



## **THE BEACH, THE BREEZE, AND THE BUSINESS OF WRITING**

- **THE WRITER'S BUSINESS PLAN**
- **THE JOYS AND PITFALLS OF BOOK SWAG**
- **GUIDING SCRIBE: BOOK PROMOTION**



**AUTHOR PROFILE:  
STAR AWARD WINNER  
LAUREN PARVIZI**

**ALISON  
HAMMER ON  
CO-WRITING**



**INSIDE THE INDUSTRY: ENGAGING READERS ON THE INTERNET**

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**8** **WOMEN'S FICTION DAY  
RETREAT REGISTRATION OPEN**



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.



Join the closed WFWA Facebook group by sending an email to:  
[membership@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:membership@womensfictionwriters.org)

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Guiding Scribe

**Nancy Wayson Dinan**  
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.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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# A Community of Learning

When I first joined WFWA I was passionate about storytelling but had absolutely no idea what it meant to manage the “business side” of writing novels. Queries, indie publishing, marketing—those words might as well have been a foreign language to me.

Now, as I get closer to querying my debut novel, I look back and realize just how much I’ve learned thanks to this incredible community. Honestly, it feels like I’ve earned a mini-MFA in writing, just by being part of WFWA.

Through our webinars and workshops I’ve picked up invaluable insights that have shaped my approach and helped me make thoughtful decisions about my writing career. But even beyond the formal resources, it’s the friendships I’ve formed here that have made the greatest impact.

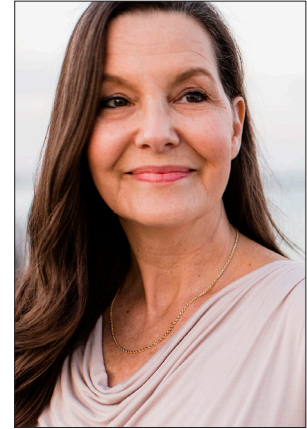
Sheila Athens and Jen Sinclair, both active members of our indie publishing group, have generously shared their personal indie publishing journeys with me. Their willingness to share their experiences—both challenges and successes—has opened my eyes to new possibilities.

Longtime WFWA member Peggy Fink, who gave an excellent presentation about querying at our recent conference, is another example of the kind of generous spirit I find so often in this group. When the time comes, Peggy will be the very first person I ask to review my query letter. Her wisdom and support have given me so much confidence.

And looking ahead to the daunting world of book marketing, I feel lucky knowing I can lean on friends like Lainey Cameron and Paulette Stout, both incredibly knowledgeable about promotion and outreach. Their ongoing willingness to share their expertise is something I deeply appreciate.

WFWA isn’t just about resources—it’s about relationships. Writers supporting writers, offering encouragement, knowledge, and genuine friendship. It’s exactly this kind of connection that makes our community truly special.

So wherever you are on your own writing journey, I hope you’ll take full advantage of all the amazing resources and relationships WFWA offers. Because when we help one another, we all grow stronger.



**THROUGH OUR WEBINARS AND WORKSHOPS I’VE PICKED UP INVALUABLE INSIGHTS THAT HAVE SHAPED MY APPROACH AND HELPED ME MAKE THOUGHTFUL DECISIONS ABOUT MY WRITING CAREER. BUT EVEN BEYOND THE FORMAL RESOURCES, IT’S THE FRIENDSHIPS I’VE FORMED HERE THAT HAVE MADE THE GREATEST IMPACT.**

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kristi Leonard". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Kristi Leonard



# THE CROSSROAD OF CREATIVITY AND BUSINESS

Dear Reader,

As submissions for this issue of *WriteOn!* came in, I was constantly reminded that “the business of writing” is a vast umbrella. I was also blown away by the *joy* written into every piece.

Many authors (raising my hand in guilt) consider the business aspects of writing a form of hellish drudgery on par with the mindless, frustrating, time-consuming labor involved in, say, preparing a tax audit. But WFWA members have found no shortage of strategies to upend this approach and replace it with something different entirely: the creative spirit. You will see it for yourself in the pages to come.

As the publishing landscape shifts beneath our feet, the business of writing is more about adapting and embracing lifelong learning than succumbing to a tedious checklist of tasks. I invite you to learn, as I did, how writers in our community are crafting business plans that serve their goals and their readers, how letting audiences into our stories can help us connect, how we can spin promotional endeavors into creative pursuits, and how the best of friendships can bloom and blossom when we write together.

In concert with industry veterans like our Guiding Scribe, Nancy Johnson, author Alison Hammer, and literary agent Nour Sallam, this issue also features submissions from our editorial staff, a Q&A with 2024 STAR Award-winner Lauren Parvizi, returning columns by Nancy Wayson Dinan and Debra Borchert, and more.

I hope you find the joy they bring to the business of writing. And, of course, we are all here because of our shared dedication to the craft itself—and thankfully, that is part of this business too.

Wishing you a season of growth, learning, and creativity,

*Brittany*

## 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).

# Writing About a Religion Not Your Own

By Patricia Bernstein

Beginning novelists are always admonished to “write what you know,” but I subscribe fully to the belief that a novelist is allowed to imagine all kinds of beings in all kinds of worlds, if they can do so convincingly. However, if you are writing about a devout member of a particular religion, and you are a member of a different religion (or none), potential pitfalls abound, and you are in danger of betraying your ignorance.

How did I come to understand the difficulty of writing about a religion not my own? When my husband and I visited Scotland for the first time, we toured the grand, old Traquair House, which is billed as the oldest continually occupied home in Scotland. During the tour, the guide pointed out side-by-side portraits of a lovely woman in a forest-green dress with one arm cradling a little brown and white whippet, and a dashing, ruddy-cheeked young man in a full suit of armor. The guide told us that in 1716 the woman, Winifred Maxwell, Countess of Nithsdale, had rescued her husband from the Tower of London the night before his scheduled execution.

I had never heard this story before and was astounded. Even though I had published only nonfiction books up to that point, I decided to try to give this tale the dramatic treatment it merited in the form of a novel.

But there was a catch.

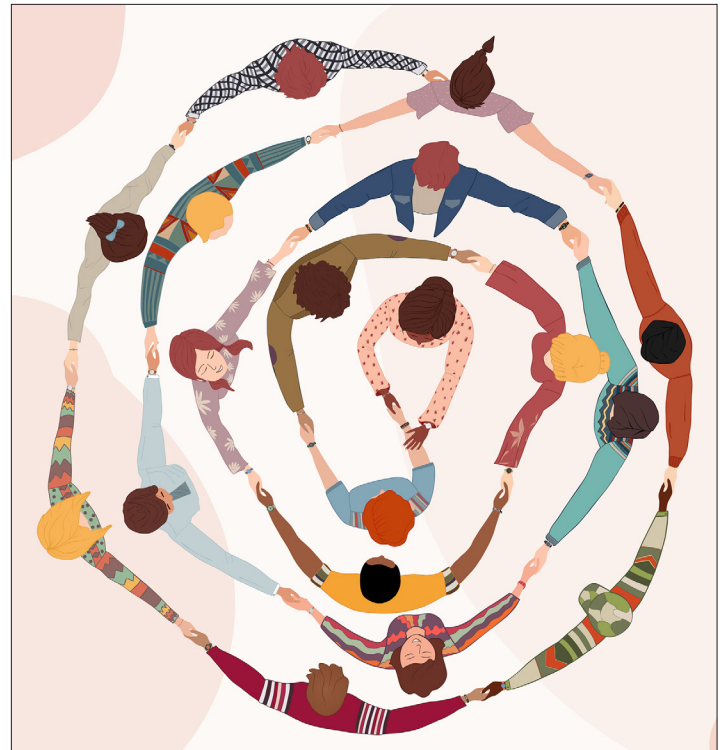
Winifred and her husband were persecuted Catholics and I am Jewish. What did I know about Catholicism, much less Catholicism in Great Britain in the eighteenth century when Catholics were brutally oppressed? Could a Jewish author writing about a Catholic heroine be considered guilty of cultural appropriation?

### RESPECT AND NUANCES MATTER

Well-known, non-Jewish, American novelist William Styron caused a storm of criticism when he published his bestselling novel *Sophie's Choice* in 1979, when memories of the Holocaust were still raw. The primary Jewish character in the novel, Nathan Landau, behaves monstrously.

Nathan first saves poor Sophie's life and then treats her with appalling brutality and sexual savagery. In addition, the despairing and sympathetic Sophie, who is the primary victim of the Holocaust depicted in the novel, is not only a once-privileged gentile but has also grown up steeped in the widespread Polish antisemitism of her time.

The fact that Nathan is suffering from a severe and ultimately suicidal mental illness does not make his extreme behavior easier to swallow for the Jewish reader. Barbara Foley, English professor at Rutgers, commented that *Sophie's Choice* was “an essentially solipsistic interpretation of the Holocaust” because “it promotes



sympathy for a Gentile at the expense of a Jew.”

When I began my own journey to tell the story of the near-forgotten heroine Winifred Maxwell in a novel, I thought I knew a lot about Catholicism. I had studied the Middle Ages. I had Catholic friends. I even knew something about the “priest holes” in some of the grand homes of England, where priests hid because their presence in England was illegal.

But honestly, I had no idea how bad things really were for Catholics until I started digging.

