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# The Writer

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# Prologue

*“If writers were too wise, perhaps no books would get written at all.  
It might be better to ask yourself ‘Why?’ afterward than before...  
There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you.”*

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON



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# No fear

I FIRST THOUGHT ABOUT WRITING a novel back in high school. It's decades later, and although I've written plenty of nonfiction in my career as a magazine editor, I haven't written a single paragraph of a novel.

If you and I, fellow writers, were having coffee or a beer together, I'd reveal why. *Fear*.

Like Frank Herbert wrote in *Dune*: "Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration."

I've let fear obliterate any action on my part to write a novel. Obliterate might not be the right word. The image that comes to mind is being bound in a straitjacket.

Not long ago, I gained some insight into this problem when I interviewed Eric Potterat, Ph.D., for a magazine article. Dr. Potterat is a clinical psychologist who specializes in performance.

"It's a threat mindset," Potterat declared, explaining fears that stall or kill action. "A threat mindset occurs when we face obstacles and barriers, whether they're real or imagined."

A threat mindset, he added, can produce fears with varying levels of intensity.

"Those of us who are really going to have a hard time with a threat mindset are those who perceive an obstacle or adversity as a threat to their reputation. They don't want to take risks because they're worried about their ego."

"No kidding?" I replied, knowing he just diagnosed me.

A threat mindset's opposite, Potterat said, is the challenge mindset.

"A challenge mindset is like, 'Hey, I just want to do this new thing. It's a challenge. It's nothing more than a challenge. And I'm going to give my best effort to accomplish it.'"

Potterat explained how the threat

mindset typically creeps into life when we're past the age of 5.

"When kids get socialized, they tend to vector into a threat mindset," Potterat said. "But before this socialization process, the challenge mindset is natural to them."

Weirdly enough, I am given an example in real time – thank you, universe! – while writing this column from the observation deck of a kids' gymnastics program. My daughter, Maddie, who is 5, just launched into a handstand, propped upside-down against a cushioned wall. She's amidst dozens of other kids, her coaches, and a bunch of gawking parents pressed up against a big window. She had no fear at all. All challenge mindset.

What's a long-socialized adult to do?

Potterat replied, "You want the overarching mindset of: 'Hey look, this

is a challenge, and it isn't a threat, and I want to go beyond my comfort zone just a little bit. So I'll think of each approaching obstacle as a challenge – and an opportunity to get out of my comfort zone and see what I can do.'"

He paused, then added: "That's it."

That's it! I'm in. Time to get out of my comfort zone and write a first novel. And I could use some help: If you'd like to join forces with me and go beyond your writing comfort zone this year – whether it's a novel, a play, a memoir, an essay – send me an email, and we'll start our own online support and accountability group. We'll get some work done and have some fun doing it.

**T.J. Murphy**

EDITOR

tmurphy@madavor.com



# Charlotte Brontë

Celebrate Charlotte Brontë's birthday with a gift to a literary friend. Or yourself.

## 1. Thornfield Sweatshirt

Thornfield, home of Edward Fairfax Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, proudly displayed on this machine-washable sweatshirt. \$31.99, [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Celebrating the April birthday of English novelist, Charlotte Brontë, 1816-1855.

## 2. Made to Order Jewelry

Captured from *Jane Eyre* in 925 silver, Brontë's words, "I am no bird, and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you." \$49 and up, [etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com)

## 3. Pajama Set

For lounging or sleeping, pre-shrunk 100-percent cotton literary pajamas. \$46.79, [cafepress.com](https://www.cafepress.com)



## 4. Blanket of Words

For your bed, your couch, or you, a throw blanket designed with a book cover. \$61.45, [redbubble.com](https://www.redbubble.com)



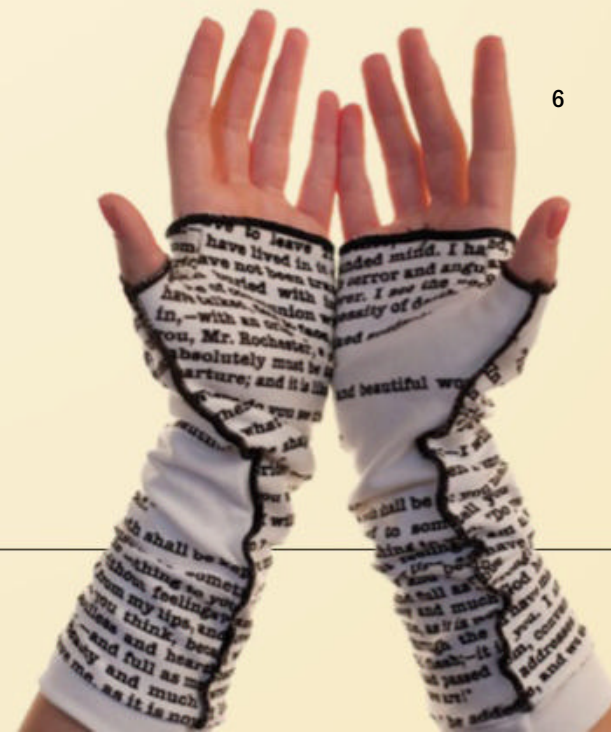
## 5. Cocktail Glasses

Perfect for a toast to the completion of a writing project. A set of two 11-ounce glasses. One includes text from *Jane Eyre*, the second (bonus!) text from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. \$30, [uncommongoods.com](https://www.uncommongoods.com)



## 6. Writing Gloves

Fingerless gloves to keep your arms warm (and inspiring) while you write. \$29, [etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com)



## Flash Characterizations

Excerpted from his new book, *The Art of Brevity*, NaNoWriMo's Grant Faulkner shows you how to push your characters to the hilt when you're writing flash fiction.

By Grant Faulkner

*"I love the idea that every character you ever write has a secret they're whispering to you. Sometimes those secrets are revealed to the reader."*

—*Sherrie Flick*

CHARACTERIZATION PRESENTS A challenge in writing flash fiction, especially if you're the sort of writer who likes to delve into a character's background, assemble lists of character traits, and put your character through personality tests. E. M. Forster laid out the conventional ground rules for such characterization in his famous book *Aspects of the Novel*. "Round characters" are fully dimensional, nuanced, and capable of surprise, he said, whereas "flat characters" are two-dimensional and relatively uncomplicated.

"Round characters" are deemed necessary in a novel, in particular, because the reader wants to have the full sense of a character, to know their inner and outer lives. Our general reverence for psychological realism in fiction places a heavy burden on characterization. A writer tends to be expected to give a maximum amount of information about a character – showing how the character walks and talks and how the past contains the motives for all present-day behavior.

Because of the condensed space of flash fiction, though, the idea of a fully rounded character is not viable. A detailed backstory is an anathema to flash because you'll be tempted to stuff all of

the more you've conjured into the story. In flash fiction, we see characters only in "fleeting profile," according to Irving Howe. We likely won't know where they were born, if they went to college, or whatever neurosis they might have developed due to a childhood trauma because we know them only in the seizure of a moment, not in a dramatically arching plot line. We hear a line of their flute solo but not the orchestra they play in.

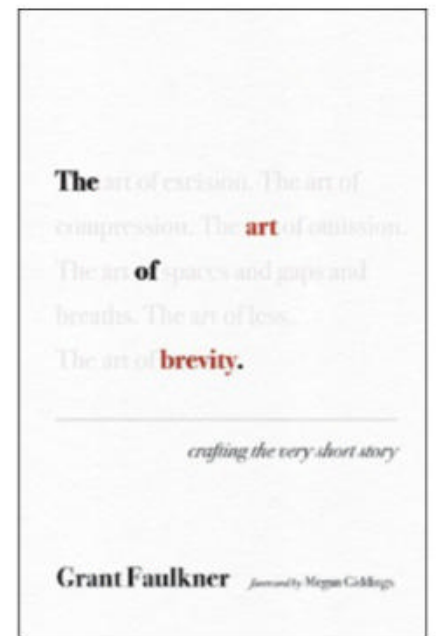
It's important to realize that a character doesn't have to necessarily be a simulation of a person in real life in flash fiction – they just have to suggest a full person through hints and the most telling of details. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* author Milan Kundera says a character need only to fill "the whole space of the situation" and in the case of flash fiction, that situation is a situation within a situation, you might say – the situation can be a single moment, a single burst. Instead of thinking about characterization through conventional window dressing, we need to only think about getting to the bottom of a character's existential crux, in other words. To their essence.

In fact, flash characters can even exist more toward the flatter end of Forster's characterization spectrum. In her essay "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale," Kate Bernheimer talks about the function of "flatness" in the traditional fairy tale. "Fairy-tale characters are silhouettes, mentioned simply because they are there. They are not given many

emotions – perhaps one, such as happy or sad – and they are not in psychological conflict." Fairy tale characters break Forster's rule of round characters, but this flatness is desirable, Bernheimer says, because it "allows depth of response in the reader."

National Book Award finalist Carmen Maria Machado notes how flash fiction borrows from this style of characterization. "It is, by definition, short; it leaves things out, it relies on inference. It doesn't necessarily have psychological flatness, per se – though it can look like that, sometimes, depending on the story – but possesses missing details (the right missing details) and flatness (the right kind of flatness) that creates a vacuum that begs to be filled."

Still, while flat descriptors might work for some pieces, other pieces need more illustration and "roundness" to work. One way to get to the heart of a quick, telling characterization is to consider what is different about your character and how that difference is crucial to the storyline (it's best not to expand into anything extraneous just for the sake of characterization). Instead of going for the surface description of telling





what the character looks like or how the character walks, find that piercing, revealing detail that tells the essence of their character.

We all feel singular in some way. I'll venture to say that we all feel apart to varying degrees, no matter how much we might try to belong. So if you're writing the story about a vampire, what is it that makes your vampire different from other vampires (and different from vampire stereotypes)? How does your vampire want to belong (or not belong)? Perhaps your vampire bites their fingernails. Or perhaps your vampire mumbles and slumps their shoulders. Cutting against the grain of expectations to reveal a character's essence is one way to capture the fleeting profile of your character.

So nurture an irreverence of banality, a disdain for the ordinary. Don't be complacent. A complacent author creates complacent characters, characters content to exist in generalities, cliches, and stereotypes. Does anyone in the world feel their existence as a stereotype? Don't we all feel ourselves as unique, as somehow apart from others, as a being unto ourselves, full of nuances and contradictions and secrets and impulses and . . . the wonderful and sometimes horrible messiness of being a human?

It takes effort to unveil a hidden truth, to bring a reader face-to-face with an arresting or even dangerous encounter. A writer of brevity has to paint characters in deft brushstrokes, with the keenest of images in such limited space, in order to capture their essence. You're not mirroring life so much as showing life. Your character's background, all that makes them who they are, matters less than their immediate impact on the reader in that dash of words on the page.

If story is character and character is story, ask yourself what is the most

vital character trait to tell the story you're writing?

### **Flashpoint: You're the kind of person who . . .**

I once listened to an episode of the *WTF* podcast with Marc Maron, and when his guest, David Cross, came on, he started giving Maron a hard time by building a farcical and damning characterization of Maron by riffing on the phrase, "You're the kind of person who \_\_\_\_." He repeated the phrase, each time filling in the blank with a damning characterization that made Maron seem more and more pathetic and questionable (humorously so). Each repetition of "You're the kind of person who \_\_\_\_" provided the opportunity to reveal something outside our expectations and experience of Maron. So, ironically, the "kind of person" frame really served to show how Maron was his own kind of singular mess.

I thought this would make a good characterization exercise for two reasons:

- 1) It serves as practice for capturing a character through dramatic traits, and
- 2) It helps you work at building a story through character details.

