certain situation. “And I'm like, I don't know, I haven't written it yet. We'll figure it out.”

Sara wrote the first chapter, and while she was working on it, she thought, “You know what? I think [her character, Sophia] has a brother in prison.”

Julie, not only a plotter but a detail-person, told her, “You need to tell the readers what he did.” Sara disagreed.

“I told her that every time she says we need to know what he did, I would make it worse,” Sara says. And she did, eventually turning the brother into a murderer.

So the rhythm became writing about a specific character, adding the other characters, and then letting the other authors tweak any dialogue or action to better match their characters.

As with any writer—whether plotter, plantser, or pantsers—the writers made discoveries about characters along the way. A scene in one chapter included a flashback with two of the characters. Later on in the book, the authors decided to add the antagonist into the flashback scene.

“We had to go back and completely rewrite an entire chapter, but it worked really well,” Marina says.

Other discoveries came along the way “including that Sophia could use her murderous brother as a threat,” Jen says. “He was a notorious killer. I just love that scene.”

**AS WITH ANY WRITER—WHETHER PLOTTER, PLANTSER, OR PANTSER—THE WRITERS MADE DISCOVERIES ABOUT CHARACTERS ALONG THE WAY. A SCENE IN ONE CHAPTER INCLUDED A FLASHBACK WITH TWO OF THE CHARACTERS. LATER ON IN THE BOOK, THE AUTHORS DECIDED TO ADD THE ANTAGONIST INTO THE FLASHBACK SCENE.**

### WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

Some scenes in the book are relatable to just about every writer: a bestseller that starts off with the MC getting out of bed to look in the mirror; a list of comp titles that goes on and on; and book reviews, some that make an author smile and others that make an author want to throttle the reviewer. Even with these nods to the publishing world, the women say they weren't writing for other writers. They wrote for readers, too.

“We were writing based on the conflicts we have with the publishing industry and self-publishing and hybrid publishing and the traditional publishing industries and the rejections and, you know, we're struggling writers,” Marina says.

All four women wrote pretend reviews and added them to a Google doc. Each chapter starts with a review, and some of them are hysterical. Julie says most were written by Sara, Marina, and Jen.

Would they recommend others taking on a similar challenge? It really depends, they say. The collaborators need to be willing to take constructive criticism, give constructive advice without being insulting, work well with others, and check any ego at the door.

One other benefit with writing as a group: In the end, all four were exhausted but pleased with their joint novel. And it was fun, they say.

Fun enough to be writing a second novel under the pen name Ivy H. Booker. Stay tuned.

In *The Accidental Life of MF Ascher*, by Ivy H. Booker, four women share a deep need to become published authors. After a night of too much wine, they create a novel giving funny prompts to an AI program. The book gets out to the public, and they must navigate unexpected—and somewhat unwanted—success. Their friendships fracture to the point of no return as they fight, grow suspicious, and betray one another, eventually leading to murder. To see where the book is available, go to <https://books2read.com/mfascher>.

Listing the names of four authors might make for a crowded book cover, so the four writers decided on one pen name. Here's how it came about, Jen Sinclair says: The Ivy is verbal for IV (four writers); H is for Hildegard, the patron saint of creativity; and Booker is, well, bookish. Round it all up and you have Ivy H. Booker.

**Diane Riley** is a former journalist, English teacher, copy editor, and proofreader (well, she's still doing a bit of copy editing and proofreading). After retiring she took the leap into fiction writing and is so happy to have found WFWA. She has completed one book, which died in submission and is being rewritten, and is working on two others: a thriller and a cozy mystery. She has written essays for a number of anthologies. She volunteers for WFWA as a copy editor.

# THE ALCHEMY OF ENDINGS

Endings are hard. The best ones are tough to define—a magical combination of satisfaction and payoff, emotional resonance, and surprise.

When I'm teaching a class on the structure of the novel, I often ask my students if a book can be "good" if it doesn't have a "good" ending. Some writers are adamant: a book can't be good if it doesn't end well. Other writers are less sure: Some good books didn't end as well as they could have.

But what nearly everyone agrees on is this: In those last pages, a five-star rating can head south rapidly. A satisfying ending, while maybe not imperative to all readers, is nevertheless important.

So when we're writing, how do we give ourselves the best shot at a strong ending?