Persecution of Catholics lasted for over 200 years. They were essentially Catholics in name only because they were forbidden to host a priest, attend a mass, or even own a rosary. They could not hold public office or vote. Everyone, including Catholics and Protestant dissenters, was required to attend Church of England services or pay a fine.

I would have been foolish indeed to attempt to write a novel from Winifred Maxwell's perspective without trying to understand the enormous hardships she faced at that time as a Catholic in England. It was her fury at the longtime mistreatment of her family that inspired her absolute determination to flout a cruel government and save her husband's life, whatever the cost.

## SPOTLIGHT ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

### THE NEED FOR SENSITIVITY DOESN'T END WITH PUBLICATION

*Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak are books with Holocaust themes written by non-Jews that treat Jewish characters positively and have not aroused the same kind of controversy as *Sophie's Choice*.

However, Lowry commented in a recent interview that her young Jewish readers often asked her why the heroine of her book isn't Jewish. Her answer was, I thought, surprisingly insensitive: "When you write a story, the protagonist is always the one who has decisions to make, and in 1943, the Jews didn't have decisions to make. The Christians had all the choices."

In actuality, Jews had lots of decisions to make during the Holocaust—terrible decisions, such as whether to fight the Nazis and die or be led like sheep to concentration camps and die anyway. This tone-deaf comment by Lowry highlights the need to exercise extra care, both in crafting a novel and in speaking about it, if you are writing about a religion not your own.

### SO WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Does this mean you should never create an unpleasant, distasteful, or downright evil character who practices a religion that is not your own? Can a Jewish novelist, for instance, create an evil Muslim character? What about vice versa? What if you are trying to expose a harm committed in the name of a particular religion?

These are huge and difficult questions beyond the scope of this essay. But in such cases the same requirements to exercise care apply, possibly amplified. Your best bet is to always do your homework. In short: *research, research, research.*

If you are planning to write about a sensitive topic such as religion, or create characters whose religion is far removed from your own, you owe your subjects and readers an extra effort to learn as much as possible about what is foreign to their own experience. Obvious techniques involved in developing fiction should be employed with even more care than usual:

- Learn as much as possible about the religion and its practice in the relevant time period. Consult historians, theologians, clergy, and others who are knowledgeable about the religion and the time period.
- Ask people who practice the religion in question to be beta readers. Ask them to note if the depiction of religious ritual and practice in the novel is accurate and if the descriptions of the lives and emotions of the characters ring true.
- If you are not only writing about a character of another religion but also writing from the *perspective* of that character, even more in-depth research might be necessary.



Winifred Maxwell, Countess of Nithsdale

### For additional resources relevant to this topic, WFWA's D&I Committee recommends:

- [D&I webinars: "Understanding Diversity" and "Authors & Allyships"](#)
- [WFWA D&I Presentation: "How to Truthfully Portray the Past Without Harm"](#)

### Sources:

Barbara Foley, "Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narratives," *Comparative Literature* 34 (1982): 330–60, quoted in Jean W. Cash, "Styron's 'Pseudofactual' Portrayal of the Holocaust in *Sophie's Choice*," *CEA Critic* 52, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 29–34.

Michael Lackey, "The Scandal of Jewish Rage in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*," University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well, Summer 2016.

[https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=eng\\_facpubs](https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=eng_facpubs)

Molly Parr, "Four Questions with Lois Lowry, Newbery Award-Winning Children's Author," [jewishboston.com](http://jewishboston.com), December 4, 2024.

<https://www.jewishboston.com/read/four-questions-with-lois-lowry-newbery-award-winning-childrens-author/>



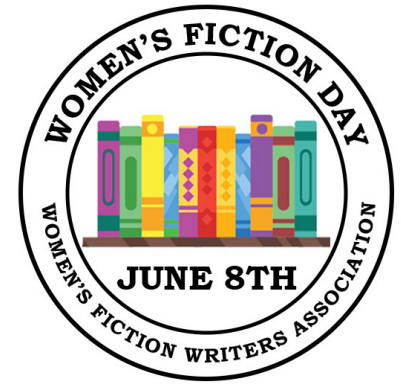
**Patricia Bernstein** earned a Degree of Distinction in American Studies from Smith College. She has published three nonfiction books, the most recent of which, *Ten Dollars to Hate*, was a finalist for a major award from the Texas Institute of Letters. *A Noble Cunning: The Countess and the Tower*, Patricia's debut novel, is based on the true story of a woman who rescued her husband from the Tower of London. The book has been awarded gold medals by the American Bookfest and the IPPY awards and first place in the Catholic novel category by the Catholic Media Association.

# CELEBRATE WOMEN'S FICTION DAY: JUNE 8

June 8 has been designated Women's Fiction Day—a specific day meant for women's fiction writers to support one another, thank our readers, and raise awareness about our fabulous genre.

## Here are some ways for you to help celebrate the day:

- If you are a newly published author, schedule a book launch on that day.
- Attend one of the many book signings held nationwide on June 8.
- Visit the WFWA [Goodreads bookshelf](#) and [Pinterest boards](#) to find hundreds of titles.
- Download the [Hear Us Roar](#) debut authors' podcast.
- Visit your local library and/or indie bookstore to discover new women's fiction authors and novels. Drop off the prepared flyer found in the toolkit (see below) and ask them to post it in a prominent location. Ask your librarian or bookstore manager to set up a display that highlights works of women's fiction in time for Women's Fiction Day.
- Follow WFWA on X (@WF\_Writers) or Instagram (@womensfictionwriters).
- On social media, #bookstagram your favorite book and include a photo or stack with #womensfictionday.
- Promote Women's Fiction Day and your books to your local media. Refer to [WFWA's handy Women's Fiction Day toolkit](#) for resources like a press release template and graphics.
- Post the Women's Fiction Day logo on your website and social media accounts.
- Use the logo graphics to create bookmarks and hand them out at events, to the local library, and to local bookstores.



[WWW.WOMENSFICIONWRITERS.ORG](http://WWW.WOMENSFICIONWRITERS.ORG)

The WFWA Communications Team has put together a toolkit to assist you in promoting the event. You can find more details about Women's Fiction Day and supporting resources in the [Online Community](#).

And, if you have suggestions for Women's Fiction Day activities, we'd love to hear them! Email us at [communications@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:communications@womensfictionwriters.org).

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## REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN FOR 2025 RETREAT WEST

[Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town](#)

**800 Rio Grande Blvd NW,  
Albuquerque, NM 87104**

**Retreat Dates:** Wednesday through  
Saturday, Sept. 24-27

**Retreat Cost:** \$590

**Room Rate:** \$229/night

It's that time of year again! Retreat West, a beloved tradition among many WFWA members, will take place at the end of September at the always-popular Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town. This year it's also our only in-person retreat, as we shift the Retreat East to the spring, so don't miss out!

Retreat West features one speaker who will facilitate three sessions—three hours each—with no overlapping sessions from other presenters. This year, acclaimed author and WFWA member **Vanessa Riley** will lead them. Vanessa has written more than 25 novels and is extremely active on social media, with pages on all the major platforms including Substack and Spotify, where she hosts a podcast called *Write of Passage*. She is represented by Authors Unbound, an event agency connecting authors to their readers.



Member-led mini-sessions will be offered every afternoon as alternatives to the scheduled free-writing time during these hours. These sessions will be recorded and available for retreat attendees afterward.

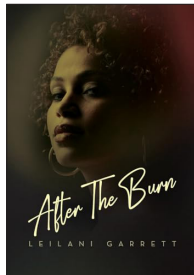
We'll also hold a welcome reception, provide breakfast Thursday-Saturday, and offer daily sunrise yoga classes. The retreat will end with a farewell reception and awards dinner Saturday evening, during which the STAR and Rising STAR Award winners will be announced.

Hotel Albuquerque features a number of places to hide and write or connect and collaborate. The Fireplace Room will be a designated quiet room for serious reading or writing. The Potters Room will be set up for meetups, discussions, or impromptu tutorials. And Casa Esencia is our group's private indoor/outdoor space every afternoon. This eighteenth-century hacienda has been transformed with historic architectural details and modern furnishings that feel familiar and inviting.

Registration opened April 1. Be sure to reserve your spot ASAP!