So, think of a character. Brainstorm some character traits. Push them to the hilt. Write seven sentences, each one beginning with, "She/He/They is the kind of person who \_\_\_\_." See if each character trait can surprise in some way. You'll not only end up with seven piercing character observations, but you might also end up with a story if each line escalates to the next, building a narrative. 📖

*Grant Faulkner is the executive director of NaNoWriMo. The article is excerpted from his new book, The Art of Brevity: The Art of Crafting The Very Short Story, published by University of New Mexico Press. His works include Pep Talks for Writers: 52 Insights and Actions to Boost Your Creative Mojo and Brave the Page, a teen writing guide. For more info, visit [grantfaulkner.com](http://grantfaulkner.com).*



**This book is available from Amazon in both Kindle and paperback versions.**

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*Who is Ron Doe and will he ever awaken?*

When a secretive new corporate client seeks help from memory therapist Doctor Steffi Blake to pull one of their colleagues out of a profound coma, she hesitates at first. The circumstances are highly unusual: the patient is identified only as "Ron Doe" and they offer her a fortune if she succeeds. Reviving a comatose patient by stirring up dormant memories would be groundbreaking, so she accepts--as much for the professional challenge as the much-needed cash. But a revolutionary new technology that lets her scan peoples' minds and display the memories on a screen soon draws her and her associates into a labyrinth of intrigue, deceit, and murder. And throughout all this, Steffi is trying hard to recover her *own* lost memories ...

## Dog Tags

Read the grand-prize winner of our 500-Word Essay Contest.

By Michelle Y. Green

TONIGHT, I FOUND MY FATHER'S dog tags.

I'd stolen a dusty keepsake box from my mother's house. The tags lay tangled beneath yellowed newspaper clippings, forgotten tie-tacks, and a large-caliber bullet. What surprised me was that I did not cry.

Hewn from the coal mining mountains of Kentucky, Dad had boarded a bus to Tuskegee with \$3 in his pocket to become a colored flyer.

"We had a job to do, so we did it. We called ourselves The 100 Percenters."

Hollywood and presidents have extolled the deeds of these extraordinary men. But my memories are in the quiet things.

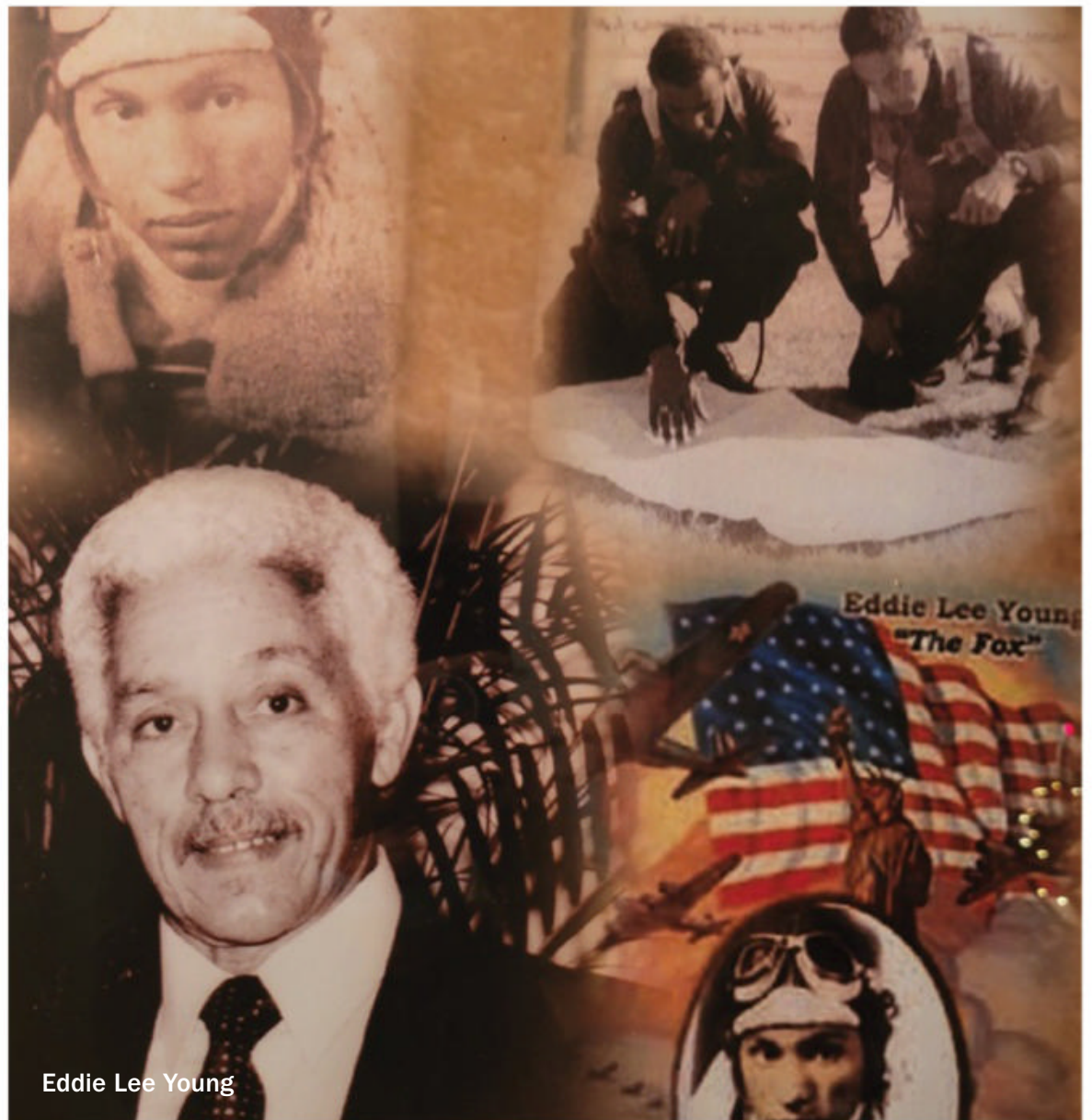
Dad shaved with a straight-edged razor from Daddy John, who, covered with coal dust, cut hair on the side. I loved to watch Dad lather his face, cut around the cleft of his chin, and then – the splash of Old Spice. Whistling, he dabbed the waxy polish from the Kiwi tin and spit-shined his shoes until he could see his face in his shoe tops. He complained that the seams on his socks hurt his toes yet pinned on his many-colored ribbons, adjusted his hat, and left for the day.

I did not cry when I found his dog tags, but I have cried many times since. World War II, Korea, and Vietnam took a toll on him, and on us. He smuggled his weapons home – a military-issued pistol and a dagger with a skull clenching a blood-soaked knife. He had a hair-trigger temper. A high school friend saved me from suicide.

In his last days, Dad put me behind the wheel of his Porsche and asked me to take him to Kentucky one final time. When I was 16, he had taught me to "slide into fifth" on Lackland's flight line. For mere mortals, the trip to Jenkins would have been an eight-hour drive – especially through the winding mountain roads behind overloaded coal trucks. But when we got to 81

South, he told me to "sting the gun!" We smelled coal dust and whispering pines in six hours.

There was nothing left of Holler Number Five. The state had cleaved his mountain home to make a new highway. We were unaware that we would witness the ribbon cutting. As my father mourned, I looked high into the mountaintop to see a single



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHELLE Y. GREEN

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tire, painted in white. It was Daddy John's custom to paint white tires to decorate the mountainside behind their house.

Dad took the wheel and unburdened himself on the trip home. He knew I would write the truth when the time came – about the body snatches, the kill counts, the stalking Special Ops Groups, the comrades absent from the black marble wall back home.

It has taken me years of mining memories, combing through personal



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effects, running the gauntlet of government red tape, and tear-soaked pillows to feel ready.

I am writing his story. My deepest regret is that, although I hear his voice clearly, he will not be here to read it. 📖

---

*Michelle Y. Green is a graduate of the Johns Hopkins Master of Arts in Writing program and author of A Strong Right Arm: The Story of Mamie "Peanut" Johnson. [michelleygreen.com](http://michelleygreen.com)*

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## In her own words

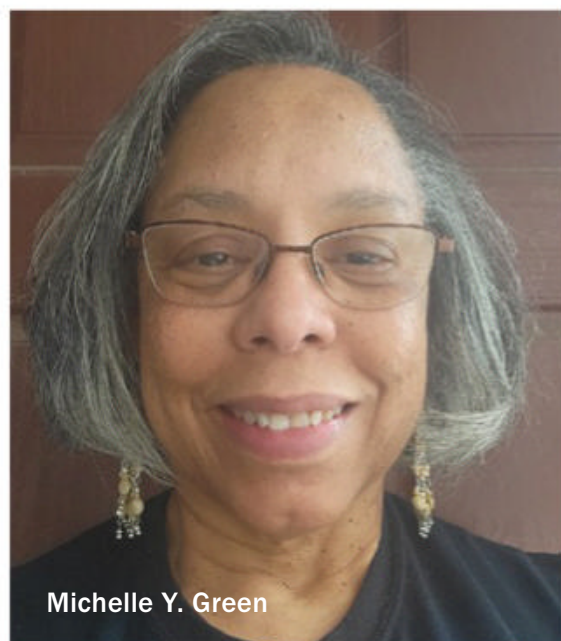
*The grand prize winner of our 500-word essay contest, Michelle Y. Green, is a longtime author of historical fiction and biographies for kids. We asked her to reflect on what it was like to write her winning essay.*

### Important tools in a writer's toolbox.

A writer writes, always. By that I mean, I don't have to be at my keyboard or scribbling in a journal to write. It means that being curious and paying attention to details are among my greatest tools.

As a writer of biography and historical fiction, I enjoy research. My dad, Eddie Lee Young, was a decorated, triple-rated Tuskegee Airman who fought in three conflicts. In my mother's house are many of his artifacts.

Dad made a habit of keeping precious things hidden in his sock drawer. Among the treasures I found were his dog tags. I was astonished that I had not noticed them before. They now dangle from a Tiffany lamp on my writer's desk, and I feel his spirit every day.



Michelle Y. Green

As I wrote in the essay, I did not cry when I found Dad's tags. As I began to write, however, I had an ugly cry. It helped me focus and write like wildfire. Within an hour, "Dog Tags" was done.

### What it was like to find her father's dog tags.

In a word, cathartic. Of all the possessions my sister, Adrienne-Young-Battle, and I have collected, his dog tags spoke to me of his sacrifice and valor.

He left the coal mining town of Jenkins, Kentucky, with \$3 in his pocket.

Being a colored pilot, navigator, and bombardier at a time when racism was rampant was challenging enough. Yet he broke the sound barrier right after Chuck Yeager and served in the Special Forces unit in Vietnam. He reminded us more than once that the cadets called themselves "The 100 Percenters." The best of the best.

He and my mother, Willie Pearl Young, set high expectations for us. And we still strive to live up to his legacy.

### Advice for those new to writing.

The first thing I would say is to throw out all the misconceptions they might have about the writing process. Many writers add one sentence, then subtract two or three words. Instead, find a comfortable place, decide what it takes for them to write, and let their words flow. For me, it's a good cup of coffee while listening to Miles Davis.

Join a local writers group if you can. Read the kind of writing they want to write. I always recommend *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott. And, of course, there is no better resource for craft and community than *The Writer*.

—Michelle Y. Green



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# Broadening the Bookshelves

This month, we're focusing on Jewish literature.

By Yi Shun Lai



# Getting to know Jewish literature

**M**ost of my life, I've lived near or around Jewish populations. With the exception of an uncomfortable stint in Chicago, where all of the Yiddishisms I'd picked up from having good friends who were Jewish or just being surrounded by a healthy Jewish culture were, for some reason, completely unintelligible to people, I've always assumed Judaism as a part of my life. (I later found out that there *is* a Jewish population in Chicago; it just didn't happen to intersect with my particular life.)

