

WINTER 2025 WriteOn!

The Quarterly Magazine of the Women's Fiction Writers Association

A FRESH START. A NEW PATH.

- Using Psychology Theory to Create Characters
- The Heroine's Journey
- Avoiding Info Dumps

+ **Author Profile: Sharon Kurtzman**

**Guiding Scribe: Starting Over
and Embracing the New**

VOTE! 2025 Board Elections



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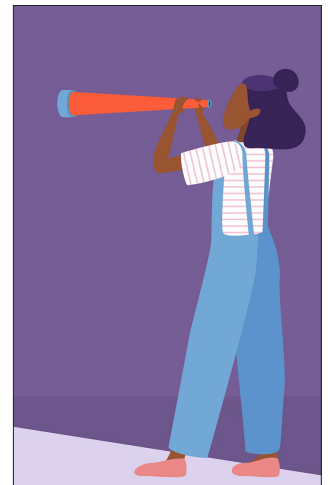
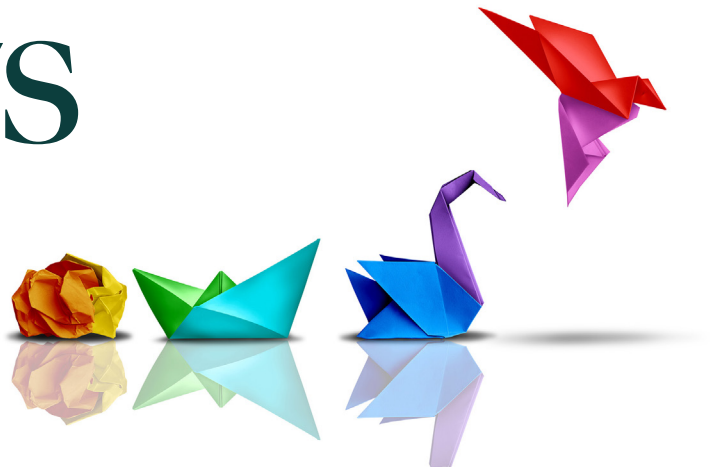
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Check out our calendar of events, workshops, and webinar information on our website.

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:
membership@womensfictionwriters.org

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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. Submitted letters are considered for publication and may be edited for clarity or space.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

When You Finish One Story, You Do Not Stop

When I first said yes to being WFWA president, I figured it would be all budgets, bylaws, and business. And sure, there's been plenty of that. But what I didn't expect was how much I would laugh on Zoom calls, how many new friends I'd make, and how often I'd get goosebumps watching this community show up for one another.

It turns out running WFWA is a lot like writing a novel. You have your messy middle, where you wonder if you are ever going to make it out alive. You have your critique partners (in this case, a board full of brilliant, stubborn, big-hearted people) who do not let you slack off. And you have that thrilling moment when the story finally takes shape and you realize . . . oh, we are really doing this.

This past year especially, we have been deep in revision mode. We asked ourselves tough questions about who we are and where we are going. We argued over commas and mission statements, wrestled with technology, dreamed about what it would look like if we were bold enough to start fresh. We did not come away with everything tied up in a neat bow. Stories worth telling rarely do. But we did land on something essential: WFWA is, and always will be, about connection.

For me, that truth became crystal clear just a few weeks ago. I sat at a coffee shop across the table from a WFWA friend, both of us working quietly, while at the same time logging into a Writing Dates Zoom. On that call were writers who have been with me through every single draft of my novel. In that moment, I typed "The End." To be surrounded by WFWA friends both in person and online reminded me exactly why this organization matters.

Fresh starts do not just happen on New Year's Day or with the first sip of coffee from a brand-new mug. They happen every time you decide to open your manuscript instead of scrolling social media. They happen when you join a critique group, pitch an agent, or volunteer for a role you were not sure you were ready for. And they happen when a community like ours chooses to build something bigger than any one of us could do alone.

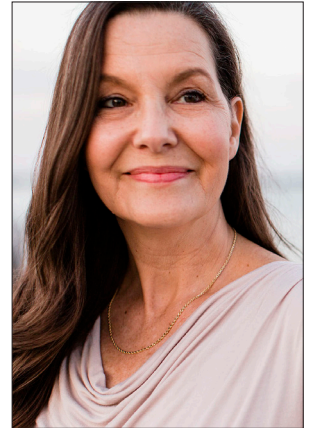
As I step down, I feel what every writer feels when they type "The End": a little relief, a lot of gratitude, and a surprising ache because it is hard to let go of something you have loved so much. But like writing, when you finish one story, you do not stop. You turn the page, open a fresh document, and start the next. That is what WFWA is doing now. And it is what I will be doing too.

Thank you for trusting me with this chapter. Thank you for showing up for one another. Thank you for reminding me, again and again, that women's fiction really is transformative, not just on the page but in the way it connects us in real life.

Here's to fresh pages, brave words, and the kind of community that makes us all better.

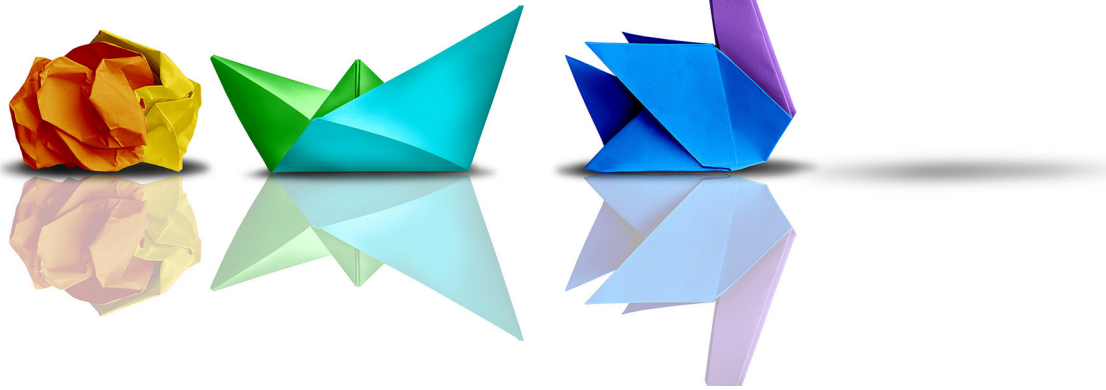


Kristi Leonard



This past year especially, we have been deep in revision mode. We asked ourselves tough questions about who we are and where we are going. We argued over commas and mission statements, wrestled with technology, dreamed about what it would look like if we were bold enough to start fresh.

Create Your Own Fresh Start



A fresh start is so romantic and invigorating. A new semester. New notebook. New resolution. New story idea. But life is messy, and writing is messier, and it's never that easy, is it? It's not all inspiration, clean slates, and joy, because fresh starts aren't delivered in neatly wrapped gift boxes.

Instead, they often come hand in hand with pain, or uncertainty, or failure (or all three). "Starting fresh" is what we do after we file (another) manuscript in the proverbial drawer, realize the book we're writing isn't the one we *must* write, or the pages we've labored over simply aren't working. It's a response to our circumstances, a decision based on what's come before.

None of this is to say fresh starts can't follow on the heels of success—a quick perusal through this issue's contents and contributors demonstrates otherwise—but rather to acknowledge that sometimes they hurt.

Through our experiences, we learn to make our own fresh starts. We fling ourselves into one more revision. We cut words. We come at something from a new angle. Because when we let go of the notion of a "pure" fresh start, we forge a new path. We find ways to begin anew, even when we are caught in the middle.

This line of thinking demands perseverance, an

open mind, and a willingness to adapt. WFWA embodies these attributes. I applaud the Board's decision to form an ad-hoc committee to oversee the formation of a new logo and look forward to following along with the process. This is a welcome opportunity for our community to envision our organization's public-facing image together. And as we thank our current Board representatives for their efforts, with multiple open seats this election cycle, we can also anticipate hearing new voices among our leadership in the upcoming months.

Finally, you may notice a fresh look in this issue of the magazine. For years, our art director, Sheri Taylor-Emery, has delivered the clean, vibrant, and sophisticated aesthetic we associate with *WriteOn!* But inspired by our organization's own decision to redesign, *WriteOn!* comes to you this quarter with a fresh look to match. With its bright palette, thoughtful balance of space, and easy sense of movement, the updated design captures the energy and optimism at the heart of WFWA.

As we move with a new season, a new calendar, a new logo, and a new look, I invite you to create your own fresh start somewhere unexpected. And I hope it leads you somewhere filled with possibility, because that is the allure and the promise of every new beginning.