# MEMBER RELEASES

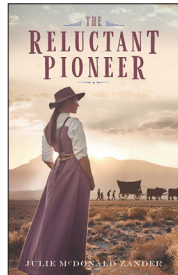
As WFWA continues to grow, so have our members' accomplishments. To be fair to everyone, all new women's fiction releases featured in the magazine must have been published within the past one year. If you are a new member with an older title(s), please still submit your books to be included on the WFWA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



**LEILANI GARRETT**  
After the Burn  
8/27/24



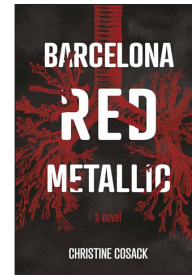
**JAN HEIDRICH-RICE**  
Secrets of the Blue Moon  
9/6/24



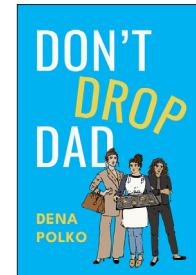
**JULIE McDONALD ZANDER**  
The Reluctant Pioneer:  
Inspired by a True Story  
9/20/24



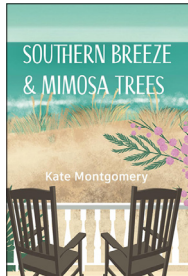
**KRISTINE MELDRUM DENHOLM**  
Yesterday's Song  
9/30/24



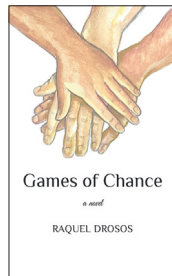
**CHRISTINE COSACK**  
Barcelona Red  
Metallic  
10/15/24



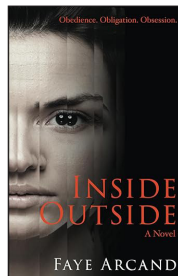
**DENA POLKO**  
Don't Drop Dad  
10/18/24



**KATE MONTGOMERY**  
Southern Breeze  
& Mimosas Trees  
10/20/24



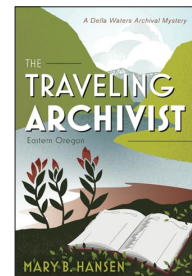
**RAQUEL DROSOS**  
Games of Chance  
10/29/24



**FAYE ARCAND**  
Inside Outside  
10/31/25



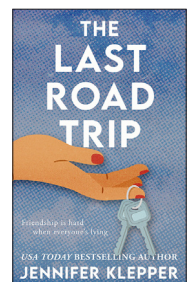
**APPLE AN**  
Mother of Red  
Mountains  
12/16/24



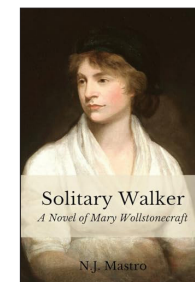
**MARY HANSEN**  
The Traveling Archivist:  
Eastern Oregon  
1/29/25



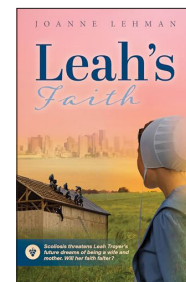
**PAULETTE STOUT**  
What We Give Away  
2/4/25



**JENNIFER KLEPPER**  
The Last Road Trip  
2/10/25



**N.J. MASTRO**  
Solitary Walker:  
A Novel of Mary  
Wollstonecraft  
2/10/25



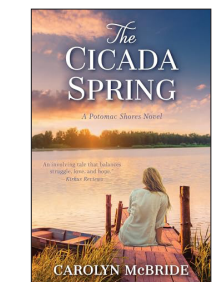
**JOANNE LEHMAN**  
Leah's Faith  
3/1/25



**RAQUEL Y. LEVITT**  
The Seer  
3/11/25



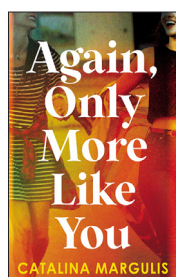
**JILL AMBER CHAFIN**  
Shaken  
3/18/25



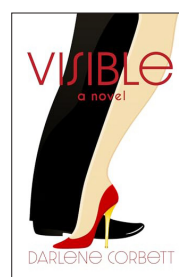
**CAROLYN MCBRIDE**  
The Cicada  
Spring  
4/12/25



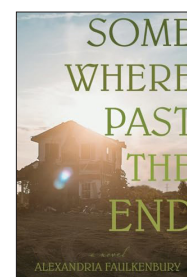
**ELAINE STOCK**  
The Last Secret Kept  
4/24/25



**CATALINA MARGULIS**  
Again, Only More  
Like You  
4/29/25



**DARLENE CORBETT**  
Visible  
5/17/25



**ALEXANDRIA FAULKENBERRY**  
Somewhere Past  
The End  
5/20/25



**JUDITH NEWCOMB STILES**  
Hush Little Fire  
5/20/25

# 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:

**The feeling of holding** another one of my books in my hands motivates me to face a dreaded task on the hardest days. I'm fulfilled by having physical art that I created from nothing, so I visualize the end product and get to work!

— C. D'Angelo

**I motivate myself** to tackle dreaded writing tasks by acknowledging the note taped on my computer that says, "Your investment in time will lead to amazing fortune."

— Brenda Weathers Hargroves

**I find the hardest writing tasks** for me (usually surrounding the first major revision) are best handled by breaking it up into smaller pieces, body doubling, and setting deadlines with someone expecting to read it!

— Kristy Hodges

**How do you motivate yourself to tackle the writing tasks you dread?**

**I motivate myself** to do the hard tasks by doing them first. Then I reward myself by doing something fun.

— Laura Drake

**If I'm stuck in deep, dark dread,** I shake it off with a walk amongst the trees or a light run to loosen my body. Movement helps dislodge the thoughts that hinder my progress. Next, I set the writing stage for myself. If I don't have the woodstove ready with red-hot coals, I turn on the fireplace channel for background noise. I pour a vanilla latte with extra foam and keep a bowl of peanut butter M&Ms close by for my sweet tooth. If none of that works, I have an honest chat with my inner critic and let her know I was the one who sought out writing. No one else is begging me to do it. I come full circle when I realize I am the only one in my way.

— Holly B. Gutwillinger

**I start by aiming for 500 words.** This usually leads to me exceeding that count, but it gives me a guidepost—a sense of direction so I don't feel overwhelmed. It helps me focus while still allowing room for expansion as the scene or ideas develop. I also schedule breaks for lunch and a workout because refueling is important. Plus, you never know what idea might strike while powering through an elliptical session or a run on the treadmill.

— Lindsay Marie Morris

**Drafting is one of the hardest** writing tasks for me. Like many writers, I prefer to have written. 😊 I usually set myself a deadline or participate in a group writing activity like #1000wordsofsummer to get momentum on a draft and keep it going till the end.

— Alexandria Faulkenbury

In the next issue, we'll be exploring AUTHOR IDENTITY, and we want to know:

**What's the origin story behind your quirkiest writing habit?**

Send your 1–2-sentence responses to [writeon@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:writeon@womensfictionwriters.org) for a chance to be featured in the magazine. Please use "Crowdsourced–Business" in the subject line, and include your full name along with your 1–2-sentence response in the body of the email. If you prefer anonymity in the magazine, please indicate this as well.



## YOUR BOOK WON'T SELL ITSELF

**Y**our book won't sell itself no matter how good it is. We spend years writing and rewriting, agonizing over character development, plot, and just the right turn of phrase. Eventually, we publish and then what? Sit back and wait for the world to anoint our book baby as *The Great American Novel*?

Sorry, that's not happening.

It's been about two months since my second novel *People of Means* hit shelves, and I've been crisscrossing the country on a book tour. Still, there are plenty of folks who have no idea this book exists. I keep asking myself what more I can do to promote the book. I'm lining up events throughout the year because I'm taking the long view, recognizing that there's nothing but upside in introducing my novel to as many new readers as I can.

### TALK ABOUT YOUR BOOK SO MUCH YOU ANNOY YOURSELF

When my first novel *The Kindest Lie* was released in 2021, I posted about it so frequently on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter that I almost muted myself. It got so bad that I apologized to my social media followers for posting so much about the book in the many months leading up to publication.

Believe it or not, I was inundated with comments telling me they craved information and updates about my novel. They wanted more of it, not less. After all, they were invested in my success. You now have permission and encouragement to shout from the rooftops about your work.

## GUIDING SCRIBE

### CHRONICLE YOUR JOURNEY TO PUBLICATION

This is something I regret not doing early in the lead up to publication of *People of Means*. Let readers in on every step along the way, starting with your book idea. What inspired you? An article you read in the newspaper, a nagging question about life, something you've always been intrigued by, or maybe a random experience with a stranger?

During your writing time, keep your readers informed about your process, including the periods when you encounter writer's block as well as the successful moments when you nail a piece of dialogue or plot point. Other moments to highlight include your book title, the cover reveal, preorder campaign, the unboxing of advance and final copies, blurbs or word of praise from authors, and, of course, publication day. But don't stop there.

Take your followers along with you on your book tour and introduce them to the readers you're meeting at every stop. I've asked practically every reader I've encountered to take a photo with me and the book. They're always thrilled to do it! But showcase the rough spots too, like the empty room when no one shows up for your event. That's real, and readers will empathize with you on the not-so-glamorous parts of the journey.

### MAKE IT EASY FOR PEOPLE TO SEE YOUR BOOK COVER AND BUY THE BOOK

You may be familiar with that old marketing rule that people need to see a product seven times before they consider buying it. Unfortunately, I've heard that the number has now risen to ten. It takes that many interactions for people to remember your product and have it top of mind when they're considering a new purchase. Your buy links should be easily accessible. Don't make people hunt for them. Include them in your email signature.



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.

Once your book is for sale, be sure to update the language from "preorder" to "buy" and change the verbiage "coming" to "on sale now" on your social media channels and on every page of your website. I was one month late making those changes and another author had to point out that my content was outdated. Don't let that happen to you.

Also, at the time of launch every image you share should prominently feature your book cover, not your author head shot or photos of anything else. Product placement is key, and your book is that product.

### BE A BIGMOUTH AND GET THE WORD OUT EVERYWHERE YOU CAN

As soon as you finish writing and rewriting the book, make a list of everyone you know. Don't leave anybody out. Include your kindergarten classmates, your teachers, pastors, sorority sisters, your plumber, hair stylist, nail tech, graduate school adviser, colleagues from old jobs, your LinkedIn network, your neighbors, and others. They could potentially be members of your "street team" who will promote your book in their circles. Who do you know who knows someone in the news media? Did you forget that the choir director at church is the first cousin of one of the local TV anchors?