So I reacted with some surprise when, as I was first crafting this column, people in my immediate circle mentioned Jewish literature again and again as a literature I should explore. Surely, I thought, *surely* this is a literature that is already duly respected, that is not in danger of under-representation or marginalization. I thought, for instance, of all the Jewish authors I've read in my lifetime, in nearly every genre: Philip Roth, Shel Silverstein, Michael Chabon, Maurice Sendak, Jodi Picoult. I thought of the Jewish writers in my social circle. I thought of the Jewish people I know in the book community – editors, booksellers, and more.

And yet – the people in my circle aren't wrong. After all, I only just learned about Jews of color recently. But as a person of color who had admired a Jewish childhood friend's blond hair and blue eyes, thinking she surely had it easier than I would ever have it in a suburban Los Angeles that saw blond-and-blue-eyed as the gold standard of beauty, I still struggled with the idea of Jews as a marginalized population, even

despite the continued evidence of Antisemitism worldwide.

I swam in my own confusion for a couple months, and then I thought, I'd better just call an expert.

Erika Dreifus teaches literature at Baruch College, and she also publishes "The Practicing Writer," a popular newsletter that rounds up information and publishing opportunities for writers. (A key positive point of this newsletter: It only publishes opportunities that are fee-free *and* that pay.) Dreifus' most recent class at Baruch is Jewish Contemporary Literature, and I knew, having taken a few classes from her during my MFA program and read some of her writings on Jewish literature, that she would be a solid resource.

For starters, I ask Dreifus how she would define Jewish literature. Like any good scholar, she admits there are multiple schools of thought on this topic and consults a few different sources right off the bat: Andrea Knight, a jurist for the Canadian Jewish Literary Awards, spoke in 2018 to this very question, which Dreifus says comes up quite a lot

in literary circles. Knight concludes, "It depends," noting that, "In some cases, it's self-evident – works on Jewish religion and ethics, books on Jewish history and culture, books written in Yiddish or Hebrew, biographies and autobiographies of major Jewish figures... We would never question whether these books are Jewish – and, I would like to think, regardless of who wrote them."

Knight goes on to say that there are other things that might help a book to define its Jewishness: The authors, she says, "Whether observant or secular... are steeped in a Jewishness, a Jewish life, and sense of self that weaves itself through their writing" and that "[it is] possible for a Jewish author to bring a *je ne sais quoi*, what I would call a Jewish sensibility, to her or his writing, regardless of the quantifiable Jewish content. It might be the rhythms of the language, a smattering of Yiddish or Yiddish syntax, a certain sense of humor." But, Dreifus says, other opinions exist: "[A] Jewish educator had come up with, like, these five components of Jewishness or Jewish identity. You don't need to have all of those components in the book for it to be a Jewish book. But the more that you have, the more it seems [Jewish]. You don't need all the legs, but you need enough of them."

As I'm listening to Dreifus delineate the different opinions on what constitutes Jewish literature, I'm wondering about something even more meta: Why *does* the question of what Jewish literature is come up so often?

"One [reason] is because there are also questions about what does Jewishness mean, or what is Jewishness? The adjective 'Jewish' also has a lot of

questions around it: Is it a religion? Is it an ethnicity? Is it a culture? The truth is that it's all of them. So that's why you get some very clearly religious or theological books, and clearly that's very religiously oriented. But then you could also have a Jewish cookbook, [and] then you get into the question of, are the recipes all kosher. And so you have the religion element there, too. But that's clearly more of a cultural thing. There's not always consensus or agreement, both in the outer world and within the Jewish community. And I think that because there is so much argument and debate within the Jewish community writ large on everything, discussions about Jewish books are perennial and never-ending," she tells me.

"The other thing is that just because there are such varied viewpoints in American culture, mostly, you know, where Jews belong in the multicultural conversation. [There are some] librarians who I've seen really engage with

**"The adjective  
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this, wanting to emphasize that we belong in that conversation as a marginalized group as a *tiny* minority group, really. We are about 6 million Jews in the United States, which is about 2% of the population. And that we also are a very diverse group within that 6 million. There's a way in which seeing Jews as so-called white [is] lumping us with majority culture."

I feel a certain dismayed thump in my chest as I hear Dreifus nail down exactly my sentiment about my blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jewish school friend. I remember distinctly feeling that my friend *already* belonged, without ever having to work for it. "It feels inaccurate to so many of us, even while we may and do acknowledge that we have over more recent years in some circles benefited from being able to appear and present as white and the privileges that go along with that," she says. "But at the same time, the far right doesn't see us as white for sure. I think it's a concern about representation, like other people want to be represented and want to have their stories told. I mean, I didn't grow up with a lot of mirror books [a work that lets a child see a representation of themselves] or, like, almost any mirror books, really. There's really nothing super influential for me in that sense. It's important because, especially in the kid lit community, [there is] the desire to provide mirror and window books that are Jewish. Because even within our community, because of all of our diversity, our books can serve as simultaneously mirrors and windows, even for us."

Dreifus reminds me of the many different ethnicities within the Judaic ethnicity: Sephardic Jews (from the Iberian peninsula); Mizrahi Jews (from the Middle East); Ashkenazic Jews (Jews from Northern France or Germany), whose works further open up the world of Jewish works in translation; and



JODY CHRISTOPHERSON

Crypto-Jews, who were forced to practice their faith in secret while professing to be another religion in order to avoid persecution.

In an earlier related email exchange, I ask Dreifus if she thinks there's a Jewish literature "movement." Is there, for instance, an upswell around Jewish literature in recent years? Dreifus tells me that, although the Sydney Taylor Award for children's books portraying authenticity in Jewish life has been offered since 1968, it's only in the past few years that the winner of the award has been announced along with the other major children's book award winners (the Caldecott, the Newbery, the Printz, and the Coretta Scott King awards, for instance). And New York City, a city well known as a hub of publishing, just had its first-ever Jewish Book Festival. (Other cities around the world have had book festivals honoring Jewish literature.) Dreifus points out that there *have* been Jewish literary events held in New York before, but

these events don't often get top billing, or even any billing at all.


I'm quick to blame this on the overall reluctance of the evil dominant majority to give due honor to a demographic whose literature needs to see more light of day, but Dreifus reminds me that this is a more complicated equation: Writers may not want to be pigeonholed as Jewish in the first place nor have their literature automatically tagged "Jewish literature." I'm reminded of my students of color, who almost always introduce

**I'm reminded of my students of color, who almost always introduce themselves to me by telling me that they don't want to be seen as "the East Asian writer" or the "Black writer of romance" or "the Latinx writer of graphic novels." They just want to be writers.**

themselves to me by telling me that they don't want to be seen as "the East Asian writer" or the "Black writer of romance" or "the Latinx writer of graphic novels." They just want to be writers.

And yet, I argue, if these literatures need to be seen, why not leverage a personal demographic marker? Even as I say these words, I'm reminded of the day a colleague told me that every hero or heroine I write should be East Asian, by way of boosting representation. Dreifus asks me if I picked up on that advice, if the main character in my forthcoming YA historical novel is East Asian.

I think of my heroine, a Philadelphia suffragist whose mother owns a nice scrappy patch of land in Bucks County. "Heck no."

"OK then," Dreifus returns. "Is that book considered an East Asian book?" She stymies me even as I'm shaking my head vehemently. "*That's* my point about the Jewish writer," she says. "So if a Jewish writer chooses to write characters that aren't Jewish and isn't writing about Jewish culture, then why is that a Jewish book? It's a Jewish writer, but it doesn't mean it's a Jewish book." 

*Yi Shun Lai teaches in the MFA program at Bay Path University and is the author of two books. Her next book, a YA historical novel, is due out in 2024 from Atheneum Books.*



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# Talk to the Practitioner:

## *Kathleen Alcalá*

In the summer of 2010, I learned about Sephardic Jews and Crypto-Jews all at the same time. In my previous 35 years, I'd never even considered anything other than the European Jew, and the only Jews of color I knew were adoptees who'd been adopted into Jewish families. I know *exactly* when I learned about these unknown-to-me populations because I was reading a great many texts from the faculty of the MFA program I was about to matriculate into.

Among this faculty was Kathleen Alcalá, whose novel *Spirits of the Ordinary* draws from her family's history as Crypto-Jews, Jewish people who practiced their religion in secret for fear of persecution. Through Alcalá, I also learned about Sephardic Jews, who come from the Iberian peninsula. If not for her, it might have been another 30 years before my horizons were expanded, and I understood more about the Jewish population.

Alcalá is the author of six works of fiction and nonfiction; *Spirits* was reissued by Raven Chronicles Press in 2021; *The Flower in the Skull*, Alcalá's second novel, will also be reissued by Raven Chronicles Press in 2023. We sat down to talk about her process and her writing life.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHLEEN ALCALÁ



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**The Writer:** Your fiction draws from your family's history and has a strong sense of fact and research to it. Can you tell us a little about your writing process? How do you balance the story with the research?

**Kathleen Alcalá:** I write historical fiction. I heard the novelist Kate Manning quote E.L. Doctorow, who for some reason has always had a lot of good quotes about writing. He said, "The historian will tell you what happened. The novelist will tell you what it felt like." So I find myself starting, really, with concentrating on setting and character. And because I write about a lot of things that used to be really obscure – people did not know about this particular group of people in northern Mexico, Crypto-Jews, hidden Jews – doing the research helps to ground me in a time and place, and it makes these people more real for other people. So that's where I start, is doing that research and trying to figure out how an individual would make their way across this landscape.

[I don't just do] book or online research but travel and in-person interviews. Although we think we can recall what a place is like, it is always surprising to me how much detail we miss or take for granted. When those details are left out, the plot, the story, and characters seem unmoored, drifting in this odd space. Then I try to develop characters along the way. Sometimes it is a deliberate process, like having students fill out a biographical form for their characters, but for me, more often, it is starting with a few things I know about the person/character and launching them into action to see what they do, how they feel about other characters, how they solve problems. Finally, when I have a general idea of what the book is about, how it will unfold, I compile a fake table of contents that helps me return again and again to what the book is really about. You might call it a synopsis, but it is something cruder, more basic than that, designed to remind me of the specific details I want to include.

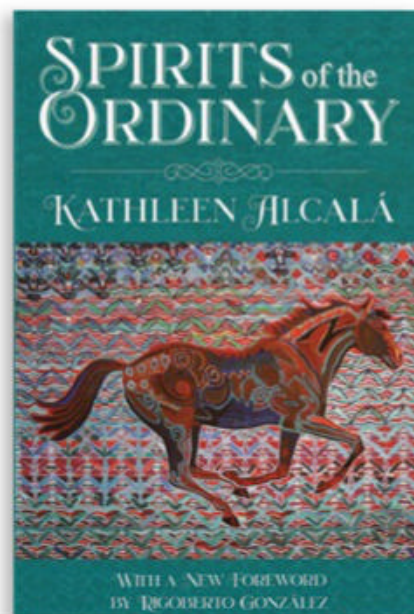
**TW:** But the group – the Crypto-Jews – is also a group you identify with personally. Which came first? Was it more the idea that you needed to tell a story about something or more like, this is a part of my identity, I need to tell a story about that? Or even was it that everybody needs to know about this particular group of people?

**KA:** It was, here are a set of stories I've never heard anywhere else outside of our family, and I think that they are interesting enough that other people would want to hear about them. I started out thinking, well, this is just another set of stories in the world. And people looked at me like, "Well, we have no idea what you're talking

about." And in particular, for a Jewish identity, the notion of hidden Jews in Mexico was something that was quite alien to most mainstream Jews who I met in the United States. And they were kind of shocked by the whole idea that there might be Mexican Jews. That just didn't match with their idea of the world. So that's where having specific detail really makes a difference because I have to ground these stories in a world that other people recognize.