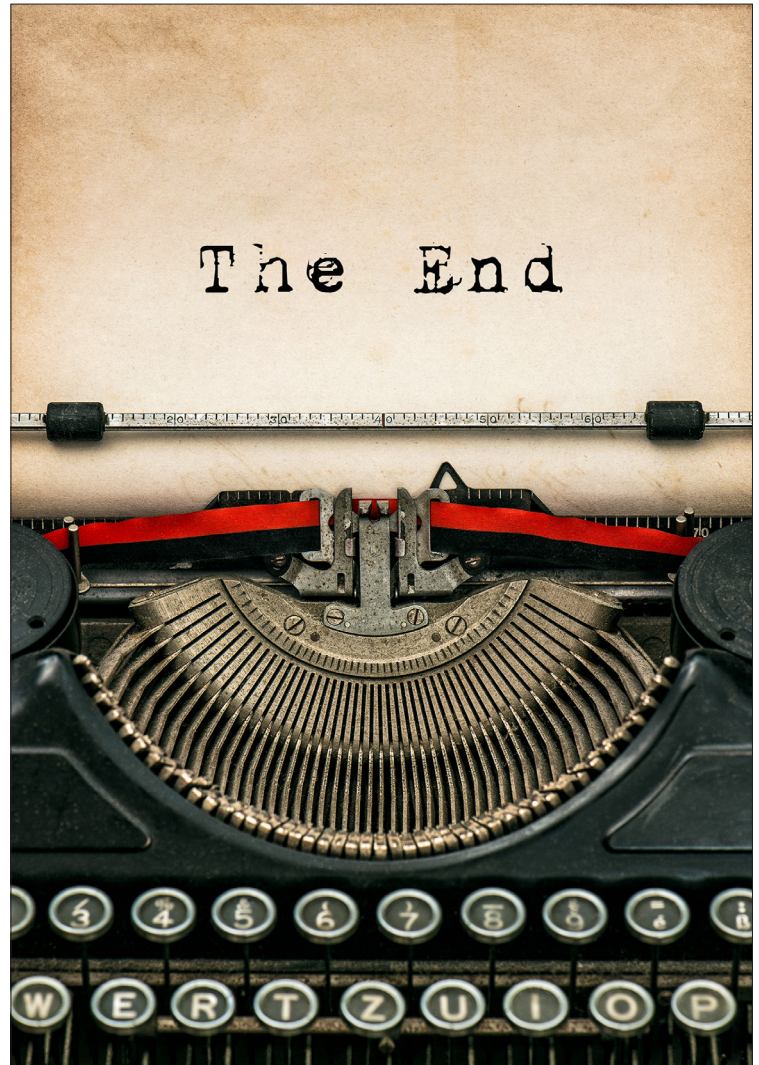
## THE INEVITABLE SURPRISE

In my MFA workshops, we would talk about the importance of an ending that feels simultaneously expected and unexpected. The best stories have a little twist at the end, taking us in a direction that we hadn't anticipated but that the writer has prepared us for. That preparation—the *inevitable* part of the inevitable surprise—is important: We don't want to shock the reader in a way that feels as if we've cheated them.

When I teach workshops now, I stress that the surprise doesn't have to be a twist ending. I don't mean that every story needs to end in a *We Were Liars* or *Gone Girl* gasp. But I do mean that something should be unexpected here, and often it's what the reader expects, just arranged in a surprising way.

## CONNECTING THE BEGINNING TO THE END

In [one of my previous columns](#), I explained that I often ask my students to stop at the beginning of the book and predict the ending. Part of the reason I ask students to stop after the first chapter or act and list the story elements is that I want them to see how the first chapter connects to the last chapter. If the first chapter introduces a character and their motivation, the last chapter should answer the question of whether they got whatever it was they were after.



In his book *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Story*, John Yorke breaks down the parallels between the beginning of the story and the end, and he emphasizes what needs to be brought back. "Inciting incidents," he states, "create the question that will be answered in the climax."

He goes on to say, "The climax is the peak of the drama: everything builds to this end, all the strands, all the issues, all themes square up." In other words, all the issues from the first act—all the trouble you put your hero in—should have some answer at the end of the book.

To find your ending, sometimes it's helpful to outline the main points of your first chapter and your inciting incident, then make sure you're addressing each main point in your story's resolution. It's equally helpful to go the opposite direction, though. Sometimes you get to the end, and you see the vision: a stand-up-and-cheer moment that gives you goosebumps.

## CRAFT CORNER

But you still need to have prepared the audience and planted all the necessary elements.

Historical fiction author Bernard Cornwell calls this act of going back and adding details “putting doors in alleyways.”

“In every book,” he says, “you’ll have the hero down a blind alleyway, trapped by their enemies, and he or she has absolutely no chance of getting out alive. So what you have to do is go back five or six chapters and put a door in.”