Use your network wisely. Identify podcasts that feature novels or topics you address in your book and pitch to make an appearance. Announce publicly on all your platforms that you're willing to speak to book clubs in person in your local area and virtually everywhere else. Ask your readers to leave reviews on Goodreads and Amazon if they enjoyed the book.

**Remember:** People are rooting for you and want to know how they can support you. Tell them!



**TAKE YOUR FOLLOWERS ALONG WITH YOU ON YOUR BOOK TOUR AND INTRODUCE THEM TO THE READERS YOU'RE MEETING AT EVERY STOP. I'VE ASKED PRACTICALLY EVERY READER I'VE ENCOUNTERED TO TAKE A PHOTO WITH ME AND THE BOOK. THEY'RE ALWAYS THRILLED TO DO IT!**

## BEING AN AUTHOR IN THE DIGITAL AGE:

### DOS AND DON'TS FOR ENGAGING WITH READERS, WRITERS, AND PUBLISHING FOLKS ON THE INTERNET



**N**avigating social media and building an online author brand can feel overwhelming. One of the most common questions I get asked on this topic is, “Do I have to have an online presence?”

It’s such a simple question, but the answer is more complex. Do you *have* to have an online presence? No. Many successful authors don’t.

Would it help your career if you did? Yes, because it connects you with readers and the literary community. Does that mean it can help you sell more books? Not necessarily.

Having an online presence isn’t a guaranteed sales tool. The point of social media is connection and information sharing—not just selling. If you approach it solely as a sales tool, you’ll likely set yourself up for disappointment and struggle to connect with your audience.

Does that mean you shouldn’t promote your books or events online? Of course not! But promotion shouldn’t be your *entire* profile. No one wants to be bombarded with “sales-y” content every time they look at their phone. What people crave is a level of personal connection with the people they follow. If you do that well, they will be more interested in supporting your work. Your goal online should be to connect and engage.

So how can you do that? Here are some dos and don’ts for being an author on the internet:

#### **BEST PRACTICES**

##### **DO: DEFINE YOUR BRAND IDENTITY**

As an author, you are also a brand. Think about what aligns with your personality and what you write: your tone (e.g., humorous or professional), your visual style (e.g., minimalist or moody), and the type of content you want to share. Having a clear sense of your brand helps you figure out how to show up online.

##### **DO: BE CONSISTENT**

Consistency matters more than frequency. Whether you have a blog, a Substack, Instagram, or TikTok, stick to a content schedule that works for you. For example, I publish a blog post every two weeks because that’s manageable for me. It might mean I’ll see slower growth than if I were to post weekly, but sometimes slow and steady wins the race. Consistency also builds trust with your audience and keeps the algorithms happy.

##### **DO: STUDY WHAT RESONATES WITH YOUR AUDIENCE**

Pay attention to the type of content that engages your audience and use that insight to guide future posts. Keep in mind that not all audiences like the same type of content. Different genres attract different preferences; romance readers might love graphics that point out a book’s tropes while literary fiction readers might not. Polls are also a great tool to ask your followers what they want to see from you!

Continued on page 14

## INSIDE THE INDUSTRY

### **DO: MIX IT UP**

At the same time, don't be afraid to experiment with different formats and content. Too much of one thing—whether it's updates on your WIP or promotional posts—can overwhelm your audience.

### **DO: BE AN ACTIVE LITERARY CITIZEN**

Share collaborations, uplift your colleagues, and highlight the books you're reading. Mention the writers and bookstores you do events with and celebrate their work. Paying it forward strengthens your connections and enriches the literary community as a whole.

### **DO: CONSIDER YOUR SOURCES**

Consider the source when you're sharing or reposting information. When you have a platform, whether it's small or large, you have a responsibility to your followers to avoid spreading misinformation or inflammatory clickbait.

### **PRACTICES TO AVOID**

#### **DON'T: ARGUE ON THE INTERNET OR HATE ON OTHERS**

What you put out online can have a lasting impact on your career. Avoid engaging in public arguments, criticizing other people's work, or complaining about agents and publishers online. Keep it light and positive. Remember: the internet is forever. You may grow and change, but screenshots live on.

#### **DON'T: OVERSHARE THE STATUS OF YOUR SUBMISSION**

I tell my clients this all the time: avoid posting about the status of your submissions. There's a lot of strategy that goes into the submission stage, and posting about it online might inadvertently affect your submission or relationships within the industry. Similarly, querying writers should be careful with posting query updates that they wouldn't want *all* agents to see. Agents and editors are also on social media and can see what you post.

#### **DON'T: USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO FOLLOW UP**

Agents and editors are people too—they deserve downtime and like to scroll through social media like everyone else. Unless you're participating in a pitch event, don't use social media to pitch or follow up with agents or editors. Stick to the proper channels for pitches and follow-ups to maintain professionalism. These are business interactions, after all.



#### **DON'T: HESITATE TO BLOCK!**

Your online space is yours to curate. You get to do what you want with it. If someone is being rude or disruptive, don't hesitate to block them. Protecting your mental health is more important than tolerating negativity.

#### **DON'T: FORCE TRENDS THAT DON'T FEEL GOOD OR AUTHENTIC TO YOU**

The internet is full of advice and trends, but not all of them will suit your personality or goals—and that's okay! If something feels forced or inauthentic, don't do it. If a platform doesn't bring you joy, you don't have to join it. Your audience can tell when you're not being genuine. Focus on what feels right for you and your brand instead of chasing trends.

Building an online presence as an author can be a rewarding experience, but it requires thoughtfulness, consistency, and authenticity. It's easy to feel pressured by algorithms or trends, but putting too much pressure on your online presence won't help you. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to being an author on the internet. Focus on creating meaningful connections, experimenting with what works for you, and protecting your mental health along the way. At the end of the day, the internet is just one tool in your author toolkit. Use it in a way that brings you joy and inspires you.



**Nour Sallam** is an associate literary agent at P.S. Literary Agency representing adult fiction and nonfiction. She has a BA in English Literature and Political Science from the University of British Columbia and studied publishing at Toronto Metropolitan University. She is an Arab woman and immigrant and loves books that amplify joy and connection and/or feature complex and nuanced histories, social dynamics, or underrepresented narratives. She is actively seeking upmarket and commercial women's fiction with a focus on friendship dynamics, dysfunctional families, and hidden secrets. You can find her wishlist and her publishing blog at [noursallam.com](http://noursallam.com).

## AN AUDIENCE—YOURS FOR THE CREATING INTERACTING WITH READERS IN PERSON



By Debra Borchert

As book tours have become more costly, social media has been our go-to for reaching readers. But if you're not interacting with potential readers in person, you're missing out on an audience that is yours for the creating.

In-person presentations can be scary, but if you focus your event around things you enjoy, you'll find it much easier to engage with people. You might even have a lot of fun.

When asked to speak at a women's university club, I created a presentation, *Common Women, Uncommon Courage*, to engage fellow feminists. I read sections of my books that immersed the audience in early feminist acts and asked attendees, "What would you do to feed your starving children?"

It turned out to be great fodder for a rousing discussion, and I sold out of books at the event.

### JEWELRY AND BOOKS GO TOGETHER LIKE WINE AND CHEESE

Author and WFWA member Linda Rosen, who writes historical fiction, creates in-person events unique to her series,

which features pieces of jewelry, one of her passions. She believes jewelry and books go together like wine and cheese.

When invited to present at a book club, Linda tested her idea for engaging potential readers. She created a workshop flyer, *Jewelry & the Art of Story*, encouraging people to bring their grandma's pearls, mom's charm bracelet, Aunt Mildred's earrings—whatever heirloom jewelry they possess, and inviting them to share the pieces' stories in the workshop.

"People love sharing the memories and stories their pieces evoke," Linda said. "And I love hearing them."

She asked her friend to distribute the flyer to the book club members, who invited friends. Twenty-five people showed up, many of whom bought copies of Linda's books. Her workshops explore the secrets behind the jewelry pieces featured in her books, and Linda reads sections in which the bracelet, necklace, or brooch appears.

After they share their family stories, she leads them in making up a story about their pieces, starting with, "What if?"

"When the women in my workshops are engaged and interact, I consider that a success," Linda said. "We all have so much fun."

### KEYS TO CREATING IN-PERSON AUDIENCES

■ **Listen:** Key to her success is Linda's interaction with potential readers. She listens to them, and she engages other attendees to share their thoughts as well as their stories.

■ **Take advantage of national and newsworthy days:** Linda takes advantage of National Jewelry Day, March 13, as a news hook and sends her flyers to libraries and women's organizations.

■ **Invest and expand:** Linda always asks for an honorarium, but if the venue cannot pay, she still conducts the workshop if they allow her to sell her books. She also brings along a sign-up sheet for readers to subscribe to her newsletter.

■ **Build a reputation:** One of Linda's goals is to build a reputation that encourages organizations to contact her and book her workshops, giving her more time to write. She recently received an email from one of her workshop attendees: "I forwarded your number to Avalon Women's Club, telling them you presented a dynamite program to our Brandeis group."