Most of the people who identify as Sephardic Jews have ancestors who left Spain during the Inquisition for friendlier countries, such as Turkey, Greece, other European countries. My ancestors hid their identities to immigrate to Mexico, which was still a Spanish colony. They did such a good job of hiding that most European and Sephardic Jews did not know they existed, but that is changing. *Spirits of the Ordinary* is based roughly on that aspect of my family history.

I also identify as Mexican, Chicana, and Native American, from another branch of the family. The second novel in the family trilogy, *The Flower in the Skull*, is based on my Ópata ancestors. I used to think that our mixed heritage was unusual, but I don't think so



anymore. With great upheaval comes great change and new stories, or a reframing of old stories. (From *La Llorona* to a new translation of *Beowulf* by Maria Dahvana Headley to *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer.)

[And] in the last 20 years, there has been a lot of discussion and more open discussion about [Crypto-Judaism]. Plus, scholars have gotten interested in it. So a lot has gotten documented that was not before.

**TW:** Are works like your novels part of that awakening?

**KA:** It was very much a part of that. And once people saw that there was an audience for it, a lot of other people decided that they would write about it. I did all the research for *Spirits of the Ordinary* pre-internet and went in person to a lot of these places, including my uncle's library in Chihuahua, Mexico. He ran a private school there for many years, and so he had quite a nice library about the Jews of northern Spain in that area.

**TW:** Are you finding many more folks wanting to "jump on the bandwagon" to write about Crypto-Judaism?

**KA:** Absolutely. I'm not going to tell anyone what to write or how to write about it, but there is a certain amount of romanticization that has taken place. People seem to think it's charming to be chased by the Inquisition. And, of course, it was terrifying. It was horrible. I've learned a little bit more about my specific ancestors and, really, the man from whom we were descended just got out of Spain by the skin of his teeth. And his parents were killed by the Inquisition. So, you know, it was not fun. But in retrospect, people seem to – I don't know. Why is that

any more romantic than leaving Germany because you're the fourth-born son, and you're all going to starve to death if you stay?

**TW:** A lot of the things you're describing rings true to me in terms of memoir. You write essays, but is there at some point room or a desire to write memoir with regard to Crypto-Judaism?

**KA:** I've written articles to that extent that get published in specialty magazines, like *HaLapid*, which is the publication for the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies. They had a meeting in Pueblo, Colorado, in the late 1990s, and I met all these other people who were both scholars and individuals who felt this was part of their background. It's kind of a safe place.

**TW:** Do you think this is a field of that requires a safe space right now?

**KA:** It's easy to appropriate these stories, and there has been a history of that since we started talking about it. If you're not a writer and you tell your story, and then somebody goes out and writes a novel who doesn't have this background, but it's your story, how are you supposed to feel about that?

**TW:** Are there higher stakes in Crypto-Judaic stories than in other minoritized populations having their stories appropriated?

**KA:** I don't know that there is necessarily. I can't weigh the value of one person's story over another person's story. Certainly that's one of the things I learned in writing *The Deepest Roots*, which is my book about food and community on Bainbridge Island.

And one of the stories here are the Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during World War II simply because they were Japanese Americans. There is a family in particular that came back to the island afterwards and started a grocery store that's part of a now-very-successful chain. But what's remarkable about the people in this family is they hold no grudges. They're here. They're working. They've made lives for themselves. So what would be the point, and what more could they want, really, except acknowledgment of that?

**TW:** For a while, you were also working in Latinx futurism. What draws you to that field?

**KA:** I think the stories told in Mexico and from this sort of background don't really make a distinction between realistic stories and stories that embrace the fantastic. My first book was a collection of short fiction, *Mrs.*

*Vargas and The Dead Naturalist*, that dips a toe into this notion of the fantastic, the more than real. There are all these different terms for it – like slipstream fiction, which goes back and forth between fantastic and realistic. It's just a fun way to tell stories. Something else I've been working on is an anthology coming out that I co-edited with Norma Cantú, who is a professor at Trinity University in Texas, and it's about La Llorona, who is the most famous character in Mexican folklore. Three years ago, I started calling for papers, calling for stories about La Llorona. And I was thinking of it as primarily fiction at that point. But I asked Norma to join the program as a co-editor, and she brought in many of her former students and other researchers. It's now a combination of fiction and nonfiction and poetry and just all of the stories that have come out of La Llorona story. It's called *Weeping Women*, and it will be presented at AWP. 📖

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Heidi Rabinowitz is host of the long-running *The Book of Life* podcast, which discusses Jewish children's literature, and she is the children's librarian at B'nai Israel Synagogue in Boca Raton, Florida. Rabinowitz provided us with books that are appropriate throughout a reader's childhood all the

way up through adulthood, and even in our brief conversation, I learn more about the Jewish people than I had ever known before.

**I** ask Rabinowitz why it was important for a synagogue to have a librarian. "They have several hundred preschoolers who spend morning, noon, and night there," she says. "I don't have to tell you how important reading is and how important modeling a love of reading is. Then, of course, in a synagogue, it also brings in the element of Jewish learning and modeling the specific Jewish value of the love of learning as well. So it's important for the synagogue to have its own library to support the preschool and also to support the religious school and the older children. I provide books for the kids, I provide books for the teachers and for the families. I also help the teachers do their jobs better. I get books that support the curriculum as well as things that are just going to excite the kids."

We started with board books.

***Buen Shabat, Shabbat Shalom* by Sarah Aroeste, illustrated by Ayesha L. Rubio (2020); *Mazal Bueno* by Sarah Aroeste, illustrated by Taia Morley (2023).**

Aroeste is a Sephardic Jew (her family's origins are in the Iberian Peninsula) and a singer/songwriter. Her two board books, written for the youngest children, show "Sephardic people just living their life," says Rabinowitz,

noting that the titles of the books are in Ladino, the language of the Sephardic Jews. "The Sephardim are a very small percentage of Jewry as a whole, which is already a small group. There's not that much representation in the literature. This is very exciting, especially at that very young level, to get that. And because she's a singer, she has a wonderful music video that goes with *Shabbat, Shabbat Shalom*, which is just so joyful and adorable."

I ask Rabinowitz how she pushes books like this out to a broad readership. "The world perceives that books [about minorities] are just for those folks. And that's absolutely incorrect," she says.

***Osnat and Her Dove: The True Story of the World's First Female Rabbi* by Sigal Samuel, illustrated by Vali Mintzi (2021).**

This picture book is about a historical figure who "wasn't even well known among the Jewish community," says Rabinowitz, although she allows that among Mizrahi Jews (Jewish people from the Middle East), Osnat Barzani might be better known. Barzani was a Kurdish woman born in 1590 whose father insisted that his only daughter continue her studies in the Torah after she was married. Upon the death of her husband, she became head of the Yeshiva (a Jewish educational

institution) in Mosul. "It's sort of a biography. It's also sort of historical fiction because it's from such a long time ago. You don't have really clear records, and there's all this kind of mystical stuff mixed in," Rabinowitz says. "But this book showcases a historical figure that was basically unheard of, a strong, smart Jewish woman role model." The book was a Junior Library Guild selection and won the Canadian Jewish Literary Award.

***The Unfinished Corner* by Dani Colman, illustrated by Rachel "Tuna" Petrovicz (2021); *How to Find What You're Not Looking For* by Veera Hiranandani (2021).**

Rabinowitz's selections for middle grade are, respectively, a graphic novel in the fantasy vein and a realistic middle grade novel, but Hiranandani's offering pushes the envelope in another way: it's written entirely in the second person. The title won 2022's Sydney Taylor Book Award, an award that honors Jewish literature. Drawing on Hiranandani's family history (she is half Indian and half Jewish), the book explores the concept of interracial marriage in the era of *Loving v. Virginia*, the landmark Supreme Court case that ruled that laws banning interracial marriage violate the Equal Protection Clause. "The book represents a recent trend in that it's exploring Jewish identity. And there have been more books just recently where the characters are actually thinking about their Jewish identity and what it means to them and how they want to embody their own Jewishness," says Rabinowitz.

Rabinowitz praises the artwork in *The Unfinished Corner*, but she also calls out the book's diversity – its four main heroes are a Jew of color,

**“Within Jewish children’s literature, 50% of the books are Holocaust-related. We’ve counted. It’s this sort of vicious cycle because publishers say, ‘Oh, well, that sells. We’ll do some more of that.’”**



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a Sephardic Jew, and two Ashkenazi Jews – and its “dynamic folklore.”

“This book doesn’t just give us the folklore we hear about over and over,” she says. “There are so many stories about the golem and twists on the golem. But there’s a huge tradition of folklore and legends that doesn’t get looked at very much. This author found other bits and pieces that nobody had been incorporating into their stories and made them fit together and made them interesting and relevant for today.”

*When the Angels Left the Old Country* by Sacha Lamb (2022).

Rabinowitz calls her young adult pick “the Jewish *Good Omens*,” referencing Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman’s retelling of the birth of Satan and the coming of the End of Times. “It’s sort of a queer historical fairy tale,” she says, starring “a Jewish demon and a Jewish angel who are Torah study partners. Hilarity ensues. They have amazing adventures as they emigrate to America through Ellis Island. They get involved in the labor movement. It has been described as the queer lovechild of Philip Roth and Sholem Aleichem.” [Ed. note: Aleichem’s book *Tevye the Dairyman* is the basis for *Fiddler on the Roof*.] Lamb is a 2018 Lambda Literary Fellow. *When the Angels Left the Old Country* is their debut novel.

*Jews Don’t Count*, David Baddiel (2021) and *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*, Dara Horn (2021).

For adults, Rabinowitz picked two nonfiction works that she feels pair well together. Comedian David Baddiel treats a serious subject with

humor and clarity in his book “about why modern progressives embrace and support so many minorities but tend to remain hostile to Jews – or not even necessarily consciously hostile, but reluctant to include Jews in progressive support for minorities,” Rabinowitz says. “He argues that there is a hierarchy of racisms which wrongly excludes antisemitism; that antisemitism is, if not exactly the same as racism, definitely related to racism.”

Dara Horn’s provocatively titled work is “a collection of essays about the disturbing fascination that the world has with dead Jews and how this attention shapes the treatment of living Jews.” I ask Rabinowitz if this sentiment isn’t in tandem with the vast number of books about Judaism or Jewish people out there that are centered on the Holocaust. “I purposely didn’t choose a Holocaust book for this list, but just to make you aware, within Jewish children’s literature, 50% of the books are Holocaust-related. We’ve counted. It’s this sort of vicious cycle because publishers say, ‘Oh, well, that sells. We’ll do some more of that.’ And then they put their resources towards it and produce a great book because they put the money into it, the backing, and the marketing. Of course, the topic is compelling and exciting in a disturbing way, and we should never forget. But at the same time, it means less of the resources are promoting other books that could use the attention, and it means that people are getting a skewed view of what it means to be Jewish. I’m not saying we need less books on the Holocaust. I’m saying we need more of the other books because the balance is off.”

Horn’s book also has a companion podcast, called “Adventures with Dead Jews.”




# TO THE FUTURE

Fidelity to science, technology, and certain  
conventions will make your sci-fi stories fly.

## AND

By Kerrie Flanagan

# BEYOND



Science fiction transports readers through time to outer space, introducing new societies. Authors like Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, and Jules Verne paved the way for this genre that centers around science and technology. Readers love being taken on these futuristic adventures, but there are certain conventions and expectations to remember when writing sci-fi.