Sometimes you plant all the details correctly during drafting, but sometimes they need to be added during revision.

The imagery of the beginning and end is often connected too, a practice screenwriting courses explicitly teach.

In screenplay classes, writers learn to think of the opening image as a mirror image of the closing, the same but opposite, showing the development that has occurred over the course of the story. While this technique is not always used, it’s important to understand that, in most satisfying endings, there’s a connection between how the story starts and how the story ends.

There’s a fascinating [video](#) that collects the first and final frames of various movies, and in class we’ll often watch this video and discuss the relationships between beginning and end.

### THE SOURCE OF EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

We read to experience a character’s journey, and one of the most important components of a successful ending is the success of that arc. We want to understand how the character has changed, and we want to see how that internal change manifests externally.

In his book *The Anatomy of Story*, John Truby recommends breaking down the resolution of the character arc into two parts: the psychological and the moral.

The psychological resolution is a self-revelation that comes as the result of the hero’s struggle throughout the story. “The hero strips away the façade he has lived behind and sees himself honestly for the first time,” Truby says.

This psychological self-revelation often leads to a moral choice, one that shows how much the hero has changed. Seeing that hero make a choice they wouldn’t in the beginning is often a great moment of emotional resonance.

I also want to briefly note some exceptions to this guideline. Sometimes the psychological self-revelation comes too late, and the hero has no time to make a moral choice. We often consider these stories a tragedy.

Additionally, there’s a genre of story in which the hero doesn’t personally change but instead changes everyone around them. Think of *Forrest Gump* and his effect on the other characters, or the Peter Sellers character in *Being There*. These stories are rare, however. (If you are interested in writing a story with a similar spine, I recommend the

chapter “The Fool Triumphant” in *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel* by Jessica Brody.)

As readers, we want to see that change, and we want that change to be substantial.

Here’s what Jessica Brody says about a good ending in *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*: “We didn’t just travel in circles. We went somewhere.”

We want the character to have gone through serious struggles, to grow as a human being, and to see that growth made evident on the page.

If our protagonist started out as selfish, we want to see them act selflessly. If they started out as meek, we want to see them be strong. If they started out as a prisoner, we want to see them taste freedom.

Providing a satisfying ending to that emotional journey is the way we show readers that we went somewhere.

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### SUGGESTED READING

- For a discussion on symmetry in storytelling, John Yorke’s *Into the Woods: A Five Act Journey into Story* is an indispensable resource.
- For an in-depth discussion of structure, including how to build characters and worlds around your central theme, John Truby’s *The Anatomy of Story* is an excellent book. For me, this is one of the books I turn to most.
- For a discussion of different storytelling modes, I really recommend Henry Lien’s *Spring, Summer, Asteroid, Bird* and Gail Carriger’s *The Heroine’s Journey*. In Lien’s book, he discusses an East Asian four-act structure, among other storytelling modes, breaking down stories like *Parasite* and *My Neighbor Totoro*. In *The Heroine’s Journey*, Carriger breaks down how structures like Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey fail to take into account communities of characters, and she argues that, in many stories, restoration of the family order is more important than glory or revenge.

### Jessica Brody’s *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel* Final Image Checklist:

- Is your Final Image one scene or collection of interconnected scenes?
- Is your Final Image visual? (Are you showing, not telling?)
- Is it evident how your hero has transformed?
- Does your “after” snapshot somehow mirror your “before” snapshot (Opening Image)?

“So what makes a good ending? It has to work, first of all, by satisfying the story; when we reach the final fade-out and walk away from the movie experience, we want to feel full and satisfied much as if we were leaving the table after a good meal. It’s this feeling of satisfaction that must be fulfilled in order for an ending to work effectively. And of course, it’s got to be believable.”

—Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*



**Nancy Wayson Dinan** is a native Texan who lives in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Her work has appeared in *The Texas Observer*, *LitHub*, *The Paris Review Daily*, and more. She earned her MFA from the Ohio State University in 2013 and her PhD from Texas Tech University in 2020. Her first novel, *Things You Would Know If You Grew Up Around Here* (Bloomsbury) was longlisted for the Center for Fiction’s First Novel Prize. She currently directs the MFA program at Western Kentucky University.

# AUTHOR PROFILE: LIBBY KLEIN

**L**ibby Klein was already a successful cozy mystery author when her editor asked her to shift to women's fiction. We caught up with Libby to ask her about how she pivoted in her career, what it meant to her, and her best advice on simplifying revising.