Do you use unique ways to promote your books? Please share it at [debra@debraborchert.com](mailto:debra@debraborchert.com)



**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*.

# THE WRITER'S BUSINESS PLAN

By Beth Dotson Brown

## *Plan.*

The word elicits songs of joy from some writers while others cover in a closet wearing headphones so they don't have to hear it. Add the word "business" in front, and reactions can get even more extreme.

Whatever your feelings about a business plan, savvy writers recognize it as a tool to help invest in themselves and reach their writing goals.

Authors Brionna Nwosu and Virginia McCullough recently shared details about their business plans and a few tips to help other writers avoid their mistakes while creating their own plan.

## **FIND WHERE YOU EXCEL**

Virginia McCullough worked with a small business adviser to launch her writing career. Her adviser helped her define her plans by building on what was working.

Before she finished her first nonfiction book (a project she coauthored with a health-care expert), Virginia wrote a proposal for a second book with another expert and landed that contract.

"It turned out I was good at working with various kinds of experts and expressing for them what they had trouble explaining to readers. And I loved this work!" Virginia said.

After identifying that, she decided to



offer services as a ghostwriter/book doctor/editor and created a five-year plan with specific steps that solidified her priorities.

"My current planning allows me to focus on fiction, while still helping others achieve their writing/publishing goals," she said.

Her writing business has since evolved to include writing fiction under her own name, but she still uses a five-year plan to propel her forward.

"Planning keeps us fresh and open to new possibilities," Virginia said. "It allows us to control the parts of publishing we can control—we can make a decision to start a newsletter or post on social media, even if we can't control a publisher's timeline. And the way we can plan is nothing if not flexible."

## **THINK OUTSIDE YOURSELF**

Brionna Nwosu began in a different place. She had a successful career in education but also wanted to write. In 2018 she set out to write her first book. The only problem? Her motivation was centered around herself and what she wanted—without broader marketplace considerations—and so she didn't complete her novel.

Before her next attempt, she created a business plan that took her audience into account.

"Now I'm focusing on the reader and how to make the book a good experience for the reader," she said. "What does the reader want?"

That change in attitude encouraged her to shift to learning to be a good storyteller. In fact, learning has been a significant part of Brionna's business plan. She pursued continuing education by participating in a writing group and through classes, but she takes classes only with people who have achieved what she's aiming for.

In 2020 Brionna completed her first novel and entered it in a contest where she was named a We Need Diverse Books Mentee in 2021. Her debut novel will be published this fall.

## **IDENTIFY WHAT YOU REALLY WANT**

Clarifying your writing goals is critical to creating a business plan. It's also important to understand why you want to write.

## FEATURE

“It’s about getting clear on what you actually want,” Brionna said. “The plan is your intention . . . what is your map of where you want to go?”

Along her journey, Brionna realized that though writing books was important to her, it wasn’t everything. She wanted a life that contained gentleness, kindness, joy, and beauty.

“I want to go help people and be with my kids,” she said. “I want to own a writing retreat . . . I want to own the space where the goal is beauty and creativity.”

### CHECK ON YOUR PROGRESS

Creating a business plan to build a writing career is all well and good, but it won’t be effective unless you actually follow it. Both Virginia and Brionna said they’ve developed ways to stay accountable.

For Brionna, being accountable means having friends who check in with her on a weekly basis about her progress—basically, they’re walking-talking deadline checkers.

Virginia keeps her goals specific so she can assess progress and track tangible markers of success.

A plan, whether it’s for one month, one year, or five years, can help you progress toward your vision with specific goals and check-ins along the way. It’s a way to invest in your own success and happiness, as these two writers have demonstrated.

### WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR YOUR LIFE AS A WRITER?

- What goals can help you achieve that?
- What strategies can move you forward toward those goals?
- How often will you assess your progress?
- How will you know if you are making progress?

**Resource:** <https://janefriedman.com/business-plans-for-writers/> (originally written December 3, 2013, and updated February 18, 2025): This helpful article includes steps for creating a plan and a visual example of how to organize the plan.



**Beth Dotson Brown** is an award-winning feature writer, short story author, playwright, and essayist who lives in Lancaster, KY. Her debut novel *Rooted in Sunrise* was published in 2024. She is the author of *Yes! I Am Catholic* and a contributor to *A Cup of Comfort for Breast Cancer Survivors*, *The Bandana Book*, and *Scenes from the Common Wealth*.

### LAY THE GROUNDWORK WITH AUTHOR AND WRITING COACH KATHRYN DODSON

I’m no stranger to business plans, having used them many times in my career as a city manager, chamber of commerce CEO, and executive at other businesses. Goals are an important part of a business plan; they lay the groundwork for where a business—or in this case, your writing career—will go.

#### Here are three important things to remember about goals:

- **Goals should be time-sensitive.** Whether you set annual goals or take a broader three- to five-year stance, timelines help you build out the strategies and tactics to achieve success.
  - **Goals must be appropriate for where you are.** If you just opened a restaurant, your goal shouldn’t be to earn a Michelin Star your first year in business. If you’ve just started writing your first book, publishing by the end of the year probably isn’t an appropriate goal. Likewise, you don’t want to set a goal that you don’t control. Getting an agent is not in your control, but pursuing traditional publishing is, and querying agents can be part of your business plan.
  - **Finally, it is critical that you come up with your own achievable goals.** Social media makes it easy to follow other writers who seem to have the success we want. The whole story is rarely visible in a post where a writer talks about getting an agent and landing a six-figure deal in six months. While that is possible, it is not probable. Don’t set yourself up for failure by copying others. Use your innate creativity to unlock your own goals.
- Goals are the top layer of the business plan. Beneath them you need a strategy, and under that you need the tactics you will use to achieve your goal.

#### Here are two examples.

##### EXAMPLE I:

**Goal:** Write a novel in six months.

**Strategy:** Write 667 words per day, five days per week (667 words x 120 days = 80,040 words).

##### Tactics:

- Put a small desk in the den to use as a writing area.
- Write for one to two hours on weekdays after the kids go to bed.
- Don’t edit as you write. Write only new words and fix the manuscript later.
- Turn Wi-Fi off on your computer when you’re writing. If you need to look something up, do it on your phone.
- If you get stuck on a word or a sentence or an idea, write “TK” (publishing/journalism speak for “to come”) in the manuscript, and fix it after the first draft is finished (TK is easy to search and won’t pop up as other words).

##### EXAMPLE II:

**Goal:** Increase orders of your book to 50 per month.

**Strategy:** Start advertising and marketing your novel.

##### Tactics:

- Do one newsletter swap per month.
- Run a three-day promo.  
Research the best promo sites for your genre.  
Apply.  
Advertise your promo to your list and on social media.
- Advertise on Facebook. (This goal works only if you already know how to run profitable Facebook ads. If not, an appropriate goal would be to learn to optimize Facebook ads.)
- Advertise on Amazon. (The same rules apply as with Facebook ads.)
- Attend one in-person event per month where you can sell your books (book fairs, etc.).

# THE JOYS AND PITFALLS OF BOOK SWAG

**Swag** is an all-encompassing term for promotional items that are given away in support of something. This year's 2025 Oscar swag given to nominees was worth \$200K. If only it could include your book!

By Sharon Ritchey

Once you've knifed open that new box of *your* books, taken in the fresh paper smell, held it to your heart, and cried when you read the dedication, a new reality hits. You're responsible for promoting and selling it.

And like your quirky secondary characters who support your main character's journey, your marketing and sales efforts should support your book sales. This means considering curated book swag such as bookmarks, stickers, or fun items related to your story or characters.

Swag is an all-encompassing term for promotional items that are given away in support of something. This year's 2025 Oscar swag given to nominees was worth \$200K. If only it could include your book! But spending that amount of money to hopefully have an Oscar-nominated star hold up an item and snap a picture is unrealistic.

## LET'S BE REAL ABOUT BOOK SWAG

### THE GOOD

- Fun and innovative giveaway items are useful to lure people to speak to you at events.
- Promotional items are a nice keepsake and a "thank you" for book club readers.
- Properly designed materials provide a way for readers to remember you and learn more about you, your work, and contact information.
- Items can be shared with other readers for excellent word-of-mouth marketing.
- Book swag can be given away instead of free (precious) copies of your book.
- Items can be included with review copies or sent as thank-you gifts.

### THE TRUTH

- You're paying for it.
- Poor quality swag will be thrown away. You're making pretty trash.
- You have to store it and move it to and from events.
- Non-paper items—mugs, coasters, and so on—require packaging and higher mailing costs. (Those low-cost adorable mugs with your book cover are breakable and take up more room than you planned.)

### WHAT, HOW, WHERE?

Before you click "buy now," take some time to consider how you intend to use book swag in your marketing plan.

Do you want to promote an individual book or do you want to promote yourself as an author? This isn't a trick question. You can do both. (And you can change your mind as you write more books.) However, understanding your author brand now saves time and money later.

Generally, your author website should be some version of your name—not your book—and this same concept can be applied to marketing. It allows for flexibility and expansion. In terms of promotional items that you have made, you could have a pop-up banner that is you as an author and smaller items for your books. Or you could have banners for your books and more generic bookmarks on you as an author. You could do a mix of both. The key is making a plan before you shop.