### **Defining science fiction**

First, it's important to understand what science fiction is and what makes it unique. This genre is defined as an area of fiction that creatively depicts real or imaginary science and technology as part of its plot, setting, or theme. Many times you will see sci-fi and fantasy lumped together, and although there can be some overlap, there are distinct differences between the two. Fantasy has magic and elements outside the realm of possibility. Science fiction, however, must be grounded, on some level, in actual science and technology. Even if you create a new weapon, travel through space, or create a new universe, there must be some basis in our current science and technology.

That being said, a good story goes beyond the science and gadgets. Adrian Tchaikovsky, bestselling author of the *Children of Time* series, says, "Whilst the science/tech elements may be key, very often the focus is on social interaction, societal setup, and the way the characters interact. These can be just as speculative and as fruitful a ground for sci-fi exploration as faster-than-light travel."

Bestselling science-fiction thriller author Douglas E. Richards says, "The best sci-fi novels offer big, mind-blowing ideas, accurate science, endless food for thought, and extrapolations of the impact scientific breakthroughs will have on individuals and society."

### **→ Origins of science fiction**

Exploring the development of this genre can help you understand how it evolved into what it is today and provide insight into the core of sci-fi and reader expectation.

During the industrial revolution, the world shifted. Technological advances changed how farmers worked their land, cars and airplanes expanded our travels, and scientific developments opened opportunities not possible decades before. The world was changing at a rapid pace, and people, including authors, started thinking about the implications these advances would have on us humans and our planet.

Published in 1818, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is considered one of the first science fiction novels. At only 18 years old, she took the science of her day and created a fictional monster while her

storyline wove in then-current cultural fears and issues. This opened the door for other sci-fi writers.

The turn of the century saw the birth of pulp magazines where many early sci-fi writers got started. These magazines were seen as “low-brow” writing and not respected in the literary community, but they were popular because they could be purchased for a few cents and provided great entertainment.

Writers were paid by the word, and some well-known authors wrote for these magazines under a pseudonym and reserved their real names for their literary work. The 1920s and '30s were the golden era of the pulp magazines. Many respected writers contributed to these magazines, including Mary Roberts Rinehart, H.P. Lovecraft, and Isaac Asimov.

Hugo Gernsback, a writer and author, is credited for coining the term science fiction. In 1926, he created the magazine *Amazing Stories*. It was dedicated to what he called at the time *Scientifiction* stories, which he defined as “a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision.” A few years later, the term became *science fiction*. Gernsback continues to be a voice in sci-fi. The prestigious Hugo Award bearing his name has been given to the best published science fiction novel each year since 1953.

### Different Approaches

Although all sci-fi must have some basis in science, there are two different approaches. One is “hard” sci-fi, where there is a strong focus on natural sciences like physics, astronomy, chemistry, and astrophysics, which are an integral part of the plot. Movies that illustrate this include *The Martian*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Gravity*. Science and technology are a main focus in these films.

The other is “soft” sci-fi, which leans more on the social sciences, like sociology, psychology, and anthropology,

that deal more with human behavior. *Star Wars* and *Ready Player One* fall into this category because although science and technology are a part of the story, they are not what drives the plot. These delve more into the relationships of the characters and just happen to take place in a futuristic world.

Tchaikovsky’s books are considered hard sci-fi, and he believes this term has a different meaning to different people.

Even if you create  
a new weapon,  
travel through space,  
or create a new universe,  
there must be some basis  
in our current science  
and technology.

“For me, it’s SF where at least some of the focus relates to scientific and technological processes and principles,” he says. “Because you’re drawing on real-world science, this tends to increase the amount of research – even if you’re going to deviate from our current understanding of the universe, you still need to get your head around what that understanding is.”

When it comes to deciding which direction you want to go with your book, Kat Falls, author of the YA series *Inhuman* and the *Dark Life* series for middle grade readers, encourages authors to try to incorporate research that excites them. “By definition, science fiction is fiction infused with science, so investigate what interests you. Your passion for the subject will excite the reader, and, again, they’ll be more willing to suspend disbelief.”

### Worldbuilding

In sci-fi, the vast universe is at your fingertips, but it doesn’t matter if you’re

writing hard or soft sci-fi; the world you build must be an integral part of the story. Sci-fi readers want to escape to a new world that has ties to what they understand from the “real” world. Falls says to do this, the setting must be more than just a backdrop against which action takes place. “It should be an integral piece of the narrative, more like another character than a prop, offering obstacles and commenting on the story’s theme. Characters interact with and are challenged – externally and internally – by all aspects of the world.”

Richards believes logic and self-consistency are the most important elements of sci-fi worldbuilding. “Unlike fantasy, science fiction worldbuilding requires ties back to what is known about reality. It requires the author to start with a set of logical rules, no matter how wild or far out. Astonishing feats of imagination can then ensue, but at no point should the author violate the rules or create huge gaps in logic.”

Even though your world may be fictional, include tethers to what readers know and understand. This allows them to make connections to their current life experiences and provide some grounding in reality. Falls suggests incorporating your expertise into the story. “A hobby, skill, or experience – something you can write about with complete authority, even if it’s simply what it’s like to own a dog. If small details ring with authenticity, your readers will be more willing to suspend disbelief in other areas.”

### → Creating characters

Building an incredible futuristic or fictional world is important, but you need great characters who face challenges and wrestle through quirks and flaws. This cast of characters allows your reader to connect to the events happening in your story. Jamie McFarlane, author of *The Junkyard Pirate* series, says if a reader can’t see themselves



in the story, they'll struggle to engage. "Believable faults for protagonists are critical, and I fight against fixing those faults as the story progresses."

Your story centers around your protagonist, but without a villain to go up against your main character, there wouldn't be a story. McFarlane finds great joy in building rich antagonists. "I want an antagonist that isn't simply evil but has understandable, if immoral, goals. I spend equal time contemplating my antagonists and their motivations as I do my heroes."

As with any story, you have the power to create great characters, but in sci-fi, you can also get to create aliens. McFarlane finds that the challenge and joy in creating new alien species is balancing their alienness against human morality. He asks himself two questions: How are they like humans? How are they different? This is related more to their personalities, morals, and values, not so much how they look.

He says it's the similarities that make them relatable. "If I'm building a species that I expect to work well with humans, they need to share a good portion of

that stuff we learned in kindergarten, or what I suggest is basic human morality." The other aliens, who he refers to as kindergarten dropouts, are the ones who don't have those basic skills of sharing or working together and who don't mind taking away another's free will (and have the power to do it). "That's good stuff," he says, "a la *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Or consider *Starship Trooper's* bugs who just want to get all stabby because another, more intelligent bug says it's the right thing to do. For me, it's the moral variance from baseline humanity which energizes the value of a well-thought-out alien."

#### → Theme

A story that resonates with readers goes beyond creating a unique world, interesting characters, and page-turning plot. To add depth and substance, be aware of the theme in your story. Falls describes this as the issue or subject that's being explored in the story through dramatization. This could be time travel, artificial intelligence, futuristic societies, gender...many themes could be explored.

You may know your theme before you start writing, or it may emerge after a few drafts. Falls says that regardless of your process, at some point you must identify your story's theme and explore it through metaphor, setting, action, imagery, and even word choice if you want your work to have dimension and resonance.

She comes up with the story concept first – before plot or character. "If an idea sparks an emotional response in me, I'll start journaling to figure out why," she says. "That's usually when the theme becomes apparent. For example, in my YA novel *Inhuman*, I started off interested in viruses that carry animal DNA, like swine flu, etc. I played with 'what if's' and created a story premise about humans turning into 'manimals.' After chewing over the speculative fiction metaphor, I realized I was most interested in a teen girl, conditioned to be polite and respectful, getting in touch with her fierce side."

#### → Weapons

In your sci-fi adventure, there may come a time when your characters must

## SCIENCE FICTION SUBGENRES

Under the umbrella of science fiction are many subgenres that each have their own unique nuances. Here are some of them.

#### → Military science fiction

Stories that have a distinct military theme. Military sci-fi author Craig Martelle defines it as, "universal truth about military and how they work with each other. Firepower. Maneuver. But in the end, it's about outwitting and outfighting your enemy."

#### → Science fiction thriller

Stories with elements of thriller and sci-fi. Sci-fi thriller author Douglas E. Richards says a good sci-fi thriller combines the mind-blowing ideas, accurate science, endless food for thought, and extrapolations of the impact

scientific breakthroughs will have on individuals and society with high stakes, breathless action, life-and-death peril at every turn, and protagonists who win the day despite incredible odds against them, through a mixture of skill, daring, and resourcefulness of thrillers.

#### → Space opera

Long-running sci-fi series with big story arcs, space battles, and relationships. *Star Wars* is considered a space opera.

#### → Time travel

Stories where the main character can go back and forth in time. The

actual time travel is accomplished through scientific or technological means. *Dr. Who* is a classic example of this.

#### → Space exploration

Stories that take place primarily in space or involve space travel. *Star Trek* and *The Expanse* fall into this subgenre.

#### → Dystopian

Futuristic stories centering around societies in devastating decline with characters battling environmental ruin, technological control, and government oppression. *Hunger Games* and *1984* are examples.

## SCIENCE FICTION AUTHORS SHARE WHAT THEY ENJOY MOST ABOUT WRITING SCI-FI.

### → Craig Martelle

“Taking the issues of today and discussing them ‘in secrecy’ within the sci-fi backdrop. I can change the world to address how I think things will play out or create an alien world where we can explore the results of different histories. We are the decisions we make, and so are the aliens.”

### → Adrian Tchaikovsky

“Giving spaceships funny names and then exploding them. Seriously, though, aliens, uplifted earth species, non-human points of view. And

whilst this is also something that can be done with fantasy fiction, I think it works most effectively with SF because of the implicit convention that ‘this could happen in the future’ that SF tends to bring with it. Things can feel more real.”

### → Jamie McFarlane

“Writing science fiction gives writers license to explore grandiose ideas. I once buried a massive spaceship and had it wake up and unbury itself with my characters inside. I write by outline and by the seat of my pants,

both. While writing, I didn’t realize the spaceship was going to take off until my crew was inside. Few genres allow for this kind of freedom. Further, I love exploring how people or aliens thrive in extreme environments. What have they adapted to overcome the dangers of rogue asteroids if they live in an asteroid belt, or where do they get their water or fuel? How have these environmental changes shaped the characters, both good and bad? The troubles are endless, just as are the solutions.”

“Unlike fantasy, science fiction worldbuilding requires ties back to what is known about reality... At no point should the author violate the rules or create huge gaps in logic.”

defend themselves or go after the villains. They will need weapons, and you get to construct them. Richards creates future weaponry for his novels, which are extrapolated from current science, making them plausible, but he does caution authors not to rely on the weapons to save their main characters. “No matter how remarkable the weaponry, I try to always have my protagonists prevail, not due to superior forces or weaponry but due to superior guile and creativity. Even in the future, even with fantastic weapons, a fight/battle scene is always better when the protagonists outwit and outthink their enemies rather than outgun them.”

### Writing a great sci-fi series

Sci-fi readers enjoy getting immersed in a series. Think about the popularity of *Star Wars*, *The Mandalorian*, *Star Trek*, and other television shows and movies. The same thing happens with readers; they get caught up in the world and care about what happens to the characters.

Craig Martelle, author of the *Battleship Leviathan* series, says that to write a great series, you must build a world the audience is interested in and

can understand. “Then you have to add likable characters who don’t share all their secrets up front. They have issues that they’re working on. The sustainable part of the series is how the world and characters grow with each new volume. The readers have to stay on board because it’s interesting. The secret is that the first book has to be a great story.” Some of the story elements wrap up, but there are overarching themes and storylines that continue with each book.