By Brittany Clair

**WO: You've been successfully publishing in the cozy mystery space, and your editor asked you to think about transitioning to women's fiction. What did this shift mean to you? How are you approaching it?**

**Libby:** When my editor at Kensington Publishing first asked me to transition to women's fiction, I said, "Okay. What is women's fiction? Isn't *all* fiction women's fiction?" He told me it was a story where the protagonist is on an emotional journey. So, I said, "But that's what I've already been writing." That began a discussion about marketing and genre requirements that would bore even Mother Teresa. At the end of it, I had my orders to shift my writing focus—just slightly.

If a novel were a tent, the center pole of a cozy mystery is catching the murderer. But in women's fiction, that center pole is the emotional journey. My initial approach was to overthink things and add a lot of talk about sex that I had to remove later. I was feeling very overwhelmed when it dawned on me: You can write whatever you want, but you can't get away from that center pole of the emotional journey. And that was the one thing I knew how to do.

**WO: Humor is a defining part of your writing style and stories. How do you use humor to deepen a storyline or a character's emotional journey?**

**Libby:** If the emotional journey is the center pole, humor is the canvas that covers the tent of my writing. It isn't planned or plotted; it's just there. A lot of humor comes out of pain. It's the other side of the coin and it's just how my mind works. It's how I deal with disappointment and heartbreak. It's balance . . . laughter and pain work



together. The jokes are funnier after you've been emotionally gutted. When you're ready for relief. I like to take my characters down low, then rescue them with humor.

**WO: Tell us about your color-coding trick for plotting and revising.**

**Libby:** I'm very visual and I like to organize. I've got color-coded charts of past vacation plans with one color for meals, another for activities, and another for hotel, plane, and car rentals. I can already feel that you're judging me. Hey, I like order. It's why I like writing murder mysteries. They're not about the murder—they're about catching the killer and restoring order. So when my writing started to get more complex, it was natural for me to turn to my color-coding obsession to make sure I had balance in my story.

I use a different color Post-it note for

each plot line. Then I write the plot points on each Post-it note and arrange them on the wall. This is my outline.

Now I look back at the wall. If I have too many notes of one color bunched together, I know I've lost balance and need to move some things around—which is easy because they're sticky notes. If I have a color that's underrepresented on the wall, I know that storyline needs to be fleshed out more.

I don't just look for balance among my A-B-C-D-E plots, but balance of character development, character screen time, where my clues are dropped, where my humor is. Every scene needs to have humor, action, or drama, so I keep track of where those beats are. This is also a good trick for those times when you write yourself into a corner and don't know how to get out. The story isn't working but you don't know what's wrong. I'll stop, take a day to do a complete read-through, and take notes on my color-coded Post-its, then line them up to see where I'm unbalanced or have gaps in my plot.

## FEATURE

**WO: You've mentioned that music is central to your writing process. How do you use music to enrich your writing and stories?**

**Libby:** Music has always been a huge part of my life. My father was a musician, and I grew up listening to his records and playing the radio every day. Music played while I was getting ready for school, doing homework—it even played in the background as I slept. I see my story play out in my head like a movie, so it feels natural to include the soundtrack in the writing. I've even written scenes that follow the emotional buildup of the song that's playing. Music is a huge motivator for me. I have several playlists I've put together to help me get into the mood or mindset for whatever character or scene I'm working on for the day.

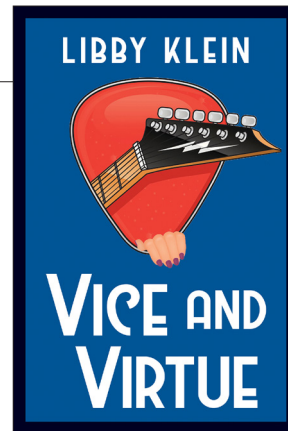
**WO: How did you find WFWA, and how has being a member served your career?**

**Libby:** I'm a longtime member of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America, so when it was time to venture out into the women's fiction world I looked for an organization to be a part of. I've not been here long, but I've already made some great friends, and I'm looking forward to growing with this group of amazing women.

**WO: What are you looking forward to reading this summer?**

**Libby:** I am in the middle of *The Third Wife of Faraday House* by B. R. Myers, and I adore it! Next up, *The Keeper of Lost Things* by Ruth Hogan.