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@womensfictionwriters.org.

Tips for Being Body-Inclusive in Your Books



By Paulette Stout

Y'all, it's well past time we have an honest conversation about how we portray fat people in books. It's a community too often left out of the inclusivity party. So grab a comfortable seat, because I'm about to spill some tasty tea you won't want to miss.

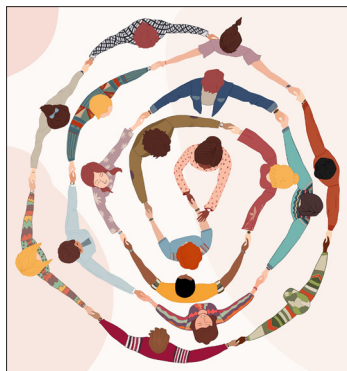
Wait. Isn't Fat Bad?

Before we go any further, let's address an important question. Why should we promote body acceptance in our books? I'm glad you asked. Beyond the deep investigations showing the connection between anti-fatness and anti-blackness in scholarly works like [Fearing the Black Body](#), findings also show our culture has gone terribly astray when it comes to weight and assumptions about health.

Studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and many more found no direct correlation between weight, health, and longevity. Turns out you can be healthy

and unhealthy at any size. In fact, the CDC was forced to [correct its methodology](#) after a study revealed that overweight people actually live longer than underweight and normal weight people. There are also mountains of data showing dieting does not work for sustained weight loss, with [83% of people gaining it all back, plus more](#).

Despite all of that, our culture, institutions, media, and, yes, books, remain hyper-focused on perpetuating anti-fatness. To help correct this, authors can be at the forefront of addressing anti-fat bias in books.



Here are six simple ways you can help correct the conversation.

1 Fat Character Stereotypes

How many books have you read where the horrible boss, mother-in-law, or annoying neighbor is fat? Their body size is used as a proxy for low moral standing and a lack of discipline. Avoid that by showing a range of character qualities across body sizes and be mindful of whether any of your fat characters are portrayed as sloppy, lazy, unethical, or mean.

2 Thin Preconditions

Character transformations in women's fiction often include a physical transformation. But try to avoid making thinness a precondition for the main character achieving their dreams. Too many stories use weight as a barrier to realizing a rich, happy life or finding a partner. People can be happy or sad, single or partnered at any body size, so reflect that in your narrative.

3 Negative Self-Talk

I won't name names, but I've had to put aside countless books because the main character's negative self-talk about weight was too insulting. They lamented their weight in the mirror, pinched their waists, complained about not fitting into clothing, or ruminated about being "out of shape." This typically equates to the character's perception that they are unworthy of love, career advancement, or adventure.

While women's fiction is about transformation, let's focus on change that matters: honoring emotions and goals, seeking respectful relationships, being true to ourselves, and pursuing our dreams. All of that can happen without characters self-loathing the bodies they inhabit. Let's craft a world we want to see around us.

4 Morality Proxy

When introducing characters, it's common to look for a shorthand to convey which characters are good and which aren't. Check your manuscripts to see if you're using strict eating habits, fitness routines, and keeping "trim" as signposts that a person is good, righteous, and worth supporting. By extension, you're positing that anyone who's not trim and fit is less worthy. As a reader in a large body, I quickly close books that make it clear that "my kind" isn't welcome or valued.

5 Comic Relief

Fat characters are commonly portrayed as jokesters, unserious, and too feeble-minded to make sound decisions without help from someone thin. If that sounds familiar, it's time to get creative with your backstories and characterizations. Every character in your work in progress can be anyone and anything you choose, so don't shackle yourself to insulting stereotypes. Give your fat characters as rich a story as the rest of your cast.

6 Fetishized Gluttony

I recently finished a novel with such anti-fat bias that I shouted aloud as I read. Loudly. The issue? Gluttony. The author made the fat character so food-obsessed that she could barely keep her mind on the conversation at hand. The author described her near-erotic reaction to the dinner spread and her lips glistening with pork grease as she ate. And the round folds of her body were captured with a breathless fetishism that reinforced her repulsive eating habits.

Y'all, fat people bite, chew, and swallow like everyone else. No need to cast them as gluttonous creatures at mealtimes.



While women's fiction is about transformation, let's focus on change that matters: honoring emotions and goals, seeking respectful relationships, being true to ourselves, and pursuing our dreams.

A Lot to Consider

This might be a new and uncomfortable conversation for many reading this article. After all, diet culture tells us that thinness should be prized at any cost. But just as we have many cultures, heights, and shoe sizes, our bodies reflect our genetic heritage. Many of us will never be thin, and we deserve to read books that don't devalue who we are. I hope after reading this piece that you'll consider crafting stories that help foster an inclusive experience for readers, regardless of size.

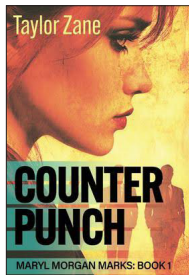
For additional reading about weight, body size, and diet culture, [check out this free resource](#).



Paulette Stout is a 25-time award-winning author of contemporary women's fiction, read in 43 countries. Her four novels—*Love, Only Better*, *What We Never Say*, *What Eyes Can't See*, and *What We Give Away*—balance powerful social issues with some serious spice. By day she leads content and branding at a Nasdaq-listed, global software company. In her "free time," she shares publishing wisdom as the cohost of *The Best of Book Marketing* podcast.

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*.



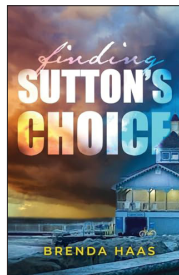
Taylor Zane
Counterpunch -
Maryl Morgan Marks
Book 1
11/26/24



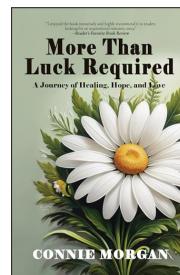
Wanda Penalver Bevan
The Rains of Wishton
2/1/25



Tatiana Goded
A Trip Towards
the Sunset
3/20/25



Brenda Haas
Finding Sutton's Choice
5/30/25



Connie Morgan
More Than Luck
Required
6/5/25



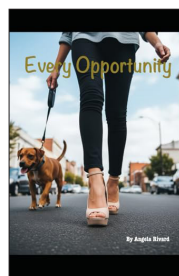
Debbie Burns
Bigger Than Us
7/1/25



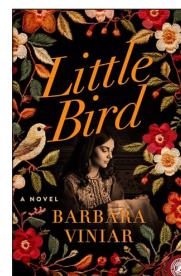
Sasha Preston
The Sweetest
Getaway
7/21/25



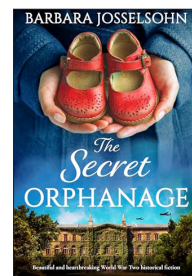
Georgina Kelly
Not Part of the Plan
8/5/25



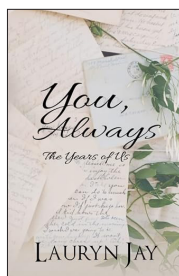
Angela Rivard
Every Opportunity
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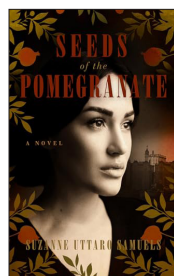
Barbara Viniar
Little Bird: A Novel
8/15/25



Barbara Josselsohn
The Secret Orphanage
8/15/25



Lauryn Jay
You, Always:
The Years of Us
8/21/25



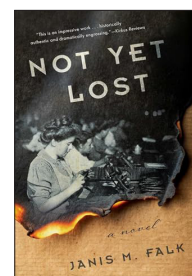
Suzanne Uttaro Samuels
Seeds of the
Pomegranate
9/2/25



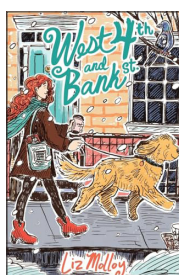
Kelly Marks
The Past That
Made Us
9/2/25



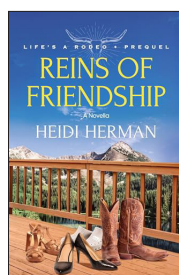
Jourdana Webber
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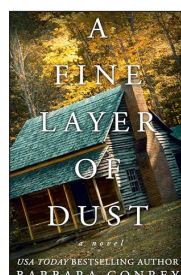
Janis Falk
Not Yet Lost
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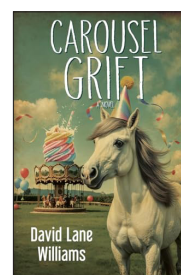
Liz Molloy
West 4th
and Bank Street
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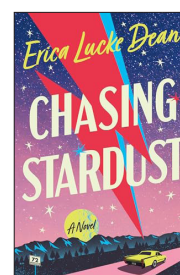
Heidi Herman
Reins of Friendship
10/1/25



Barbara Conrey
A Fine Layer of Dust
10/6/25



David Williams
Carousel Grift
10/23/25



Erica Lucke Dean
Chasing Stardust:
A Novel
11/1/25

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:

"My first manuscript was inspired by the day I held my father's hand in the ICU and watched him pass away. I hope *The Good Sister* finds a home someday, and of course there's also a 'bad sister' in the story. :)"

— Patty Warren

"I'd just retired as a trauma counselor and was walking in the early morning on an isolated road between farms when a ute went past with a dog in the back, barking savagely. I thought, What if an angry partner of an ex-client abducts me? When I got back to our farm I wrote the first 6,000 words of my 100,000-word thriller."