Writing science fiction allows you to boldly go where no human has gone before as you create stories that blend science, technology, unique characters, and intriguing storylines. May your books live long and prosper. 📖

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# CIRCLE OF POETS



Community, support, accountability, and high-quality work: These are some of the benefits of being in a good poetry group. Here's how to go about finding the right group for you – or starting your own.

**By Deborah Straw**



**I****F** it were not for my writing group of 20 years, I most likely would not have completed dozens of poems. No one would have been as well equipped to read them carefully and diligently before I considered sending them out into the world of publishing: a competitive and sometimes discouraging place for writers. I might not have completed two nonfiction books nor finished my essays and short stories. Without editorial deadlines for much of my work, I needed a self-imposed deadline, i.e., my group, to keep creating, writing, and revising. I am often a slow writer. I need feedback. The group was invaluable to me.



Writers may create in solitude, but all writers, of poetry or prose, need readers. Almost no first draft is final. Poet Galway Kinnell, a one-time Vermont state poet (1989-1993) who received a Pulitzer Prize and was co-winner of a National Book Award, admitted that he did up to 100 revisions on some of his poems, often a word or a line at a time. Knowing when to finish, deadline or not, is often the most challenging part of the work of creation. Readers can help.

Aside from diaries or journals never meant for publication sharing, everything else you produce is waiting for an audience. We all need readers to make sure our work is clear and at its best.

In *On Writing*, Stephen King famously penned, “Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of difference.”

If you don’t have writers in mind to form a group but want to create one, read local papers for writers’ names you admire. See if there are ads in public media for existing groups. Put up a sign at a bookstore or a food co-op. Check out or advertise on your local Craigslist if such exists in your community or state. Ask writing friends whose work they admire. If you take a writing or literature class, reach out to classmates whose work shows promise. Alternatively, your city or state arts council may have a writers’ organization with a list of names that you can peruse.

For a poetry group, it is undeniably ideal to include only poets. That said, you don’t have to be a poet to critique poems. But you do have to have a good ear, understand language, and have read quite a lot of poetry. If your group has non-poets, be sure to explain various forms of poems – haiku, sestina, sonnet, ballad, and so forth – if that is what you write. Prose writers might not know these terms and their requirements.

Writers’ groups work best when they are small and when meetings and membership are consistent. I found four or five members work well. Sometimes one person would be absent (two people are *not* a group). Also, we wouldn’t have had time for any more writing during our two- to three-hour meetings. Within

our small group of four, everyone had a chance to share at each meeting.

Should you decide on a larger number of members, maybe half would read and receive feedback at one meeting and half at the next. Don’t rush through the process. This is serious business. Every word, every line break, every stanza, every paragraph matters.

Writers’ groups are most useful when writers are at about the same level of writing skill. If you are a published writer, you want other published writers to first critique your work. Un-

**One of the primary reasons for a longstanding group whose members know your work and your worth is just that: to keep you on track and to help you improve.**

less you’re forming a beginning poetry group, you don’t want to hem and haw over grammar, trite cliches, or the placement of commas and periods.

Groups work well if the members are fairly similar in age. I prefer a female group because they represent my intended audience. If there is a much younger person in the group, or much older, keep in mind that you may need to define some time periods or events in history, song titles, or other terms. I have found different generations of writers have different interests and tastes in style, and men and women often read quite disparate things. That said, these considerations may not matter whatsoever.

The more you share in common with your writers’ group, at least in terms of enjoying writing and reading some of the same genres or authors, and being absolutely committed to continue to write, the better it is to move forward and stay on track. Outside similar interests are useful – movies, other cultures, politics, equality, or animals.

When I decided I needed a group to critique my work (I was doing more creative writing, less journalism), I searched my acquaintances for prospective members. Two of these people were former friends and colleagues. One was a poet; the other was a non-fiction writer. I taught writing and literature for 30 years at a community college and at various other venues, including at the local correctional center. These are the places I met these two women – at college and at the local arts council that funded courses at the jail.

The fourth member, a woman 15 years older than the rest of us, was someone I greatly admired, a very good writer for a daily paper who I knew had more talent than she was showing the world. She loved poetry and novels and always received the assignments of interviewing high-profile visiting poets and novelists.

Much to my delight, she accepted my invitation, and we soon met as a group and set up tentative rules.

All members must bring something every time, even if it’s a tiny poem or a couple of reworked paragraphs. Don’t hesitate to bring back the same manuscript if only slightly changed.

If someone has the dreaded “writer’s block” or has been too busy to squeeze in writing time, assign a prompt each of you will write about for the next meeting: death, hands, dogs, flowers, loss, porches.

Limit the length of manuscripts – two or three poems or 10 pages of prose, for example. Generally speaking, in my group, we had work we initiated on our own, and some were assignments from a newspaper, magazine, or journal with deadlines.

Once you’re physically meeting, if you have time, read the other members’ manuscripts through once without pen in hand; then read again to add written

praise and make suggestions. Read silently. With poetry, the poet also reads aloud. Read thoroughly so you don't have to ask embarrassing questions that have been addressed in the manuscript but which you may have missed if reading too quickly. Once everyone has had the time to read, which takes everyone a different amount of time, discuss the work in the group.

Always remember, this is not a proof-reading or editing group. If one writer needs a lot of editing, send them back to their computer or even, more drastically, reconsider their appropriateness in your group. Group members want to be able to read smoothly without taking a pen to every sentence, stanza, or paragraph.

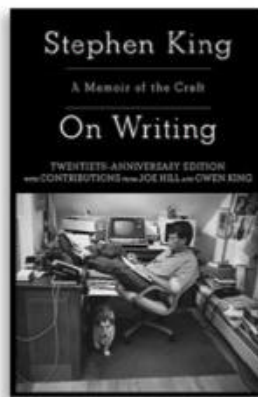
After about three years, my group decided to try out another woman as a group member. Although she was an excellent writer, her subject matter, mostly scholarly religious research, did not mesh with our concerns or styles.

These were the conditions we followed for 20 years: we agreed to meet at regular intervals, to each bring a piece each time (revisions were fine), to photocopy or print out the work for the other three, and to give ample notice if not able to attend a scheduled meeting. We also agreed to meet at alternating houses and not to drink wine or other alcoholic beverages, which does not help creative collaboration. We generally had tea and cookies or iced tea and cheese and crackers, depending on the season, and we generally met for two to three hours once every two or three weeks. We almost always had a cat in attendance as well, a comfort many poets share.

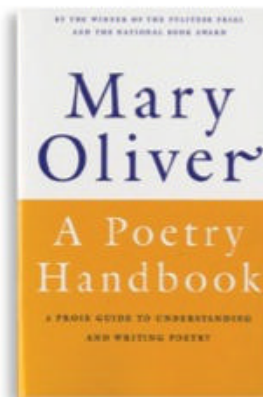
We had no TV or music on in the background, and we turned off our phones. We generally avoided slipping into gossip (unless it was about a difficult or fabulous editor, useful information) or discussion of favorite books, films, or recipes.

When we critiqued each other's works, we would start out with the positive points, leaving "negative" criticism or questions and misunderstandings to later. I learned never to use a red pen in graduate school as it looks too much like blood on the page. We writers are a sensitive lot.

## Recommended Reading and Listening:



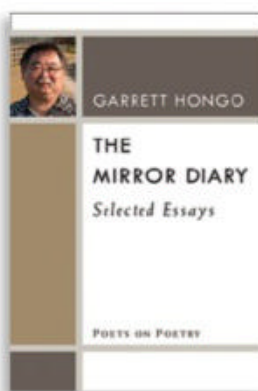
Stephen King: *On Writing*, 2020, reissue



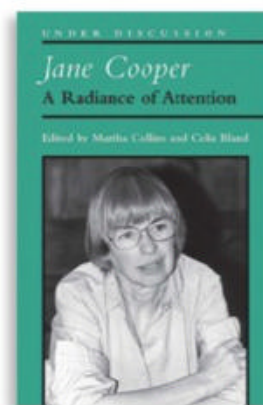
Mary Oliver: *A Poetry Handbook*, 1994



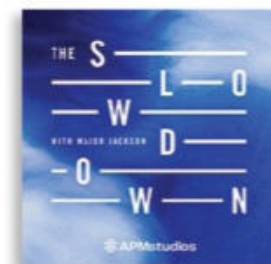
May Sarton: *Writings on Writing*, 1980 (in particular, see her essay, "Revision as Creation")



Poets on Poetry (book series), [press.umich.edu/browse/series/UM31](http://press.umich.edu/browse/series/UM31)



Under Discussion (book series of reviews and essays about individual poets), [press.umich.edu/browse/series/UM34](http://press.umich.edu/browse/series/UM34)



*The Slowdown*, a podcast of the Poetry Foundation, [slowdownshow.org](http://slowdownshow.org)

Start gently; give praise where praise is due. Taking feedback often requires courage, especially if readers don't understand or care for your newest work.

Give honest feedback, and if you don't know what to say, admit it. Always offer kind, positive comments first. There ought to be no biases re: topics. That said, if someone's writing (topic or language) consistently makes you uncomfortable, the group needs to discuss this and see if the two of you can work together. I learned I was uncomfortable with a woman member, with us for a while, who dominated the meetings and wrote about her open marriage.

You do not need to take all suggestions. Use what makes sense to you or what two or more members agree doesn't work or is unclear. Sometimes,

a poem takes its own directions. Your group members may see this before you do; try out their suggestions. You can always return to your original draft.

Don't be afraid to say, "I don't understand." If you don't, some other readers won't, either.

We sometimes shared the names of editors or agents who were looking for new work. Great teachers, local and online, were recommended, too.

While you're in a writing group, it's always important to keep reading. If you're a poet, of course, you'll be reading the latest work and perhaps restudying the classics. Encourage your other members to read some of the work you love or bring some to share. My group occasionally attended local readings together: I distinctly remember Kinnell,



Ruth Stone, and Mark Doty, all renowned poets.

Try to continue to meet as a group for at least a year. Although you may become busier in your lives, if you carve out time for your writing, you will begin to understand each other's styles and concerns more truly. If you are serious about writing, and publishing, your meetings deserve to remain a commitment.

One of the primary reasons for a longstanding group whose members know your work and your worth is just that: to keep you on track and to help you improve. King's "someone(s) who believes in you" makes a huge difference in your journey to becoming a better writer *and* not giving up. Share successes and rejections. Few except working writers understand the often-long process of submitting, being rejected, or being edited and then published and being paid or not, sometimes after a very long time.


If the idea of an on-the-ground group meeting doesn't appeal, you can

connect to or form a new group on Zoom and other platforms. However, for me, a bit of a Luddite and a former classroom teacher, seeing the writers in person is always preferable, more intimate, and somehow more genuine than seeing people on a small screen. Meeting outside the home takes more energy and time than sitting down at your familiar computer and signing on. Now that the incidence of COVID has lessened, you can also hug a colleague in congratulations or empathy, not just say "good work" with a smile. Also, the risk of staying at home for an online group may make you feel you ought to be doing other things when the meeting comes around (walking the dog, doing laundry, preparing dinner), thus causing you to miss more often.

In my two-decades-long group, aside from helping me start and finish a lot of work, I learned that my poetry was sometimes too repetitious in meaning (not in language) and included too

many *ands* (not used in much poetry). Other members can help suggest titles, too. And your readers indicate whether something is clear or ambiguous. You may forget to define something or someone, or you may use words or images that just don't fit.

Giving feedback, listening, is also good for *you*. You learn about new worlds, new perspectives, maybe even new words or concepts. You understand how critical your comments are to your other members, who may have initially been reticent or even afraid to share.

Writers' groups are there for you: they listen to your work, they read your work, they believe in your work, they keep you on track, and they help you grow, as a writer and as a person. 