**POPULAR AND AFFORDABLE ITEMS FOR THE BIGGEST REACH (AND HOW TO SQUEEZE A LITTLE MORE OUT OF THEM)**

Think about swag you have collected or seen throughout the years from trade shows—a free pen from your bank, T-shirt from a sporting event, wedding favors, or job fair giveaways. What did you take—and more importantly, what did you keep?

Do you still use the Acme Repair chip clip or the We Buy Anything tape measure? Do you have a free bookmark tucked into your latest bedside reading or a cute sticker on your water bottle? Maybe you’ve saved an empty tin from branded mints and now keep buttons or coins inside.

Now think about the junk you took and tossed. What if you paid for all of that?

Ouch!

It’s easy to become swept away in book swag and the excitement of selling your new material. Don’t rush your selections. You can always buy more.

**HAVE A PLAN**

Before you begin ordering items, remember it all has to be designed. Even the simple act of putting your book cover on a bookmark requires layout.

- Have a scalable, high-quality image of your book or any images/logos you want to use.

- Create a QR code that brings people to where they can buy the book. Even better is to go to bitly.com and create a QR code that allows you to list multiple links or Linktree.com to create a link that brings readers to your website, newsletter, bookstore of choice, social media accounts, and so on.

**WHAT TO CHOOSE?**

Promotional marketing sites have dozens of ideas, but here are a few that authors agree work:

**Bookmarks:** Readers love bookmarks, and they are inexpensive, small, and can be printed on both sides. One side can be a nice image related to the book that the reader will want to save and use again. The other should have your QR code, website, social media, or other marketing content.

**TIP:** Choose the thickest paperweight or alternative material that you can afford. Nothing “hurts” more than someone taking a bookmark and then folding and slipping it into a pocket. That bookmark is destined for the trash, not your novel.

**Stickers:** Readers collect fun stickers. Make them large enough to include your website and think beyond your book cover. Does your story feature an animal, an interesting location, or object? For my novel *The Pelican Tide*, I have a sticker with a cartoon pelican that says, “Be a Pelican not a Pelican’t.” The stickers are popular with kids too. I’ve sold more than one book after a curious child asked a parent if they could have a sticker.

**Coasters:** Readers keep these on their desks and bedsides along with your book. If you have multiple titles you can create sets.

**Postcards:** This may seem like an oversized bookmark, but the larger area gives you more marketing space. If you leave one side blank, you can write a personal message. The additional size allows you to add reviews or short descriptions of what the book is about.

**Bookplate Stickers:** A personalized bookplate that you can sign and send to a reader if you can’t sign in person adds a special touch to a book.

**BEYOND PAPER**

If you have the budget, it’s nice to offer more substantial promotional items. *The Pelican Tide* features a hot sauce competition, so I give away mini bottles of Tabasco sauce. Kristin Owens offers a swag package for her book *Elizabeth Sails* that includes a metal bookmark in an anchor shape and a charm bracelet related to the story. Christine Gunderson packages her debut *Friends with Secrets* in a reusable drawstring blue mesh bag with a bookmark. With a little brainstorming, it’s easy to find bulk, low-cost items related to your story that readers will appreciate and keep.

**A WORD ABOUT FOOD**

I’m sure you’ve seen beautiful book-launch cakes, pies, cookies, candies, and cupcakes that feature book covers. If that’s your passion, celebrate your amazing launch but steer clear of these items for promotions. The moment someone pops a delicious treat into their mouth, it’s gone and then the wrapper is tossed forever. The only exception is tins of mints, as no one eats an entire container in one sitting.

**THOUGHTS ON DESIGN**

Most online vendors have easy-to-use design tools that allow you to drag and drop images. They often have templates and free art. Remember: Don’t cut and paste images that you don’t own or aren’t listed as free to use. That’s plagiarism.

Keep your designs simple: Use one set of fonts and repeat images to create a cohesive brand. Once your material is printed, share the images on social media and on your website!

Book swag can be a lot of fun to create and to give away. Ultimately the goal is to sell your novel and build your brand. Keep this in mind and you won’t go wrong.

**WHERE TO DESIGN AND BUY BOOK SWAG**

This is a short list of online vendors. Many offer coupon codes and regular discounts. If you’re on a tight budget, start with one item and wait for the offer that is sure to follow.

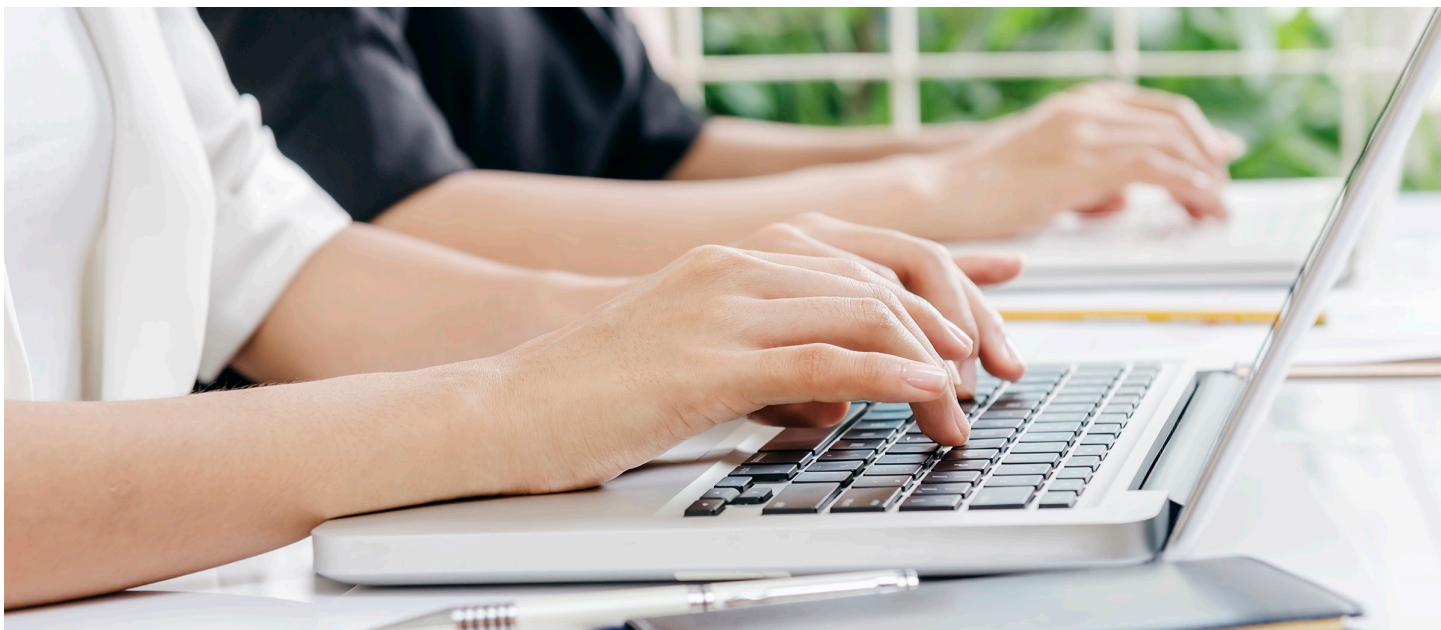
- Canva.com
- Gotprint.com
- Jukeboxprint.com
- Moo.com
- Printplace.com
- 4imprint.com
- 48hourprint.com

**In-person resources**

- Staples
- UPS Store
- FedEx store



**Sharon Ritchey** has 30 years of promotional and marketing experience. She is a former WFWA VP of Communications and serves as the *WriteOn!* editorial advisor. Her novel *The Pelican Tide* written as Sharon J. Wishnow, is her debut.



## THE BUSINESS OF CO-WRITING

When people find out that Ali Brady is actually two people, they often have a lot of questions (especially if those people are writers).

The act of writing is so personal, some can't imagine letting another person—even their best friend—in on the process. But for others, writing feels so isolating that the idea of collaborating with a partner sounds like a dream.

And for the right team and the right circumstances, it can be!

Keep reading for answers to some of our most frequently asked questions—from the logistics to the creative considerations and the realities of the business partnership.

### HOW DID YOU TWO MEET?

Our “meet cute,” as we call it, happened during a WFWA workshop. The way I usually tell it, I did a little light online stalking of Bradeigh. She was in another group within the workshop, but I read her samples and was really impressed. When the opportunity to swap pages for a critique came up a few months later, I jumped at the chance!

We started by reading fifty pages for each other, and we instantly hit it off. We both loved each other's style of writing—and the way we critiqued, which is really important. Soon we graduated to critique partners. I was so excited when Bradeigh called me her CP, I put that title under her name in my phone. (It's still there.) Our friendship grew as well, and the evolution to cowriters felt really natural. I honestly think it worked so well because we had been reading and critiquing each other's work for years. Plus, we both had a lot of respect and were fans of the other.

### SINCE THERE ARE TWO OF YOU, IS THERE HALF AS MUCH WORK?

You would think so, but there isn't! While it is nice that we can divide and conquer some of the jobs, there's quite a bit more work when it comes to the actual collaboration. We spend a lot of time talking about everything from writerly topics like plotting, character development, or writing synopses to the business aspects like social media, marketing, and publicity. We also edit each other's work. That back-and-forth process can slow things down, but it's nice having a built-in editor who knows the story as well as you do!