— Suzie Reynolds

"The spark for my novel *Five-Alarm Fudge* came from a famous Wisconsin fire on Oct. 8, 1871, in which a young nun and a hidden and valued recipe for a fudge-like candy survived—the latter a reason for murder today."

— Christine DeSmet

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

"One summer night, a drunk man down the street had trouble unlocking his car, so he removed his pants. I still think about this event years later, and I'm working on a story about it. It's possible my first sentence here constitutes the entire story, but I need to find out."

— Claire Reinburg

"I went by five different names on the radio and changed my name when I got married—twice—so I know how complicated identity can get. That's what inspired me to write a novel about a DJ who keeps reinventing herself with on-air aliases until she's not sure who she really is anymore."

— Lisa Lehmann

"I was at the playground with my kids, watching parents who were strangers to each other forming friendships because their children were playing together. I thought, 'Imagine if a love story started this way. . .' and my novel *Like a Mom* was born."

— Raquel Drosos

"Until he died, my father lied to me and my family about what he did in World War II. I had to write a novel to figure out why."

— Lorelei Brush

"While cleaning out a relative's house that had generations of hoarding dating back to the early 1900s, I realized I was uncovering a story purely through objects. Vintage toys, bottle caps, unopened perfume and silk gloves, political paraphernalia, all mixed haphazardly with decades of trash—and I had a story just begging to be told."

— April Quarto Wright

In the next issue, we'll explore sustainability, and we want to know:

What's the last thing you said "no" to to protect your writing time, and how did it work out?

Send your one- to two-sentence responses to 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 your one- to two-sentence response in the body of the email. If you prefer anonymity in the magazine, please indicate this as well.

Starting Over and Embracing the New



There's something disorienting about staring at a blank page—even when you've filled hundreds before. I've written two traditionally published novels: *The Kindest Lie*, my debut, and *People of Means*. Those stories each began with a question, a sociopolitical trigger, a moment of truth that refused to let me go. I followed those sparks down winding paths and through countless revisions until they became full, breathing narratives out in the world.

And now, I'm here again crafting those first chapters of a new novel. Starting over.

That phrase—*starting over*—can sound like a loss. As if something didn't work out, and now you have to rebuild from the rubble. But for writers, starting over is just part of the rhythm. It's what we do. Whether you've published two books, ten, or none at all, that first word of a new manuscript will always feel a little like stepping into the void.

And let me be honest: It's hard. Even with experience, even knowing I've done this before, the doubt still creeps in. That inner critic, ever-present, leans in and whispers: *What if this is the one you can't finish? What if you're actually an imposter?*

But I recognize that voice now. It's familiar. I've heard it before. And each time I've answered it with grit and perseverance. Each time, I've remembered that the blank page isn't a threat—it's an invitation.

Recently I made another difficult decision in my writing life: I chose to part ways with my literary agent—the person who believed in my work and escorted me to the publishing dance. I never imagined doing that. But sometimes change is necessary to grow. Seasons shift, and so must we.

Now I find myself on the brink of querying again. I'll be looking for new representation soon. It's scary—I won't lie. But I also feel a flicker of hope, of excitement. A new beginning. A chance to find the right match for where I am now as a writer—and where I want to go next.

GUIDING SCRIBE

In September I attended the incredible WFWA retreat in Albuquerque, where I met writers at all stages of the journey: debut authors, seasoned storytellers, and many who've filled drawers with unpublished novels. Some are still waiting on agent responses; others have faced a cascade of rejections. And yet, they keep writing. They keep showing up for their stories and themselves.

One writer told me, "This is my third book. The others were never published, but I'm still writing." Another said, "I'm going to do one more round of querying and then decide if I want to go another publishing route."

That's what starting fresh really is: a declaration of persistence and hope.

Yes, it's daunting. But it's also exhilarating—that first-day-of-school energy in the unknown. The early stages of writing are full of promise. You don't know how your protagonist will grow, what secrets they'll reveal, or where they'll lead you. It's a journey of discovery—for you and for them.

Embrace it.

Let yourself play again. Let the writing be messy and imperfect. (I'm truly talking to myself here because I spend way too much time self-editing.) This is the stage for exploration, not mastery. Give yourself permission to wander.

And while we're on the subject of change—let's talk about publishing. If there's one constant in this business, it's that nothing stays the same. I began my career in traditional publishing, and I'm proud of that path. But one thing I've learned from meeting writers in WFWA is that there are many possibilities: indie publishing, hybrid models, new platforms. The landscape is shifting, and our strategies have to shift with it.

Your path to publishing might look different from the one you imagined. That doesn't mean it's wrong. It means you're paying attention. You're adapting. In a changing world and marketplace, be prepared to move when you need to move.

Sometimes that movement is external—a new publishing path, a new agent, a new genre. Other times the movement is internal. A new voice whispering inside you, asking to be written. A deeper story only you can tell now, after all you've learned and lived.

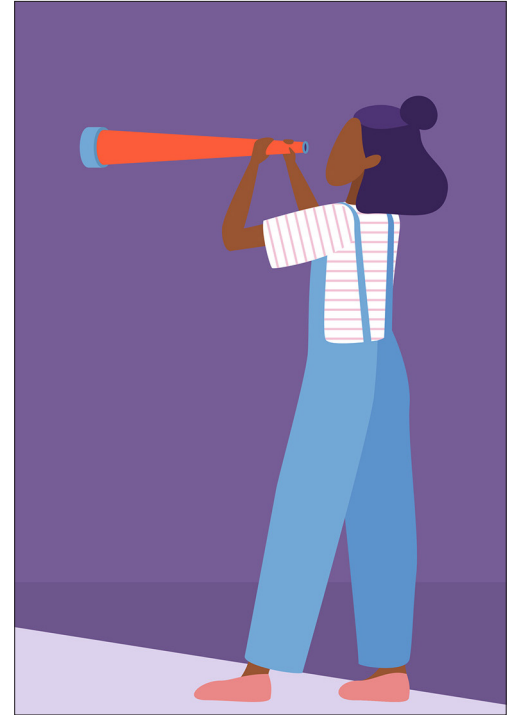
Wherever you are in your writing journey—just starting, mid-career, published or not—know this: You're not alone in the terror or the thrill of starting anew. Every writer has to begin again. And again. And again.

But beginning again doesn't mean starting from scratch. It means building on everything that came before—the skills you've honed, the resilience you've earned, the stories you've already told. Each fresh start is actually a continuation, a deepening of your voice and your vision.

So if you're standing at the edge of a new story, unsure how to take the first step, take heart. You're not at the beginning—you're at the next chapter.

I am too.

Let's write our way forward.



But beginning again doesn't mean starting from scratch. It means building on everything that came before—the skills you've honed, the resilience you've earned, the stories you've already told.



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.



A Publisher's Perspective on Women's Fiction Submissions and Market Trends

As the publishing landscape continues to shift at an accelerated pace, the genres we publish at Black Rose Writing evolve with it. I'm often asked what we want in submissions and, more specifically, how those preferences have changed in recent years. While the core aspects of strong storytelling remain constant—original voice, compelling characters, and emotional authenticity—there are minor shifts happening in women's fiction that authors should keep on their radar.

Big Picture: What We Want in Women's Fiction Right Now

Black Rose Writing is actively seeking emotionally resonant stories that dig deep into relationships, identity, reinvention, and resilience. The definition of "women's fiction" has broadened substantially, and that's a good thing. No longer does the genre solely revolve around romantic entanglements or domestic drama. Today we're seeing readers and editors alike gravitate toward layered narratives that address social justice, mental health, career pivots, caregiving, personal loss, and rediscovery.