**Libby Klein** writes ridiculously funny murder mysteries from her northern Virginia office with a very naughty calico Persian named Miss Eliza Doolittle and a sweet black Lab named Vader. She can name that tune for '70s and '80s rock in the first few notes, and she's translated her love of classic rock into her Layla Virtue Mysteries. Libby was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that prevents her from eating gluten without exploding. Because bread is one of her love languages, she includes the recipes for gluten free goodies in her Cape May-based Poppy McAllister series. Most of her hobbies revolve around travel and eating, and eating while traveling. She insists she can find her way to any coffee shop anywhere in the world, even while blindfolded. Follow all her nonsense on her website, [libbykleinbooks.com](http://libbykleinbooks.com).



### Chapter 1

Nothing says you've made a wrong turn in life like playing the hokey pokey on electric guitar for an old couple's fiftieth wedding anniversary. My whole life has been about sex, drugs, and rock and roll – but the wrong kind of each.

The cinder block and plywood event stage at the Seahorse Lounge creaked under my hundred and thirty pounds making me nervous that I'd crash through it as I rocked my hips in time to the chicken dance that I wailed on my guitar like Jimi Hendrix playing the National Anthem.

Okay fine, a hundred and thirty-eight pounds.

The problem with being on this side of the action was my front row seat to tomorrow's regrets. The couple who would fight later because the wife's best friend was drunk and getting handsy with the husband. The teenagers sneaking champagne that had been abandoned on the banquet tables by their over-trusting elders, who in lieu of guarding the liquor, were flapping their arms like drugged birds on the dance floor. All drunk and disorderlies in the making. Today's happy family celebration would be tonight's domestic disturbance. Alcohol was always an accelerant.

It was no use saying anything. I'd learned long ago that you can't save people from their destructive behaviors. I couldn't even save myself.

Two boys emptied leftover cocktails into a water bottle. I closed my eyes. It's not my problem – I'm just the entertainment. I can't get involved. When I get involved people get hurt.

I turned up the volume to drown out my nagging conscience. My father had bought me the teal and gold Les Paul when I'd turned sixteen many years ago. Other kids got cars. I got a custom guitar that up until six months ago had mostly collected dust in the corner. This was not how he'd intended me to use it.

I slowed the music down and started an instrumental version of *Unchained Melody*. I didn't need one of the guests of honor to stroke out. Very few referrals came from dead clients.

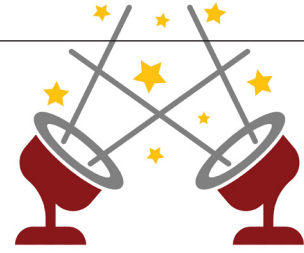
Watching the happy couple so in love sent a stab of pain and loss through my heart. I tried to find another point of focus to distract me when a hand tapped my knee and I cast my eyes downward to a chubby face smeared with raspberry frosting.

I'd been joined on stage by a little boy with bright blue eyes and hair like a sticker bush. "Are your pants made of trash bags?"

I turned off my voice mike. "What? No. This is Italian leather." At least its Chinese vinyl made to look like Italian leather.

"Why is your hair blue?"

"My hair is black. It just has blue streaks through it. Now go away."



## **VIRGINIA McCULLOUGH: A MULTI-FACETED AUTHOR AND VOLUNTEER**



Virginia McCullough likes to joke that she started writing when Richard Nixon was president.

But writing was never all she did.

In the late 1970s, she and her family moved onto a sailboat where they lived for seven years, spending time in Maine and Maryland before moving their home to St. Thomas.

Then a sudden relocation to Chicago led to a jump into temp work and trying to figure out a way to make a living as a writer. Eventually, she was able to use her sailing experience to land her first writing credits in periodicals about boating and cruising magazines, which, in turn, developed her philosophy of writing: “Nothing is wasted . . . ever.”

A couple of breaks put her on the path of coauthoring, ghostwriting, and book doctoring, which led to a full-time writing business. In the decades since, she’s published five indie romantic women’s fiction novels and signed with Harlequin.

Her latest work is a book about writing: *How to Be a Writer and Stay a Writer: The First 50 Years Are the Hardest*. This compilation of what she’s learned about the writer’s life and how to make a full-time living, or part of a living, as a writer will be released this fall.

A longtime WFWA member and volunteer, Virginia is currently on the D&I committee and a judge in both of WFWA’s writing contests. In the past, she’s been a mentor in the mentorship program and encourages others to get involved as well.

“Volunteering is one of the most important ways colleagues turn into supportive friends and confidants,” she says.

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**Virginia McCullough** is an accomplished writer in many genres and a long-time WFWA volunteer. She lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and has adult children and two grandsons.



Don't expect the puppets of your mind to become the people of your story.

If they are not realities in your own mind, there is no mysterious alchemy in ink and paper that will turn wooden figures into flesh and blood.

Leslie Gordon Barnard, WD