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*Deborah Straw publishes essays, poems, articles, and book reviews. She has also published two nonfiction books and taught writing and literature at the college level for 30 years.*

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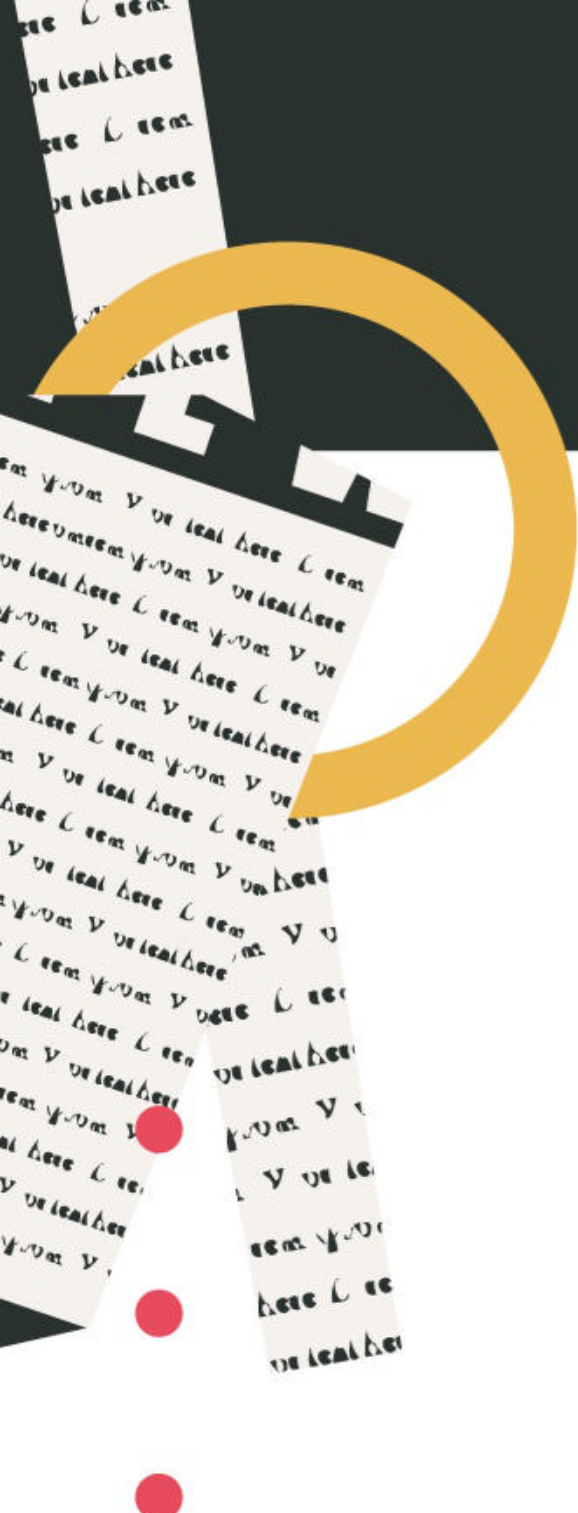


# TRUE STORIES



Why dramatic technique is not enough to write great creative nonfiction: You need an unwavering blend of hard-won facts and the drive to find them.

By T.J. Murphy



**A**lthough demanding, creative nonfiction is rich territory for writers. It's attractive to journalists and fiction writers alike, a place to exercise strengths – like the research skills of a reporter or the dramatic technique of a novelist – and build skills you don't currently have.

Or, if you're willing to do the work, you just make creative nonfiction your thing from the start by taking classes, attending workshops, or pursuing an appropriate MFA.

Creative nonfiction is a broad category, chock full of an array of subcategories. Memoir and essays, of course, but also (it's a long list) writing about things like food, travel, crime, music, and history. A subgenre can be broken down further. For example, under travel/adventure, you can find disaster nonfiction: think *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer's terrifyingly vivid, detailed journalism from the top of Mount Everest.

The controversy long dogging creative nonfiction (a.k.a. literary nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, narrative journalism, etc.) is in its defining properties. As Lee Gutkind, founding editor of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, described in his 2012 book, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Creative Nonfiction – From Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything In Between*, one of the chief complaints about the term “creative nonfiction” is that the word “creative” must suggest that “making things up” is OK.

Gutkind succinctly argues that the “creative” in creative nonfiction refers to literary craft, not yarn-spinning fabrication.

“In some ways, creative nonfiction is like jazz,” Gutkind writes. “It's a rich mix of flavors, ideas, and techniques, some of which are newly invented and others as old as writing itself.”

He continues: “The goal of creative nonfiction is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. But the stories are true.” Any belief that the word “creative” gives the writer license to “make up facts and embellish details” is, Gutkind states sharply, “completely wrong.”

### **Fact versus fiction**

In his book, Gutkind explores one of the more sensational episodes of the debate, when Alex Heard, longtime editorial director of *Outside* magazine, found certain anecdotal stories in the books of David Sedaris beyond belief. He was a fan of Sedaris, but his editor's sensitivity to the implausible tripped an alarm. Heard proceeded to don a fact-checker hat and went about interviewing Sedaris' friends and relatives. And Sedaris himself. There was a there there, and Heard's work culminated in a 2007 piece for *The New Republic*, entitled “This American Lie.”

Heard started off with the following: “The events described in these stories are real,” humorist David Sedaris wrote in the introductory note to *Naked*, his 1997 collection of nonfiction essays. The *New York Times*

PASEVEN/SHUTTERSTOCK; NEO GEOMETRIC/SHUTTERSTOCK

was convinced: When *Naked* hit the best-seller list, it categorized the book as nonfiction.”

One story from *Naked* that Heard fact-checked was Sedaris describing how, when he was 13, he volunteered at a mental institution and ultimately was bit by an elderly patient. In his research, Heard talked to a registered nurse who would have been working at the hospital at the time and faxed her a copy of the story. “He’s lying through his teeth!” she said back to Heard, listing a number of factual errors in the story.

Spurred by the nurse’s revelations, Heard drove on with the project, checking on other stories within the Sedaris canon – each presented as

nonfiction – with a “fleet of e-mails and idiotic-sounding cold calls to dig deeper.” Some out-there stories, to Heard’s surprise, turned out to be true. But he also uncovered a number of “outright fabrications” that “collapsed like a shaky Jenga tower.”

Sedaris admitted to Heard that he sometimes made stuff up – that it’s all about telling “good stories.” Sedaris justified his position by saying if he were to find out that Frank McCourt’s Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *Angela’s Ashes* had been cooked up, he wouldn’t care because he liked the story so much.

To which Heard responded, “OK, but last time I checked, you’re supposed to call that fiction.”

### No free pass

As you can imagine, the *New Republic* story sparked debate about what the boundaries are or should be for humorists like Sedaris. Should humorists – in the interest of presenting larger truths – be granted more latitude than other creative nonfiction writers when it comes to facts?

“Real stories, factual stuff, reported accurately and skillfully, can evoke many emotions, from humor, to tragedy, to fear,” writes Gutkind in his analysis. “It doesn’t follow that humorists alone should receive a free pass – and a shortcut to larger truths.”

For my part, I agree with Heard and Gutkind, if only for my own enjoyment as a reader. The first (and second) time I read “Ticket to the Fair” by David Foster Wallace, his hilarious account of the 1993 Illinois State Fair for *Harper’s Magazine*, I loved it – in part, I imagine, because I grew up in Iowa and once spent a week at the Iowa state fair, selling magic tricks for a magic supplies store. I was 15 at the time, and it remains one of the weirdest experiences of my life, from seeing what was then called a “freak show” to being around “carnies” to going to a Styx concert (this was in 1978). Still, some of the stuff in “Ticket to the Fair” was so funny it was hard not to wonder if Wallace the novelist couldn’t help himself. That said, I wanted his anecdotes

## IMMERSION AND THE CREATIVE NONFICTION LIFE

A good creative nonfiction writer goes well beyond Google search when researching a story. For a powerful example, read Andrea Elliott’s 2022 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival & Hope in an American City*.

Starting in 2012, Elliott followed an 11-year-old child named Dasani growing up poor and often homeless in New York City. Elliott immersed herself in the daily life of Dasani and her family (including seven siblings). As the *New York Times* described it, Elliott spent eight years “following Dasani and her family virtually everywhere: at shelters, schools, courts, welfare offices, therapy sessions, parties.”

Elliott’s reporting used notetaking, audio recording

(132 hours), and cellphone video recording (28 hours) to capture scenes and dialogue. Any reporting that she didn’t witness firsthand she corroborated by interviewing sources present. To check matters like tone and accuracy, she read passages of the book out loud to Dasani.

An additional layer of book research included reviewing 14,325 records from government agencies and the like. The book contains 50 pages worth of end notes to support her reporting. “The reporting has an intimate, almost limitless feel to it,” continues the *NYT*. “The result of this unflinching, tenacious reporting is a rare and powerful work whose stories will live inside you long after you’ve read them.”



Ploi Pirapokin

to be real because this is what fueled the humor. Unfortunately – for me anyway – my suspicions were at least partly confirmed when I read D.T. Max’s biography on Wallace. This is when I initially found out that one of the characters in Wallace’s story – referred to as “native companion” – was not his high school prom date as told in the story but a manufactured version of a woman Wallace had been dating at the time. From then on, I wasn’t sure what to believe and what not to believe in Wallace’s nonfiction.

(By the way, Josh Roiland does an impeccable job of analysis on the subject of Wallace’s role in creative nonfiction in his study, “I’m Not a Journalist – I’m More Like a Novelist With a Tennis Background.”)

How exactly do you get on the right path with creative nonfiction? This was my key question when I reached out to the nonfiction editor at the *Newfound Journal*, who teaches for the Creative Nonfiction Foundation. Ploi has an MFA in creative writing from San Francisco State and is accomplished both in fiction and nonfiction. She also teaches classes at the University of Hong Kong, the UCLA Extension writers program, and WritingWorkshops.com.

• • •

**As both a writer and a teacher, how do you define creative nonfiction? What kind of boundaries are there?**

To quote *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, creative nonfiction is “True stories, well told.” I had an amazing press run with journalists last year for a viral Twitter thread about witnessing a fight

featuring Thai Power Rangers at a ramen restaurant in Oakland. I was able to see, in real time, how journalists collected evidence and worked with the restaurant to write their story within 24 hours.

Here’s what I learned: Don’t lie about checkable facts. When in doubt, leave it out. Admit what you did in-page in off-record interviews, to your editor; hell, even admit in your writing that your memory is fallible. The draw of nonfiction is that it’s true, and you had access to that truth and lived to tell it. You always have the freedom to present and express the story

in any way, shape, or form that speaks to you based on the facts that were researched or given. Readers enter your nonfiction work with the belief that what you say happened, which is why you have the responsibility as the voice to your story to be held accountable for shining a light to it.

**Can you describe your path into the nonfiction work you do? Were there particular writers or teachers who inspired you to build the skills you use?**

The allure of being a fiction writer, especially if you’re marginalized in any

BRANDON ESPY

way, is that everything that you write that appears believable and sincere – especially if it features your culture, ethnicity, any autobiographical information, gender, or sexual identity – will be considered nonfiction.

When I started submitting my short stories over 10 years ago, sometimes panelists, jurors, and editors would ask me if I was writing nonfiction, which inspired me to try it. At the time, I wrote from a place of wanting to prove that my fiction was equal to my nonfiction in craft, heart, and intention. Over time, nonfiction became my playful reprieve from fiction that supplemented my creative practice, but that's when I saw that nonfiction is more egalitarian of a genre to write in than fiction and much more accessible to the public than short stories.