What stands out now more than ever are manuscripts where the protagonist undergoes authentic transformation. Readers want to feel the stakes and emotionally charged themes. They're looking for protagonists who are not perfect, like a Tony Soprano, who are working through something real—whether it's grief, depression, divorce, aging, or even ambition.

How Our Preferences Have Adjusted

One of the clearest changes we've observed over the past two years is a desire for more diverse voices and more inclusive storytelling. This isn't just about checking boxes; it's about relevance and resonance. Stories that reflect the multifaceted lives of women today—across cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs—have greater impact and commercial viability.

Additionally, we're increasingly drawn to manuscripts with a clear sense of purpose or urgency. Stories with meandering plots or overly introspective arcs are struggling to hold attention. This doesn't mean we want thrillers masquerading as women's fiction, but there should be a central conflict and forward movement in the story. The reader must feel a momentum that reflects the emotional progression of the protagonist.

INSIDE THE INDUSTRY

POV, Tense, and Word Count Trends

We've seen a noticeable lean toward first-person narratives in the past 18 months. Readers appear more eager to crawl inside a character's mind and experience their world intimately, especially when it comes to emotionally heavy topics. That said, third person—especially close third—is still effective when handled correctly.

Present tense is also gaining traction, especially in stories involving reinvention, self-discovery, or trauma recovery. The immediacy of present tense can heighten intimacy and urgency. However, this choice must be intentional. If an author isn't fully comfortable in that tense, it can quickly become a distraction.

On the question of word count, yes, books are trending shorter. We're seeing more reader interest in titles in the 70,000 to 85,000 word range, versus the 95,000 to 110,000 we saw a few years ago. This trend may be tied to audiobook production, digital reading habits, or simply reader fatigue. It's also beneficial for the publisher in regard to pricing in the marketplace, as we can reduce page count a bit and price more competitively. Either way, we're finding tighter manuscripts perform better—provided they don't sacrifice emotional depth.

Genre and Subgenre Swings

There's a definite surge in women's fiction that blends genres—stories that live at the intersection of book club fiction and suspense, or historical and contemporary timelines. Dual-timeline novels are still in demand, especially when they uncover intergenerational secrets or legacies.

Additionally, we've noticed an increase in successful submissions that include light speculative or magical realism elements. This isn't fantasy or sci-fi, but rather a magical sprinkle that enhances metaphor and meaning—books like *The Lost Page* by David E. Sharp or *The Town with No Roads* by Joe Siple come to mind. These stories succeed when they offer an emotionally grounded “what if” that complements the human themes at their center.

On the flip side, we're seeing fatigue around pandemic fiction and overly grim or darker narratives. Readers want stories that offer catharsis, not despair. That doesn't mean avoiding hard topics—grief, addiction, illness, trauma—but there should be a thread of hope or forward motion.

Submissions That Stand Above the Rest

What makes a submission rise to the top of our inbox and get in review? A strong hook in the query, a clear grasp of the audience, and writing that avoids overwritten description. If accepted for review, you've got to show Black Rose Writing a protagonist with flaws, goals, and heart. Start your manuscript in the middle of movement—no slow build-up, no excessive backstory in the first twenty pages. And make sure your pitch reflects the emotional core of the book, not just the plot mechanics.

We also value professionalism. If an author demonstrates an understanding of their market, has a basic online presence, and treats the submission process as a partnership, it matters. This is a business, after all, and authors who understand that are better positioned for long-term success.



There's a definite surge in women's fiction that blends genres—stories that live at the intersection of book club fiction and suspense, or historical and contemporary timelines.

In Closing

Women's fiction is one of the most dynamic, emotionally rich genres we publish. We've had many bestsellers in this category, and it carries a ton of weight in our daily marketing and sales. It adapts quickly to cultural shifts and remains anchored in the universal search for meaning, identity, and connection. At Black Rose Writing, we are looking for stories that challenge, comfort, and move us—stories that will do the same for readers.

If you're querying this year, focus on telling the most honest story you can. Cut the fat. Start with fire. And don't be afraid to explore the gray areas of life—that's where women's fiction thrives.



Reagan Rothe is the creator and owner of Black Rose Writing, an indie press in Texas; the host of the *Heard It Through the Rosevine* podcast; and a fellow published author. He is an Amazon and Meta Ad ninja, serves on Ingram's Publisher Advisory Board, is a Social Media Certified Professional, and is also Admin Certified on Monday.com. He has contributed to IBPA Independent, NetGalley Insights, and other reputable literary channels. He lives with his beautiful wife, Minna, and has two children, Lena and Walter Lee.

MEET YOUR WFWA BOARD CANDIDATES

VOTE! 2025 Board Elections

Our Board elections will be held November 7–13, and WFWA needs your vote! There are four open positions this year, and the elected candidates will serve two-year terms (2026–2028). Next year, remaining Board positions will be up for reelection, thus ensuring continuity. This year's candidates are stepping up to offer their experience and perspective in leadership roles, and all are dedicated to keeping the organization growing and thriving in the future, for every member. Please take a moment to read their candidate statements, and visit the website to review their full interviews and learn more about them.



2025 Board of Directors Candidates:

President: Ginger Haggerty

VP of Programs: Natalie Ihli

VP of Technology: Michele Lugiai

VP of Diversity & Inclusion:
Vickey Finkley-Brown

PRESIDENT, GINGER HAGGERTY

I come to WFWA and the Board with a background in nonprofit leadership, network management, and event planning, as well as a decade of small business experience. These roles have prepared me to lead with a broad perspective while focusing on delivering meaningful value to our members.

I joined WFWA after searching for a writing community. Like many new members, I started by applying to the Critique Program. Since then, I've been the Star Award Chair and now serve as VP of Programs.

Being part of WFWA has helped me grow as a writer. Here I can immerse myself in discussions, webinars, and opportunities, all centered on writing. Here we share a common language that I don't have with family or nonwriter friends.

My experience as VP of Programs inspired me to run for President, giving me a bird's-eye view of WFWA's impact on writers' journeys. I've seen members go from polishing workshop pages to landing agent requests, and others move

from weighing publishing options to confidently going indie within a year. Serving with the Board has been an honor, and the support and collaboration I've experienced motivates me to continue building WFWA's future.

If elected, I will focus on strengthening member connections across WFWA platforms with clear and consistent communication. I hope to expand opportunities for members to shape our programs, while also working to establish additional affinity groups so writers can connect around shared interests. Most importantly, I want to ensure WFWA supports all writers—published and unpublished alike.



MEET YOUR WFWA BOARD CANDIDATES

VP OF PROGRAMS, NATALIE IHLI

My professional journey spans developing and facilitating training programs across educational, nonprofit, and governmental sectors. I've learned the power of engagement and helping people "plug in." I'd love to bring my joy in matchmaking to VP of Programs: identifying publishing trends and member needs, then finding that perfect speaker or event.

I joined WFWA in August 2023, ready for fiction writing to take the front seat after years of technical, academic, and professional writing. I sought both craft development and genuine community. Women's fiction also aligned perfectly with my reading habits and my social work/therapist values. There's something powerful about watching someone learn and grow through storytelling. WFWA offered all I was looking for and encouraged me to take chances, connecting me with an excellent mentor, supportive critique groups, my perfect beta reader, and events like RISING STAR and Agent Pitch.

As WFWA's Workshop Manager, I've learned WFWA's inner

workings: coordinating speakers, managing logistics, and troubleshooting technical issues. This hands-on knowledge means I can focus on strategic improvements rather than learning the basics.

Along with continuing what's already working, I'd love to see further growth in networks and connections. We should continue reaching out to our impressive members, tapping into their talents and strengths! For example, we could create a "talents board" where members can share their professional expertise, geographic knowledge, and life experiences to help with manuscript research. Essentially, it's about doing more of what's already happening—leveraging the amazing expertise we have right within our own community.



VP OF TECHNOLOGY, MICHELE LUGIAI

My favorite parts of my career are 1) enabling people to achieve their goals through the use of technology, and 2) empowering people in their career growth through mentorship, collaboration, and freedom to excel.

Over the past 30+ years I've led global IT teams, modernized enterprise systems, and guided organizations through complex digital transformations—across 40+ countries. I've had the privilege of traveling the world and working with diverse teams that bring a value-added perspective when developing solutions.

I'm known for:

- Simplifying the complex
- Leading through change
- Building teams that thrive
- Driving strategy into action
- Making technology work for people

When people ask me "Can we . . . ?" and "Is it possible . . . ?" I say, "With technology, the answer is always yes."