### HOW DOES IT WORK LOGISTICALLY?

We've done a few panels with other co-writing teams and are always surprised to hear that everyone does it a little differently. (Married co-authors Emily

Wibberley and Austin Siegmund-Broka literally sit at the computer together; another writing duo trades off with one person writing a full draft and the other revising it.)

Bradeigh and I each take the lead on one POV character, and we're responsible for that character. We spend a lot of time in the beginning plotting the story and working on the character's emotional arc. When it's time to write, we usually have a chapter-a-week schedule. We each write our chapter, and then we swap and edit the other's chapter. So at the end of the day, we've both touched and influenced every single page.

Once a week we have a Zoom meeting to go over the previous chapters, talk about what's coming next, if there need to be any changes, and all the business/marketing/promo stuff that comes along with writing.

## WRITING TOGETHER

### DO YOU EVER DISAGREE?

Of course! As much as we joke about sharing a brain, we each have our own ideas about how we imagine specific things. When conflict comes up, a few different things happen. Sometimes it makes us realize that we haven't explained something as clearly as it is in our head. And often we'll talk about it and come up with an idea or a solution that's even stronger than it was originally.

Bradeigh also had an idea that we've only had to use once: Each of us gets one veto per project, a change that we feel strongly about, no questions asked.

### DO YOU HAVE THE SAME AGENT?

Bradeigh and I both had our own agents before we started writing together (and had each published solo books), so our agents work together and co-agent us as Ali Brady. It's actually been really nice. They can play "good cop, bad cop" with our publisher (don't tell!), and they each have their own connections and relationships, which can double the opportunities for us.

### WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO USE A PEN NAME?

We chose to use a pen name for a few different reasons. First, because we wanted our Ali Brady books to be their own brand. We each write different genres under our own names: Bradeigh has two thriller novels, and I have two books that are pure women's fiction (without the elements of romance). The second is a logistical reason. If we used both of our names—Alison Hammer and Bradeigh Godfrey—the search platforms would look at that as one name. So it might not come up in the system if people just searched for Bradeigh. (This is similar to the reason my editor wanted me to use the word "and" instead of an ampersand in the title of my debut novel, *You and Me and Us*.) Discoverability and searchability are important!

**TWO BRAINS WORKING TOGETHER ARE BETTER THAN TWO BRAINS WORKING SEPARATELY, MEANING OUR IDEAS AREN'T JUST ADDED TOGETHER, THEY'RE MULTIPLIED.**

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### HOW DOES THE MONEY STUFF WORK? AND TAXES?

With our traditionally published books, everything is accounted for separately. The publishing company sends half of the money to each of our agencies, then our agents take their 15% and send the rest to us. (That's the standard practice with traditional publishing.) We recently dipped our toes into the self-publishing waters, and for that we opened a joint account where our revenue is deposited, and then we use that for expenses like touring, swag, or ads.

### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BEST PARTS OF WRITING TOGETHER?

Bradeigh said something once that I call back on often: Two brains working together are better than two brains working separately, meaning our ideas aren't just added together, they're multiplied. The experience of co-creating a story world and characters sparks new ideas and builds in ways that wouldn't happen if we were working on our own. We each bring our own strengths to the partnership, push and challenge each other, and serve as built-in editors and critique partners.

It also helps having another person to lean on when things get tough. There have been a few times when Bradeigh had to pick up the slack for me when I was struggling with burnout from work, and I've done the same for her.

And on a personal level, it's pretty great having someone who is just as excited as you are about your wins (like when we hit the *USA Today* bestseller list!) and who is just as disappointed by all the frustrations that come with

publishing. And since we live in different cities, we love the opportunity to tour together and see each other at events.

### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES OF WRITING TOGETHER?

Writing with another person takes a lot of communication and compromise; you can't get too stuck on your own ideas because you need to be a team. But a lot of the challenges honestly end up becoming strengths. The moments when we each have a different idea for something, we usually end up getting to a better place than we were before. Also, flights are expensive, and we don't have unlimited vacation days, so we can't always do every event together that we want to or get together as often as we'd like. Another challenge can be the pace that we each write, if one is slower or faster than the other. But it helps that we set a schedule and do our best to stick to it.

### WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR OTHERS WHO ARE THINKING ABOUT WRITING WITH A PARTNER?

We got this piece of advice from one (two?) of our writing idols, another BFF writing duo, Christina Lauren. They said to remember why we got into this and to make sure that we set aside time to focus on our friendship. Once you start working together you become business partners, and that can change the dynamic, but it's important to put effort into your friendship, too.

Publishing can be hard and books will come and go, but your friendship will hopefully outlast it all.



**Alison Hammer** (right) half of the writing duo Ali Brady, the USA TODAY bestselling author of romantic, heartwarming, funny novels including *The Beach Trap* and *Battle of the Bookstores*. Their books have been "best of summer" picks by *The Washington Post*, *Parade*, and Katie Couric Media. Alison is also a creative director, founder of The Artists Against Antisemitism, and the author of *You and Me and Us* and *Little Pieces of Me*. She lives in Chicago.



## FOUR CONNECTIONS THAT REVIVE A SAGGING MIDDLE

By Nancy Wayson Dinan

Many novelists dread “the sagging middle,” when the exhilaration of the inciting incident is mostly over, and readers haven’t yet reached the thrill of the end. Luckily, when you find yourself bogged down by a middle section, there are four connections you can make to eliminate momentum killers.

### CONNECT TO YOUR CHARACTER’S JOURNEY: HOW DOES YOUR CHARACTER GET EMOTIONALLY FROM A TO Z?

At every point in the writing process, always remember: Readers will care about your story because they care about your character and are experiencing the story through their eyes. In the middle section of the novel, your conflict should be escalating and complicating. As readers, we need to see a novel’s protagonist endure internal and external conflict in order to change.

Take a moment to think about your character’s identity throughout the middle portions of your story. How does your character go from point A to point B and then from point B to point C? What’s the best description of your protagonist during each phase?

In *Story Engineering*, Larry Brooks posits that a protagonist’s identity must have distinct emotional shifts throughout a story’s four acts. For example, if your character started off as clueless and by the end is smart, what different iterations does she undergo in the middle section of your book? Perhaps it’s clueless, scared, angry, and, finally, smart—the choice is yours, but the key is figuring out what makes sense for your story.

**TRY IT OUT:** How do you depict your character throughout your book’s in-between sections? Identify the best description of your protagonist’s emotional state in each section and then lean into that: What does your character need to do to transition between them?

### CONNECT TO CAUSE AND EFFECT: HOW DOES ONE EVENT IN YOUR STORY LEAD TO THE NEXT?

There’s a famous video of Matt Stone and Trey Parker, of *South Park* fame, telling NYU students about the importance of linking scenes with “so then” or “but” instead of “and then.” If one of your scenes happens *and then* another scene happens, you don’t have a strong chain of cause and effect.

## CRAFT CORNER

It will be important for you to go back to figure out the link between your scenes. A chain of cause and effect is one of the key differences between a series of events and a story.

It's also important to note that there's a difference between the "so then" and "but then" beats in your story:

■ Usually, the "so then" beats occur when a character is taking some new information or new event and making a decision to act.

■ The "but then" beats are the events that occur because a character has taken an action.

For example, let's say your character's car has been towed, and she needs to get to work. The "so then" beat—the decision beat—depicts her deciding to take a cab instead. The "but then" beat—the outcome beat—often throws a wrench in the protagonist's plan. Here, maybe the cab driver is our protagonist's former high school bully, someone she's long avoided. When she gets into the cab, she's going to have to make another decision: Will she let the driver know she recognizes him? This decision will become the next "so then" beat in your story.

One significant caveat: While you want to connect each scene to the next with a clear chain of cause and effect, some scenes might have multiple things happening, and some effects might not be seen until much later.

**TRY IT OUT:** Look for the chain of cause and effect in your story. Have you achieved a "so then" or do you need to find a better point of connection? Once you master this, you'll return to the essence of what keeps your readers turning pages.

### CONNECT TO CHARACTER REACTION: HOW ARE EVENTS CHANGING WHAT YOUR CHARACTER BELIEVES OR HOW THEY ACT?

One of the most common issues I see in first drafts is the protagonist's lack of reaction to an event in the story (the "so then").

When something major happens, readers want to see the protagonist processing that development. This is particularly important when the reader is supposed to be piecing clues together to solve one of the story's mysteries. If the protagonist finds a clue, make sure that the protagonist's reaction allows the reader to understand what that clue means.

This is a move that Netflix series *Stranger Things* does well: We see characters pick up a clue and experience a revelation. When Winona Ryder's character picks up her son's doodles and assembles them, the show makes sure viewers know she's just realized the doodles are actually a map.

**TRY IT OUT:** At every point in your story, consider how your character is affected. Does the event give the character new information? Does it affect their choices or emotions?



**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.

Does it change something about their actions? These are the character thoughts you need to include on the page.

### CONNECT TO PACING: HOW QUICKLY ARE YOUR READERS TURNING PAGES?

There's a screenwriting principle (one of many!) that applies to fiction, and especially to middles: in late, out early. Basically, we want the scene to start as close to the action as possible and we want to leave the scene before we have complete resolution.