But transformation isn't about technology. It's about people. And my goal is to make technology work for people—not the other way around.

I love the camaraderie and support of the WFWA community, and I'd love to bring my experience to WFWA to help enable and further its strategy and mission.

Michele joined WFWA in 2019. She's expanded her knowledge about the craft and business of writing through WFWA workshops and made connections with critique partners who encouraged her on her writing journey. She is preparing to query her first novel and is editing her second.



VP OF DIVERSITY & INCLUSION, VICKY FINKLEY-BROWN

I have over 25 years of experience as an educator, writing coach, editor, and diversity training coach. In my career, I've designed programming to help teachers, administrators, and staff to create more culturally relevant curricula, and I've developed DEI training for medical professionals working with lupus patients.

When I joined WFWA in 2022, I was looking for a writing community that offered actual community. I found the writing dates and soon after joined the D&I Committee.

Being a member of WFWA has broadened my options, knowledge, and writing community. There is a genuine desire for the organization to be as inclusive as possible. I love the offerings—the commitment to furthering the craft of writing and access to valuable resources for members. In my first year, I presented at the WFWA conference along with writers I have

admired, read, and looked forward to meeting.

The D&I Committee has done great work, and I want the momentum to continue. Our best work begins with affirmation and common ground. As VP of D&I, I'll focus on building the idea of belonging into the everyday fabric of WFWA. I want every new member to be greeted with a simple welcome: *Your voice belongs here, and we're so glad you joined.* I have ideas for a drop-in, prompt-driven workshop for socially conscious writers that keeps us connected to both craft and community. My goal is to show that inclusivity is not extra—it's the heartbeat of creativity, retention, and joy at WFWA.





Using Science to Launch Your Characters to the Next Level

By Kate MacIntosh

Characters are the key to fiction that engages. Editors, agents, and, most importantly, readers want stories with compelling characters they can cheer for. Working as a counsellor for over 20 years before transitioning to being a writer, I know that psychology can teach us a lot about creating characters. Creating complex characters is easier if you understand the science of how people behave in the real world. Relatable characters that strive for their goal, despite a range of hardships, will always keep readers turning pages.

With that in mind, here are four psychological concepts you can apply to your writing.

Personal Conflict Is Universal

While the challenges we each face feel very personal, it's unlikely we are the first to face them. If you're looking to enhance your fiction, visit the self-help section of your library or local bookstore. Whether your character is loving too much (or too little), facing addiction, divorce, the death of a loved one, career setbacks, or difficulties getting along with family, you will certainly find a book about it. These advice books can help you better understand your character, spark your brainstorming, and show possible paths for your character to move forward.

History Affects Current Decisions

All therapists start a clinical relationship with an in-depth interview. They want to know not only the key events that have happened in an individual's life, but also how that person views those events. If they understand what has affected a person in their past, they can better understand why they make the choices they do in the present, as well as the possible impact on decisions they make in the future.

“Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are, something is bound to happen.”

—Anne Lamott

Feature

As a writer, you need to know what has happened to your character before the story starts, both the good and the bad. While that backstory may not appear in the book, or only in limited flashbacks, those events have still left a mark on the character. The screenwriter Michael Hauge asks writers to consider, “What is the hole in your character’s soul?” The better you know what’s happened to your character, the better you can create realistic responses to events in your story. You can create a timeline of major events in their life as a way of seeing their history all on one page.

The Creative Academy for Writers offers a [free clinical interview for characters](#) that you can download from its website, along with other resources from the *Build Better Characters* book.



Perspective Is Reality

What happens to us is rarely as important as the story we tell ourselves about what has happened. The theory of Rational Emotive Therapy explains this using the shorthand A, B, C.

- A is the activating event, the objective action/experience.
- B is our belief about that event.
- C is the consequence of that belief.

For example:

- A: An individual is adopted as a baby.
- B: The individual believes their mother didn’t want them and they are unlovable.
- C: The person doesn’t engage in meaningful relationships and keeps everyone at a distance.

Now keep the same activating event, but change the belief and see how it impacts the consequences:

- A: An individual is adopted as a baby.
- B: The individual believes they were so loved that their birth mother made a difficult decision to do what was best for them, and their adopted family loved them enough to leap over hurdles to make them a part of the family.
- C: The individual has a strong sense of confidence and a willingness to be emotionally vulnerable with others.

This illustrates that you need to know not only what happened to your character, but also the meaning they’ve taken from the experience to craft the most compelling storylines.

Go back to the major events you listed for your character(s). What is your character’s belief about those events? How has that shaped their life? How will those beliefs impact how they view the things that happen during the story? Will their beliefs change and evolve? How will those beliefs drive their decisions?

Belief in Change

Counsellors are optimists. They believe people can—and do—make changes in their lives. However, counsellors also understand that change is difficult, not due to a lack of knowledge or information, but because shifting our perspective, and trying (and failing) to behave differently, is a long and sometimes arduous process.

For example, many of us may wish to be more fit, and it’s not that we don’t know how to exercise. It’s that we have competing wants—like a desire to stay on the sofa with a snack and watch Netflix. Literary agent Donald Maass asks in his book, *Writing the Breakout Novel*: What does your character want? What is the opposite of that thing? How can they want both things at the same time? Answering these questions is a great way to identify the emotional hurdles preventing your character from making a change they seem to want.

It will also help you avoid making it too easy on your character as they go from want to achievement. Your character likely needs to make a change over the course of the book, but are you making it difficult for them to make that change? Do they try and fail? Hard-earned change not only will feel more believable to the reader but will also keep readers invested and leave them more satisfied when your characters are ultimately successful.

Understanding what psychology teaches us about real human behavior can help you dig deeper into your characters’ motivations, choices, and conflicts. Creating characters that behave realistically will increase the connection readers feel and their enjoyment of your story. Hopefully you’re convinced it’s time to send your imaginary friends to therapy; not only will you know them better, but so will the reader.



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.

The Heroine's Journey: A Plotting Structure for Your Story?

By N. J. Mastro

I'm a plotter who flies by the seat of her pants, which I suppose makes me a planster. When I began planning my second novel I had a basic plot in mind, but I struggled to give it shape. So I turned to the Hero's Journey, a narrative pattern popularized by Chris Vogler in the early 1990s. Vogler based the model on Joseph Campbell's 1949 book *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, which defined an archetypal hero figure based on centuries of myths.

But the Hero's Journey didn't match my novel's storyline. I didn't have a protagonist set on conquering the world. Instead, I had a woman in search of herself. So I was glad when I discovered the Heroine's Journey by therapist Maureen Murdock. Murdock was a

student of Campbell and argued that the Hero's Journey didn't adequately describe the archetypal feminine journey, which Murdock believed was about healing wounds hidden deep within the feminine nature.

Murdock drew her conclusions from her counseling practice in which she listened to American women who'd entered the workforce in the 1970s and '80s in record numbers following the equal rights movement. Her patients expressed deep dissatisfaction despite their successes. They felt sterile and empty—betrayed even—by false promises. A common thread emerged. Women were adopting the male heroic journey in order to succeed in the workplace. In doing so, their accomplishments were leaving them emotionally and spiritually bereft.

From these conversations, Murdock published *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, a decidedly feminine archetypal journey of transformation (figure 1).

Murdock didn't create her model as a narrative map for storytelling. Writers, however, can use it to set the stage in their novels, especially women's fiction. For example, if your protagonist is more of a warrior personality or is called to adventure—think Cheryl Strayed in *Wild*, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, or Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*—then the Hero's Journey is probably a superb choice. However, if your protagonist is more like Esme Nicoll in *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, Nora Seed in *The Midnight Library*, or Jane in *Jane Eyre*, then the Heroine's Journey might be a better option.

To be clear, the Hero's and Heroine's Journeys aren't about gender. A man can have a feminine side, and a woman can possess a masculine side, and in contemporary society, gender has become nonbinary with pronouns like they/them replacing him/her. One can also think of the Hero's and the Heroine's Journeys like yin and yang—complementary but opposing forces interacting to create a dynamic system. Or, as Carl Jung (who also worked in archetypes) said, the *anima* versus the *animus*: the feminine and masculine parts of the human psyche.

Multiple models for the Heroine's Journey exist besides Murdock's, including those by Victoria Lynn Schmidt from her book *45 Master Characters: Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters*. Whereas Murdock is a psychologist, Schmidt is a screenwriter, and, like Vogler, had storytelling in mind when she created her model (figure 2).

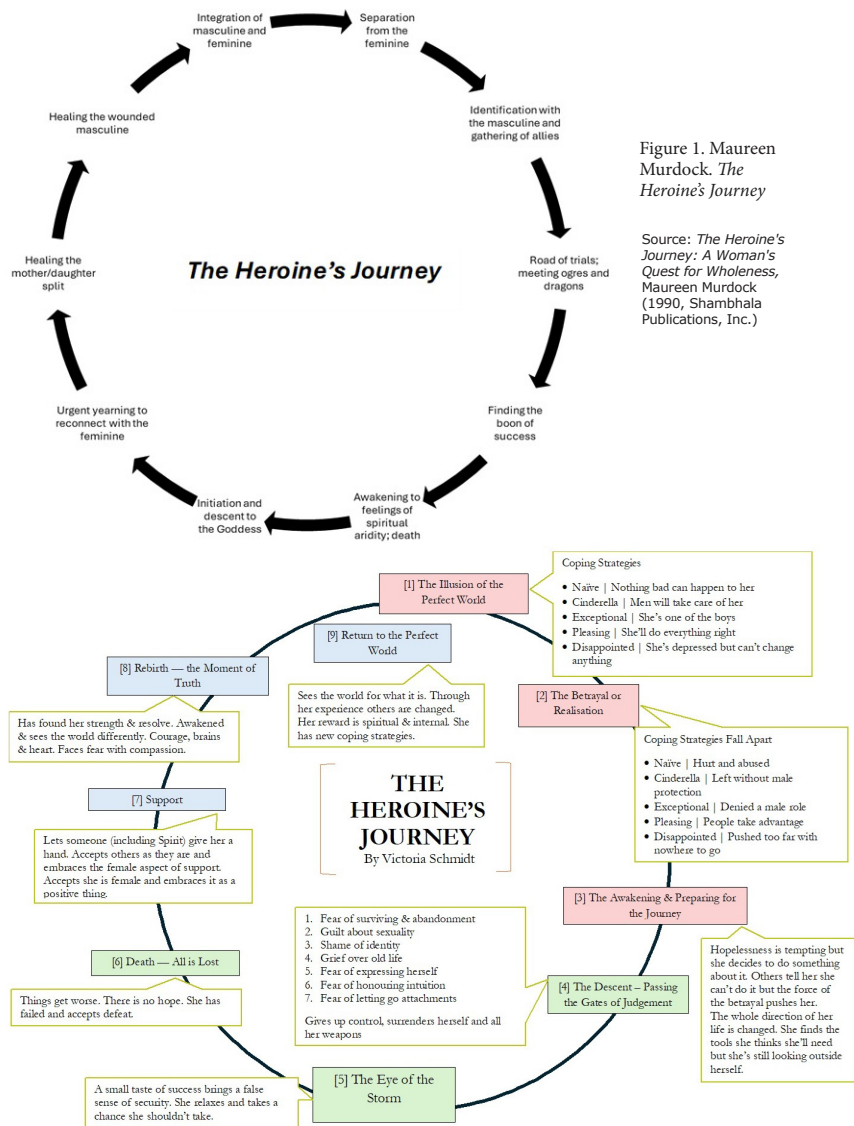


Figure 2. Victoria Schmidt, *The Heroine Journeys Project*.

Redrawn from image drawn by Katie Paul from [beat-heart-beats.com](https://www.instagram.com/beat-heart-beats/). Retrieved online 10/23/23 from <https://heroinejourneys.com/heroine-journey-4/>

Feature

Models aren't for everyone, and there are no strict rules about how to use them. But for some writers, models can help point in a direction that feels right. Not only was I able to use the Heroine's Journey to plot my second novel, but I was able to go back and use it in editing my first novel to more fully round out my protagonist's feminine arc.

What's the best plotting structure for your novel? That depends. In figure 3, note the similarities between the three models discussed in this article: a break from a character's known world, resistance to impending changes that threaten the character's identity, a journey (both inner and outer), and a return as a changed individual.

Where they differ is how a character navigates their unknown, which may be the most important question of all.

The Hero's Journey (Vogler)	The Heroine's Journey (Murdock)	The Heroine's Journey (Schmidt)
1. The ordinary world	1. Separation from the feminine	1. Illusion of the perfect world
2. The call to adventure	2. Identification with the masculine and gathering of allies	2. Betrayal/disillusionment
3. Refusal of the call	3. Road of trials: meeting ogres and dragons	3. The awakening and preparing for the journey
4. Meeting with the mentor	4. Finding the boon of success	4. The descent—pass the gate of judgement
5. Crossing the threshold	5. Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity: death	5. The eye of the storm
6. Tests, allies, and enemies	6. Initiation and descent to the Goddess	6. Death/all is lost
7. Approach	7. Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine	7. Support
8. The ordeal	8. Healing the mother/daughter split	8. Rebirth/moment of truth
9. The reward	9. Healing the wounded masculine	9. Return to a world seen through new eyes
10. The road back	10. Integration of masculine and feminine	
11. The resurrection		
12. Return with the elixir		

For more, see these sources:

■ *The Heroine's Journey: A Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, Maureen Murdock (1990, Shambhala Publications, Inc.)

■ "The Heroine's Journey." Maureen Murdock. Retrieved from <https://maureenmurdock.com/articles/articles-the-heroines-journey/>

■ "Victoria Lynn Schmidt's Heroine's Journey Arc." The Heroine Journeys Project. Retrieved from <https://heroinejourneys.com/heroine-journey-ii/>

■ "A Handy Handout." *Chris Vogler's Writer's Journey Blog*. November 4, 2023. Retrieved from <https://chrsvogler.wordpress.com/tag/the-heros-journey/>



N. J. Mastro writes historical fiction and publishes *Herstory Revisited*, a blog in which she reviews biographical novels about prominent women from the past. In 2025 she published her debut novel, *Solitary Walker: A Novel of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Besides writing, she is an avid reader, master cook, and wine enthusiast. A former school superintendent, she has a doctorate in educational leadership, a master's in school administration, and a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She lives in South Carolina with her husband.

Cowriting a Novel: Where Partnership Meets Practicality

Writing is typically a solitary endeavor, but in recent years more writers have discovered the joys of working with a coauthor. Although most teams include two authors, three or more people (as we saw in the last issue of WriteOn!) can work well together. This column has previously spoken to the many benefits of writing partnerships: the thrill of brainstorming and creating as a team, the perks of dividing the workload and speeding up the process, and the advantages of sharing resources and marketing strategies. Wrapping up our writing-together series, we'd like to provide some guidelines for coauthoring before you jump in.

Determining Fit

In our opinion, cowriting works best if the authors are well-matched in terms of writing expertise, publishing experience, and writing goals. That way they can show appreciation for each other's contributions and spur each other on to improve their craft.

We recommend prospective partners weigh (and discuss) their priorities and requirements as a prelude to launching a project. Reviewing each other's written and/or published works is perhaps the best way to determine compatibility. Alternatively, writers might ascertain their skills and compatibility by working on shorter pieces, like a short story, magazine article, or blog.

It's important that coauthors have similar goals for their writing—both in general and for the collaborative project. Are both serious writers committed to continually improving their craft? Is one interested in publishing traditionally but the other wed to self-publishing? Do the coauthors agree about how often they will communicate and by what means?

Being able to gracefully give and accept feedback is another key ingredient. That means each author should focus on making the joint product the best it can be, rather than advocating for their individual approach or vision. Both partners must be willing to give up a certain degree of control over the project. Individuals with a high need for control may not be good candidates for cowriting.



Making It Official

No matter how long coauthors have known each other and regardless of how well they think they'll work together, we encourage writers to draft a formal agreement early in the process. There are many sample agreements available on the internet. We think these ingredients are essential:

- What will be the division of labor?
- How will authorship be represented?
- Will actual names or pen names be used?
- What will be the order of authorship?
- Should the team consider using a single name to represent them?
- How will authors handle any expenses incurred while working on the project?
- How will writers go about seeking literary representation or, if they have such representation, how will they manage communications? How long will they allow for the steps in the process, for instance, for an agent to shop the novel to editors, before moving on to another publishing option?
- How will any advance or royalties be disbursed and in what proportions?
- What will happen if one author fails to complete his/her portion of the workload? Or what if one person is unable or unwilling to continue?

WRITING TOGETHER

It is not difficult to find sample author agreements online, but it is important to select one that addresses all aspects of the writing process and publication. One particularly useful resource is the Authors Guild: members have access to free legal advice on contracts and agreements, including coauthor agreements. The Alliance of Independent Authors offers a particularly thorough [sample agreement](#).