One trick I've seen work really well to quicken the pacing in a sagging middle is to move the last page of one chapter to the beginning of the next. The reader wants to find out the resolution to the previous event. By moving the page to the next chapter, you're wrapping up that resolution alongside the next plot development.

Conversely, slowing down strategically can also *increase* tension. When a previously fast-paced narrative slows—concentrating on moment-by-moment detail—the reader knows to pay attention.

Think about the battle scene in *The Return of the King* when Faramir rides to Osgiliath while his father feasts, or the scene in *Die Hard* when Hans Gruber falls from Nakatomi Tower. In both cases, the action slows so that the viewer can see every detail.

**TRY IT OUT:** Shorter scenes increase story momentum, contributing to a propulsion from one page to the next. If you're reading your scenes and find yourself growing bored, take a step back to ask: Is it possible to compress those scenes while still maintaining the integrity of your story?

In truth, once you've mastered these writing tricks there's no reason to dread writing the middle section of the novel. By connecting to the character's journey, your chain of cause and effect, your character's reaction, and your pacing, you can keep readers turning pages all the way to the end and keep the magic of your story alive.

### SUGGESTED READING:

■ *Story* by Robert McKee

This is a screenwriting book to which I repeatedly return and always learn something new. For story design and pacing, I especially recommend chapter 7, "The Substance of Story." In this chapter, McKee fully develops his idea of the gap between expectation and result, and he also discusses conflict, risk, and the components of a strong protagonist.

■ *Story Engineering* by Larry Brooks

This book was recommended to me by another WFWA member, and it's quickly become one of my favorites. For character issues in the middle of your novel, I especially recommend reading Chapter 13, "Interior vs. Exterior Conflict," and Chapter 14, "Crafting a Character Arc."

# AUTHOR PROFILE: LAUREN PARVIZI

**C**ongratulations to Lauren Parvizi, winner of the 2024 STAR Award in the debut category for her novel *La Vie, According to Rose*. We caught up with Lauren to learn more about what she's working on now, where she gets her ideas, and the journey to her first novel.

By Brittany Clair

**WO: Tell us about your involvement in WFWA and how it felt to win the STAR Award for your debut novel.**

**Lauren:** I've been a member of WFWA for ages, and thus I've enjoyed many of the organization's resources, including webinars, multi-week workshops, the tenth anniversary conference in Chicago, and, for a time, a WFWA-matched critique group. But my favorite part of WFWA is the deep connections you make with other writers along the way. I think that's why it was so special to win the STAR Award for *La Vie, According to Rose*. Not only did this book benefit from things like the Grabbing the Reader workshop offered by WFWA, but I was able to share in the excitement with so many of my women's fiction writer friends and colleagues.

**WO: You already have a second book out! Tell us about *Trust Me on This*.**

**Lauren:** *Trust Me on This* is the story of two mismatched half sisters forced together on a West Coast road trip to see their ailing father who has something to share that he'll tell them only in person. One sister is a culinary consultant who prefers her solitary life in the kitchen to the company of human beings, and the other is a much younger, bubbly Hollywood starlet who's facing a serious career scandal. Their drive is filled with many of the antics you would expect from a buddy road trip tale, but it's also a deeply emotional story about family, scars, and what it really means to trust. I can't seem to write light without adding in the heavy stuff too!



**I'M A BIG BELIEVER IN CREATIVE INTUITION, SO I FEEL STRONGLY THAT OUR SUBCONSCIOUS MIND IS DOING ALL SORTS OF INCREDIBLE THINGS AS WE GO ABOUT OUR DAILY BUSINESS, READING BOOKS, TAKING IN NEWS STORIES, DISCOVERING NEW PLACES AND PEOPLE, AND SO ON.**

## FEATURE

**WO:** You previously worked as a digital editor and content writer. What did you do in these roles? How and why did you transition to fiction?

**Lauren:** I actually began my MFA prior to working as a digital producer and content writer and then continued to work while I got my degree at night, so these paths ran parallel for many years. As a digital editor and writer, I created daily content for various news sites. Sometimes this meant writing original stories or editing personal essays. Other times I had to quickly aggregate a story from various sources or create a sponsored article, which essentially is a kind of marketing copy. But after freelancing part-time, raising a toddler full-time, and writing and querying a book, I finally hit a wall at the end of 2020. (I know, who didn't, right?) I was fortunate enough to have the ability (namely thanks to my husband's salary and health insurance) to pause my day job, and so I did. I got my agent in 2021, and the momentum has kept me going from there.

**WO:** Where do you get your story ideas from?

**Lauren:** I'm a big believer in creative intuition, so I feel strongly that our subconscious mind is doing all sorts of incredible things as we go about our daily business, reading books, taking in news stories, discovering new places and people, and so on. Some magical mix of all these things—with a dash of childhood experiences and inspirations—creates a germ of an idea. For me, once that takes root I make a more conscious effort to explore whether that idea can sustain a book, and whether I'm the right person to write that book. But it all starts with a mysterious seed trying to push its way through the subconscious.

**WO:** What's something on the business side of publishing that you enjoy doing?

**Lauren:** It's such a joy to work with a team of experts to bring a book to life. Talking about your vision for the story, ideas you have for the cover, and, yes, even coming up with clever marketing copy, are thrilling parts of the process. I also genuinely love learning about the inner workings of an industry I was stuck for so long peering at from the outside.

**WO:** If you could outsource one business-related task, what would it be?

**Lauren:** Social media. Next question. ;)

**WO:** What's your biggest piece of advice for members in the earlier stages of their careers?

**Lauren:** Cultivate friendships, take breaks when you need them, and most importantly, don't quit! As long as you keep going and keep the right people by your side, anything is possible.



A flight to Paris from SFO at the end of July cost \$1,300. High this year. I wrote down the number in my worn Moleskine notebook.

Recording fares felt like writing in code. A diary with nothing but numbers and dates spelling out my secret hope. The notebook had become sacred, a place to go when work and family and memories of Dad were both too much and too little, proof that escape was a plane ride away.

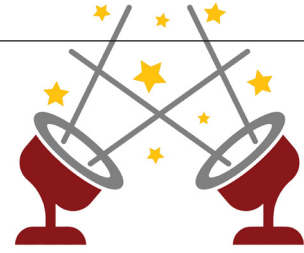
In the beginning, I'd tracked fares to all sorts of major cities—Istanbul, Dublin, Prague, Stockholm, Barcelona—but eventually I chose Paris. If I could have one trip, that's where I would go.

The City of Light.

What a cliché, right? Sad, single, unsatisfied woman goes to Paris and finds joy, passion, herself. But the cliché was kind of the point. Who didn't want a happy ending?

I tucked my Moleskine back into the wicker bookcase where I'd kept it since college and abandoned the cocoon of my living room for the kitchen. The rich scent of sautéed onions and garlic filled the space. The smell always made me think of Dad standing at the stove wearing his Persian rice, rice baby apron we'd gifted him for Christmas one year. Mom still had it hanging in her kitchen, the fabric stained with yellow splotches of saffron and tomato spatters faded pink.

**Lauren Parvizi** is the author of *Trust Me on This* and *La Vie, According to Rose*, winner of the 2024 Women's Fiction Writers Association STAR Award in the Debut category. She worked for more than a decade as a digital editor and content writer and earned an MFA from San Francisco State University. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and sons.



## **KATHRYN DODSON ON REINVENTING HERSELF**

Eight years ago, Kathy Dodson volunteered for her first job with WFWA and has never looked back. She's held positions from Vice President of Finance to reader for the STAR Award, and this year, she's hoping to work on the scholarship auction again.

"It's an incredible community that offers learning and friendship in equal measure," she said.

Kathy is most proud of two tangible organizational improvements she helped engineer. First, she was integral in launching the D&I committee and then oversaw hiring a consultant to integrate the new inclusion policies into the organization. Second, she played a crucial role in creating the first paid position in WFWA.

"Hiring an executive director shifted some of the administrative burden off the board so they could focus on member-related initiatives," Kathy said.

Kathy's ability to lead such initiatives in WFWA is aided by her professional experience. She holds an MBA and has held various positions, from a city manager to a chamber of commerce CEO. These days she writes various types of fiction and consistently publishes two to three novels a year.

"It was as if the words had built up over all that time working," she said.

When the Southern California resident isn't volunteering or writing, she meets regularly with her WFWA-



matched critique group and works as a book coach. (Check out her expert notes on how to strategically plan your writing goals in "The Writer's Business Plan" article on page 17.)

Kathy has spent nearly a decade reaping the rewards of the organization, and she encourages unpublished authors to take advantage of everything WFWA has to offer to grow a writing career like she's managed.

"WFWA helps people turn the solo endeavor of writing into a support system of advice, education, and friendships," she said.

**Kathy Dodson** is an author, book coach, and world traveler. She writes about intriguing women in captivating places who become their own heroes. She loves travel, fiery food, hanging out with the neighbors in the front yard on Friday evenings, and reading. She grew up writing and riding horses in far West Texas. She graduated from SMU in English/Creative Writing and went on to get an MBA from Thunderbird and a PhD from Clemson.

**Just know that  
everyone's  
writing is terrible.**

Until it's not.

No one's stuff is  
right immediately.

You gotta work it.  
Refine it. Shape it.  
Spend time with it.

It's a relationship.

Between you and  
what comes from you.

– Ava DuVernay