Launching the Project

Determining compatibility is only the first step. Cowriting a novel requires an altogether different approach than the solo endeavor. Both authors must agree on a common vision for the project. Exactly what genre and tone are they aiming for? What themes do they wish to explore? How do they picture the story arc, the novel length, and the characters' personalities?

Coauthors should also agree on the frequency with which they will check in with each other. Having a good sense of each other's writing schedules and routines can go a long way toward warding off frustration for the speedy writer or guilt on the part of the slower partner.

Dividing the Workload

Before beginning it's imperative that coauthors agree on the division of labor. Will one person take the lead and the other follow, or will both authors be involved in hashing out the draft? In either case, the writers should remain flexible throughout the process because it's often difficult to predict how much effort will be required. Different writers have different strengths and weaknesses, and cowriters will want to consider these trade-offs.

It's also important to assess how much research will be required for the project and how the research tasks will be assigned. By dividing the work, each writer can "specialize" in different

characters, settings, or time periods, freeing each of them up from having to cover the waterfront in terms of gathering background information. Regardless of how the research is apportioned, both authors should know all the background information in order to capably write and critique the manuscript.

Once the coauthors have an idea of the novel structure, they'll be better able to decide how to divide the writing effort. Does one person enjoy writing from the perspective of the dastardly antagonist and the other the heroic protagonist? Perhaps one author enjoys creating initial copy and the other especially likes revising. The structure of story timelines can also affect decisions about drafting the text.

Managing the Mechanics of the Project

There are various ways to go about drafting the novel. We decided to first develop a detailed outline because we planned to split up the writing assignment according to different point-of-view characters. So we needed an outline of the story to guide us as each of us drafted separate chapters. The outline thus served as a blueprint, provided a framework for the writing, and kept us organized.

Coauthors will need to decide how much they want to outline or plan the story before they embark on drafting so that they're in agreement about how to proceed.

The team will also need a place to deposit research materials, character and setting descriptions, chapters, and any other materials the authors need access to. There are many options for this. We recommend a platform that allows one to create folders for the outline, timeline, character sketches, setting details, title ideas, revision notes, and chapter drafts, among others. Visual platforms can also help in early stages to outline the chapters

and color-code different aspects of the novel (e.g., point-of-view characters, different timelines, and the like).

Obviously, both authors will need to eventually review and have input on all content, but we suggest that one author keep a master file of the latest updates to manage version control. Another way to control versions is to utilize something like Dropbox or Google Docs for uploading the master document.

Once the novel is complete, the authors should determine a revision plan. For our joint novel project, we each reviewed the complete manuscript in Microsoft Word with track changes turned on, combined the two edited versions, and then read through the combined draft together and decided which changes to accept or reject.

Conclusion

Many other tips are out there for coauthors, but we especially recommend [this article at Writer's Digest](#). If managed well, the cowriting experience can be productive, stimulating, and satisfying. But it's imperative that coauthors plan well, develop a formal contract, and keep the lines of communication open.

Resources

■ "10 Great Tips on How to Write a Book with a Co-Author" by Christopher Mari and Jeremy K. Brown. <https://www.writersdigest.com/be-inspired/10-great-tips-write-book-co-author>.

■ "Sample Agreements: Co-Authoring Agreement" by Orna Ross, Howard Lovy, Sarah Begley, and Jane Dixon-Smith. <https://www.allianceindependentauthors.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Sample-Coauthor-Agreement.pdf>.



Maryka Biaggio is an award-winning author who specializes in historical fiction based on real people. Her novels include *Gun Girl and the Tall Guy*, *The Model Spy*, *The Point of Vanishing*, *Eden Waits*, and *Parlor Games*.

Vanitha Sankaran writes fiction based on myths, beliefs, and culture. Her debut historical novel *Watermark: A Novel of the Middle Ages* traces the introduction of paper in southern France at a time when heresy was aflame. She has since published short historical fiction in multiple anthologies as well as chapters in a historical fiction craft book, and is currently working on both a historical art mystery series and a speculative fantasy set in 1950s India.



The authors have recently signed a contract with Foundations Book Publishers for their cowritten novel *Between Fortune and Fate*.



AVOIDING INFO DUMPS AND EXCESSIVE EXPOSITION

By Jill Caugherty

In early drafts, we as writers sometimes bombard readers with lengthy backstory and exposition, believing we must provide background context before telling the “real” story. The more time we’ve researched a subject, the more we’re tempted to do this.

The bad news? Information overload drastically slows the pace of the story and risks boring readers. In the best case, readers will skim over long passages to get to the meat of the plot. But in the worst possible case? Pointless exposition will cause readers to DNF (not finish) a novel.

How, then, do you decide which details to include in a novel and when?

Below are several guidelines to help avoid info dumps and unnecessary exposition in novels.

Does the exposition/information advance the plot? Is it relevant to the scene?

Let’s say you’re describing a scene in an 1860s farmhouse where a woman is making butter seconds before confederate soldiers storm into her yard. Making butter is irrelevant to the impending crisis, therefore it’s pointless and distracting to include step-by-step details about the lengthy process. At most you might mention—in a sentence or two—that the woman is churning, kneading, or molding butter when she glances out the window and spies uniformed men with rifles. In other words, **provide only the details that are necessary and move the storyline forward.** Ask yourself whether the information is relevant to the current scene and/or whether it’s important to the overall novel before deciding whether to keep it, chuck it, or save it for later.

As another example, if the protagonist is a cardiac surgeon, you might include a scene in which the doctor performs open heart surgery on a patient. Rather than describing the procedure in

minute detail, **focus on the protagonist’s thoughts and emotions.** What is the surgeon feeling? Has she performed this surgery so many times that her thoughts wander, and she grows distracted? Or is she a brand-new intern who’s tense and worried about making a mistake? Does she know the patient? The answers to these questions will introduce layers of complexity to the readers’ understanding of the protagonist and her feelings.

Show, don’t tell.

This is an old writing adage, but it bears repeating. Instead of describing a fantasy world or a character’s backstory in large chunks of exposition, **reveal the information organically through dialogue, action, and character interactions.** This means weaving worldbuilding elements and backstory into the narrative bit by bit, over several chapters, so the story unfolds gradually. And remember, when sharing information via dialogue, do so in a way that feels natural to the situation and conversation, ensuring the dialogue is authentic to the characters.

Feature

Does the scene need more details to bring it to life?

Conversely, sometimes a chapter or scene needs more details to help readers visualize the story and vicariously experience it. In the scenario with the woman making butter, you might briefly describe the furniture in the kitchen—for example, a black cast-iron pot on a hearth, a hand-carved oak table, ladder-backed chairs—to give readers context and help them feel transported to that unique time period and setting. The details you choose to include can also highlight the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings. For example, by showing the woman frantically searching for ways to protect herself from the armed men in her yard, you can contrast her heightened fear with the familiar comfort of the furniture and utensils in her kitchen.

Identify and rework info dumps.

When uncertain about whether a novel includes too much exposition, turn to critique partners and trusted beta readers for feedback. But if you want to try on your own first, you can identify info dumps by looking for long passages with excessive character backstory, technical details, worldbuilding, background information, or any other information that stalls the narrative. Info dumps also tend to explain or describe something with little accompanying action, thoughts, feelings, or dialogue.

According to Abigail Perry from [The Write Practice](#), ask this editing question when looking for info dumps: If you can eliminate at least ten words in every paragraph, does this detail matter?

Hannah Bauman from [Between the Lines Editorial](#) also asks the following questions when she’s evaluating clients’ manuscripts: Am I getting paragraphs of dense worldbuilding (including world history) at one time? Or am I getting a few sentences or a paragraph of context to let me know what that new “thing” is? If it’s a few sentences, are those sentences dense, or are they easy to follow? Is the exposition necessary, or can I understand what the new “thing” is from context clues? Am I getting intense and long character descriptions in one spot, or do I have enough information to develop a base understanding of this new character, then gradually learn about him/her in more depth, by what’s shown on the page?

Move, don’t delete.

If you shudder at the thought of deleting information you’ve worked long and hard to research, you can save these “stray” facts in a separate file, which could eventually become the basis and/or background for a new novel.

In general, though, less is more. By removing unnecessary details and gradually sharing relevant information while focusing on characters’ emotions, you’ll not only avoid alienating and overwhelming readers, you’ll succeed in making your novels more compelling, fast-paced, and propulsive.



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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). She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband and daughter. Learn more at www.jillcaugherty.com.

Author Profile: Sharon Kurtzman

By Brittany Clair

I get to meet a lot of authors in my work for *WriteOn!*, and each has taught me something vital about what it means to be a writer. But I have to say that Sharon Kurtzman's journey is one of the most inspirational publication stories I have come across. Her debut, *The Lost Baker of Vienna*, is the culmination of 25 years of work, persistence, and passion. The book was inspired by the war and postwar experiences of her own family, who were Holocaust survivors.

Since I had the opportunity to get to know Sharon and learn about her path to publication, I've found my thoughts drifting to her experience during moments of doubt—it's that energizing. Please, read our interview with her and see for yourself.

WO: Tell us about *The Lost Baker of Vienna*. It's a personal story for you. How did you approach researching, planning, and drafting a manuscript inspired by your family?

Sharon: I've wanted to be a writer since a young age and always knew that someday I would write about my family's experiences during World War II. As the years passed, I researched places my family had been during the war, yet I struggled with how to write their stories, wrestling with fiction or nonfiction. In early 2016 I settled on historical fiction as the way to write about my family, but it wasn't until after I'd earned an MFA in fiction writing in 2019 that I felt I was ready. And even then, it took falling ill with COVID-19 early in the pandemic for a loud inner voice to declare that *now* was the time to write the book.

Once I started writing, I plowed through a first draft in five months. I'd been living with the story for a long time and researching the material for decades. While writing that first draft, I did minimal research, just enough to allow me to finish. Then I set the book aside for several months. When I came back to the story, I wrote a second draft, researching along the way. Before the third draft, I spent two to three months



Photo by Daniel Turbert ©2025

reading everything I could get my hands on about the places and time period, and I reached out to experts and museums. Because my family inspired this book, I felt a responsibility to do everything I could to research and pay close attention to the historical details and events.

WO: Was there a moment in your own writing journey when you felt you needed to "start fresh"? How did it influence your career?

Sharon: It has been a 25-year writing journey to the publication of *The Lost Baker of Vienna*. Along the way I completed five other manuscripts. I queried four manuscripts (my fourth got me my first agent) and received hundreds of rejections. Over a seven-year period

I had two books die on submission with two different agents.

Storytellers know all about creating a dark-night-of-the-soul reckoning for their fictional characters. Though it was amicable, parting ways with my second agent when my second novel failed to find a publisher was when I experienced my all-is-lost moment. I considered whether I should keep writing at all. When I was in my MFA program, my critical thesis touched on the difference between writing with extrinsic or intrinsic motivation. At that point in the writing of *The Lost Baker of Vienna*, my mindset shifted to purely intrinsic motivation—I continued writing this book not because I expected to see it published but because I had to do it regardless of what happened once I had finished.

Feature

WO: What's one piece of advice you'd give writers who are starting something new—whether it's a new manuscript, working with a new writing partner or agent, or switching genres?

Sharon: Go into the new work or new relationship with an open mind while also following your instincts. That means welcoming the possibilities and insights this new project or person might bring. Approach feedback in the spirit of learning. Discovering what elements are not working or need all-out revision is as helpful as knowing the elements that do work. If a particular suggestion doesn't resonate then don't take it, but *first* be open to truly examining it. Explore the suggestion and ignore how much work it might be to implement it. Then decide if it fits your vision. Ask yourself if it will make your story better or not. This is where you will need to trust your gut.

WO: What's been your creative outlet as your manuscript moved from editing through publication? How did you transition through the various stages? (Do you have any advice for writers going through the process?)

Sharon: My advice is to start your next project, your next book. While I waited between revisions with my editors, I began researching and prewriting my next novel. By the time my manuscript went into production, I had a synopsis and was already deep in a first draft. By the time my book was published last month, I was near completion of the second draft of my new book.

Another creative outlet for me is cooking and baking. I spent a good amount of time baking while *The Lost Baker of Vienna* was moving through the publication process. All in the name of research, of course!

WO: How did you become involved in WFWA, and what has your experience with the organization been like?

Sharon: I joined WFWA about nine years ago. At first I joined because of the Rising Star contest (though I never entered) and the Albuquerque Retreat, which I've attended three times. I'm a



From *The Lost Baker of Vienna* by Sharon Kurtzman, published by Pamela Dorman Books/Viking, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Copyright © Sharon Kurtzman

Chapter One Zoe

*Raleigh, North Carolina
February 2018*

On this starless winter night, wind howled through the street and cold wicked from the ground, burrowing into Zoe Rosenzweig's bones. Not that she minded; she preferred winter. Sweltering summer days often set her on edge. She fumbled in the dark to slip her key in the door. The porch light was out again. She tucked the bag with the snow globe under her arm, turned the lock, then jabbed the doorbell twice. The kitschy souvenir of the Chicago skyline was for her grandfather, as was the double ring; the latter to signal he needn't rush to greet her. Not that he rushed anywhere since his stroke.

"It's me," she called, stepping inside his tidy Raleigh bungalow, and leaving her keys in the misshapen ceramic bowl on the foyer table, the one she'd made for Grandma Tess twenty years ago.

"Zoe, you're back from your trip?" Katherine called from the kitchen.

big fan of the organization. It is such a supportive group, and I've made great friends all over the country thanks to the retreats and various virtual meet-up opportunities. A constant piece of advice I give new writers is to find their community. WFWA is an amazing community overflowing with generosity!

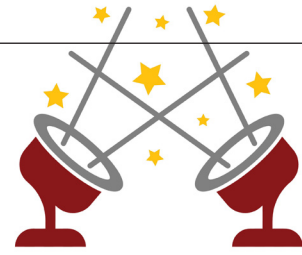
WO: What are three books in your TBR pile?

Sharon: Three books in my TBR stack that I can't wait to get to are *Marriage at Sea* by Sophie Elmhurst, *These Summer Storms* by Sarah MacLean, and *Jackie* by Dawn Tripp. I'm looking forward to

reading this trio of books before the end of the year.

Sharon Kurtzman worked in television marketing before pursuing her dream of becoming a writer. She earned her MFA in fiction from Vermont College of Fine Arts and her undergraduate degree from Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications.

The Lost Baker of Vienna was inspired by the war and postwar experiences of her own family, who were Holocaust survivors. Kurtzman lives in North Carolina with her husband. They have two adult children.



Lisa Montanaro: Thriving While Adapting

You may know Lisa Montanaro from her long tenure as WFWA's Webinar Host, but you might not know about her wide-ranging experience.

She's worn several hats in her past, including as a theater performer, teacher at the NY School of the Deaf, employment lawyer, executive coach, productivity consultant, speaker, and author. With so many changes over the years, it's safe to say she knows a thing or two about reinvention. If anything, she says she fears stagnating because she enjoys being challenged.

Lisa's Webinar Host position has been steady since 2019, but the role itself is ever-changing. As host, she says she gets a "front-row seat to amazing professional development, and access to some of the best authors, editors, publishers, agents, and experts in the writing world." Just like her volunteering roles, Lisa's career trajectory as an author has been anything but linear. She's published hundreds of articles, blog posts, and newspaper columns through her consulting, coaching, and speaking businesses and as a freelance writer. In 2016 she set out to write a nonfiction account of certain aspects of her life, especially her unique family story. But after she reviewed family members' personal essays and interviewed her father, she had an epiphany and pivoted the project to fiction.

That's when she joined WFWA, which she says was a "flash point" in her author career.

"We support, motivate, and inspire each other," Lisa says. "I'm amazed at how talented, collaborative, and supportive writer colleagues are. It's a special community!"



Her advice to those considering volunteering for WFWA is to dip their toes in the water. "I truly believe [volunteering] will be a game-changing part of your author journey," she says.

Lisa notes that her background in theater played a key role in helping her create and embody characters in her novel. She is also a linguistics geek with a talent for accents and studied in an 18th-century palazzo in Bologna, Italy, a few years ago. With a combination of talents like that, maybe one day you'll hear her narrate an audiobook!

Lisa Montanaro has been the WFWA Webinar Host since 2019. She is part no-nonsense Italian American New Yorker and part sunny Californian. Her first novel *Everything We Thought Was True* was published in January 2025. When not writing, she enjoys cycling and hiking with her veterinarian husband, tending to her garden, and chasing after their rescue dog, Naya.

FINAL THOUGHT

You can't be that kid
standing at the top of the
waterslide, overthinking it.
You have to go down the chute.

Tina Fey, *Bossypants*



WriteOn!