It's normal to wonder if an author can write such an accurate and honest story without having endured the exact situation themselves, but does investigating into the parallels between the writing and the author's life really satisfy our search for the truth? What happens after you've found that truth? What can you do with it?

I found personal essays, memoirs, and lyric essays freeing to construct, given that I already had themes, research, and experiences I wanted to explore, and my desire to connect and be in conversation with others has always outshone my desire to simply be seen or recognized.

Coming from Asia, aka “The Cultural Pioneers of Gaslighting,” it was profound when Vievee Francis [a poet and professor at Dartmouth College], one of the first authors I shared my nonfiction with, said my feelings were valid. [Author of Lambda Literary Award nominee *Boy Erased*] Garrard Conley inspired me to stand up for what I write – no opposition to my truth will ever feel as destructive as erasing myself again. That gave me the courage to react and participate with contemporary writers who push on form and structure to extend the possibilities of nonfiction and who constantly show us that our imagination is



“Readers enter your nonfiction work with the belief that what you say happened, which is why you have the responsibility as the voice to your story to be held accountable for shining a light to it.”

essential to our real, off-the-page lives and for a better world.

**When you teach a class in creative nonfiction, what kind of key objectives do you have in mind?**

I'm drawn and connected to nonfiction that features our humanity.

We lie. Make mistakes. Respond in petty ways. Cause unintentional and intentional harm. Have blind spots, coping mechanisms, and flaws that contextualize our intentions, behaviors, actions, and even regrets.

Naturally, we avoid sharing our worst selves on the immortal page and wish that the act of confessing and the sensational content of our perceived sins will be enough for our writing to resonate with others. Hiding and

prostrating oneself to hordes of strangers you know will judge you, unfortunately, is not sustainable – that's how you become bitter or resentful.

When teaching, my main objective is to create a community of humility and acceptance. If we can practice compassion, vulnerability, and patience in workshop, it will show up in our writing, and we'll feel freer to bloom on the page. More than anything, we learn to be more compassionate and patient with ourselves, in our reflections, in how we want to remember things, and how we may want to be remembered as full human beings.

**What advice do you have for the new writer who is embarking into creative nonfiction?**

Separate a writing career from the actual writing. Writing is a process, and we only catch the highlights of someone's career when they are on the up and up. No one is on your radar when they're hibernating to write a book for 15 years or if there's a personal life matter they must attend to.

What alleviates the pressure for me is as writers, there are hundreds of authors (your worldwide, global co-workers and colleagues) and published examples you can draw inspiration from to help guide or shape your work – as a template, as a launching pad. Your first draft may make zero sense to anyone but yourself. That doesn't mean you should never write again. If you keep revising, you'll discover new approaches to language, structure, and tone that could better express what you're trying to say.

There's sadly no shortcut to writing something that stands the test of time and has its own life once it has left your fingertips. Rewriting, re-remembering what happened, and repositioning where you are writing from (your distance to the subject matter, the story) takes time, and you deserve to give yourself that space to dream. 📖

*T.J. Murphy is the editor of The Writer. Follow him on Twitter @tjmurphywriter.*

# ADVICE *FROM THE* FRONTLINES



**Against everything from gig economics to ChatGPT, how do you make it in the 2023 world of freelance writing?**

**By Natalie Weiner**





## “What advice do you have for an aspiring writer?”

is a question that any person who has been published fields inevitably at some point, not because of any particular success but because the field can seem so nebulous and impenetrable from the outside that those looking to get started are understandably often left grasping for any shred of concrete, useful information. Maybe *this* person, they imagine, will turn up a first step that is unequivocally right and will open up some imagined self-explanatory path.

As a person who has attempted to respond to this question, I find it hard to feel like my answers are very satisfying. Even more so than in the past, there is no particular path to follow or ladder to climb – a reality that is both liberating and more than a little terrifying. There might have been an easy answer at some point, but there definitely isn’t right now, as media companies launch and fold in the space of months, and ever-evolving media and platforms challenge the written word for consumers’ constantly shrinking attention spans.

When it comes to offering advice to freelance writers, the answers become still more complex. Most writers are freelance writers, and certainly even more start out that way – yet the current flux of the media landscape makes

it tough to full-throatedly recommend the job to anyone, especially those who’d like to make a full-time living at it.

I was thrust back into full-time freelance work in 2020, when I was laid off like so many others due to my company’s financial concerns around the COVID-19 pandemic. Even with the connections I had made and clips I had from years as a staffer, it was still scary. But the combination of what I had built to that point and the skills and ideas that I had developed when I was just starting out has helped me keep finding not just work but new, exciting opportunities that I wouldn’t have had access to as a staffer – as well as a lot more flexibility. What follows are a few of the ideas I keep coming back to even as the industry changes.

### **Keep what you’re passionate about front and center – especially when you’re just starting out.**

Whether you’re interested in writing fiction, nonfiction, investigative journalism, criticism, or anything else, your biggest asset as a writer is your specific point of view – the questions that you can ask and the answers you can dig up that no one else would think to pursue.

That’s why I recommend thinking of your work as two interconnected

tracks. First, the opportunities that lend you credibility – ones that may not involve writing your dream project but allow you to work with a thoughtful editor or get your words seen by more people or, very importantly, put you in a better position to pay the bills. Second are the ideas that you just can't get out of your head, that you feel driven to pursue even if everyone thinks they sound stupid.

I know my work has always had these two components from the beginning – honestly, whether I've had a staff role or not. But if you have never had anything published, it probably sounds like unusable advice. You want to know how to pitch, how to network with editors, what makes a piece salable. I think always keeping both considerations in mind, though, helps those things fall into place.

On my path to becoming a writer, I was looking for those concrete answers,

too. That's why I enrolled in Columbia Journalism School right after I received my bachelor's degree. About six weeks later, I dropped out. Not because journalism school is bad or because Columbia's specifically is bad or anything like that; but it just wasn't right for me. I didn't feel as though I was getting those answers that I came for – quite possibly because those answers don't exist.

The only place I could find that would take me on as a writer was a Caribbean music blog, some distance away from my interest in jazz and American popular music but a chance to write (for free) all the same. My editor there was invested in my work and gave me chances to learn and experiment. This led to my first paid clip, a review of a dancehall album for NPR. I would put my work there in the first category, in that it helped me get my footing as a writer – and yet it was tied to the kind of historically grounded, well-contextualized work I wanted to do in other relatively niche music genres. At the same time, I was able to leverage those clips into chances to write for an affiliated jazz site (also for free), staying grounded in what got me into writing about music in the first place.

If I were starting again, I would tell myself to lean into that even more with a personal blog or newsletter. If you care about telling a story – care in the deepest, most personal way, not because it's trendy or seems like it will find an audience – other people will care about reading it. It is undoubtedly a hustle trying to tell those stories while you're working on just getting something published, but that is the part of the hustle that will pay dividends.

**Get used to constantly reevaluating your personal time/money equation.**

Talking about “hustling,” of course, leads us to “hustle culture,” which is incredibly easy to fall victim to as a freelancer. Many rates haven't changed since the '90s (and in some cases the '70s), making it harder than



ever to rely on freelance work to survive. Ultimately, you have to decide what makes writing worth it for you and, specifically, which gigs are worthwhile. When I was starting out, I wrote a lot for free and worked as a bartender. That's a lifestyle that can be tenable when you're 23 (as I was) but may feel a lot less practical at 33 or 43. Writing is real work, and it takes time. Churning out rote blog posts for \$20 a pop just so that when you Google your name something comes up may not take long to feel more draining than rewarding.

There's no shame in enabling your writing with a day job, and unless you're doing a pretty specific kind of journalism and ignoring direct conflicts of interest, no shame in doing the same with copywriting/marketing/public relations work. For me, the latter is something like my day job, despite the fact that it's all freelance. The less I'm interested in the project, the more I charge – a necessity, after all, because it's harder to invest in something you don't care about as much, and writing, as I mentioned, is deeply personal even when you're doing something as mechanical as typing up a press release. That work allows me to take on projects I really care about that might pay less.

Of course, you're always searching for that dream assignment – the pitch you've been working on for ages landing at a visible publication that pays you more than you expect. But it's a lot easier to hold out for that, and to stay energized to keep chasing it, if you don't constantly feel like you're pouring your heart out into a black hole.

An advertisement for Gotham Writers Creative Writing Classes. The background is a photograph of a lake with a city skyline in the distance and a small boat with two people on the water. The word "Write" is written in large, white, cursive letters across the middle. At the top, the Gotham Writers logo is visible. At the bottom, the text reads: "Creative Writing Classes Online, Remote, &amp; NYC" and "GOTHAMWRITERS.COM".

## Find your niche (and make it obvious).

One of the reasons that I felt so out of place in journalism school was that my interests lie mostly in what's considered "soft news" – entertainment writing and criticism, as opposed to the "hard news" of, say, politics, commerce, or systemic inequality. Of course, there's never been a clean divide between these two things, and the further along I got as a writer, the more I found myself needing some of the basic "hard news" skills to write my "soft news" stories – just as "hard news" journalists sometimes struggle to write

style, your in-depth knowledge of a niche industry or your knack for writing short stories with a particular bent.

Don't limit yourself, but get specific – and advertise your niche, whether on your website or newsletter or on social media. Of course, Twitter and Instagram are double-edged swords and deserve plenty more caveats than recommendations. But I don't think I would be writing about sports professionally if I hadn't tweeted about them, a lot. It comes back to being true to what you care about; people can suss out clout-chasing a mile away. Post as you write, with the intention of helping

responsiveness to edits and emails. Especially if you're in journalism, you want to be an editor's first call when a story breaks and they need a time-sensitive follow-up, and the only way to earn that trust is by meeting those bare-minimum standards the first and every time.

I know as well (better?) than anyone what a bugbear procrastination can be, how deep the anxiety that fuels it (especially when writing about a topic you care about) goes. But done, as is so often said, is better than perfect – your editor can't do their part of helping improve the piece and clarify-

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**IF YOU CARE ABOUT TELLING A STORY – CARE IN THE DEEPEST, MOST PERSONAL WAY, NOT BECAUSE IT'S TRENDY OR SEEMS LIKE IT WILL FIND AN AUDIENCE – OTHER PEOPLE WILL CARE ABOUT READING IT.**

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about cultural context that might flesh out their stories.


But if I had continued in journalism school and wound up starting my career in a more traditional way – as a cub reporter at a local paper or TV affiliate – I might not have been able to hone in as easily on the things that fascinated me, the passions that now lead plenty of editors to my inbox because they know that I am a reliable voice on, for example, jazz, women's college basketball, and country music. I didn't start out as an expert on all those things, and, in fact, have come to the latter two over my years as a writer. But because I jumped into all of them headfirst, often fighting against skeptical editors every step of the way, I've been able to give my name a kind of associated shorthand. You just want an editor to have something, *anything*, where their knee-jerk response is, "Oh, we need [your name] for this." Maybe it's because of your location or your

people better understand what exactly you're about.

### Don't forget the basics.

If you are not responsive, timely, and professional as a freelancer, you won't get called again – and that makes it nearly impossible to begin a career in the field. It's of a piece with the aforementioned advice about becoming an editor's go-to for a topic. Another way to an editor's heart is clean copy in by (or before!) a deadline, coupled with

ing your points if they don't have anything to work with.

The basics bring us back to that initial point, of making the foundation of your work the ideas and projects you care about. Especially as a freelancer, you'll work way too hard to afford to get cynical about the work. If you can't find a seed of joy in the process, whether it comes from sating your curiosity through research, speaking to people as a reporter, or the craft of writing itself, it's just not worth doing. Tapping into your wildest flights of fancy, the most random rabbit holes, and most creative perspectives *is* the fruit of your labor – the byline is just a nice bonus. 



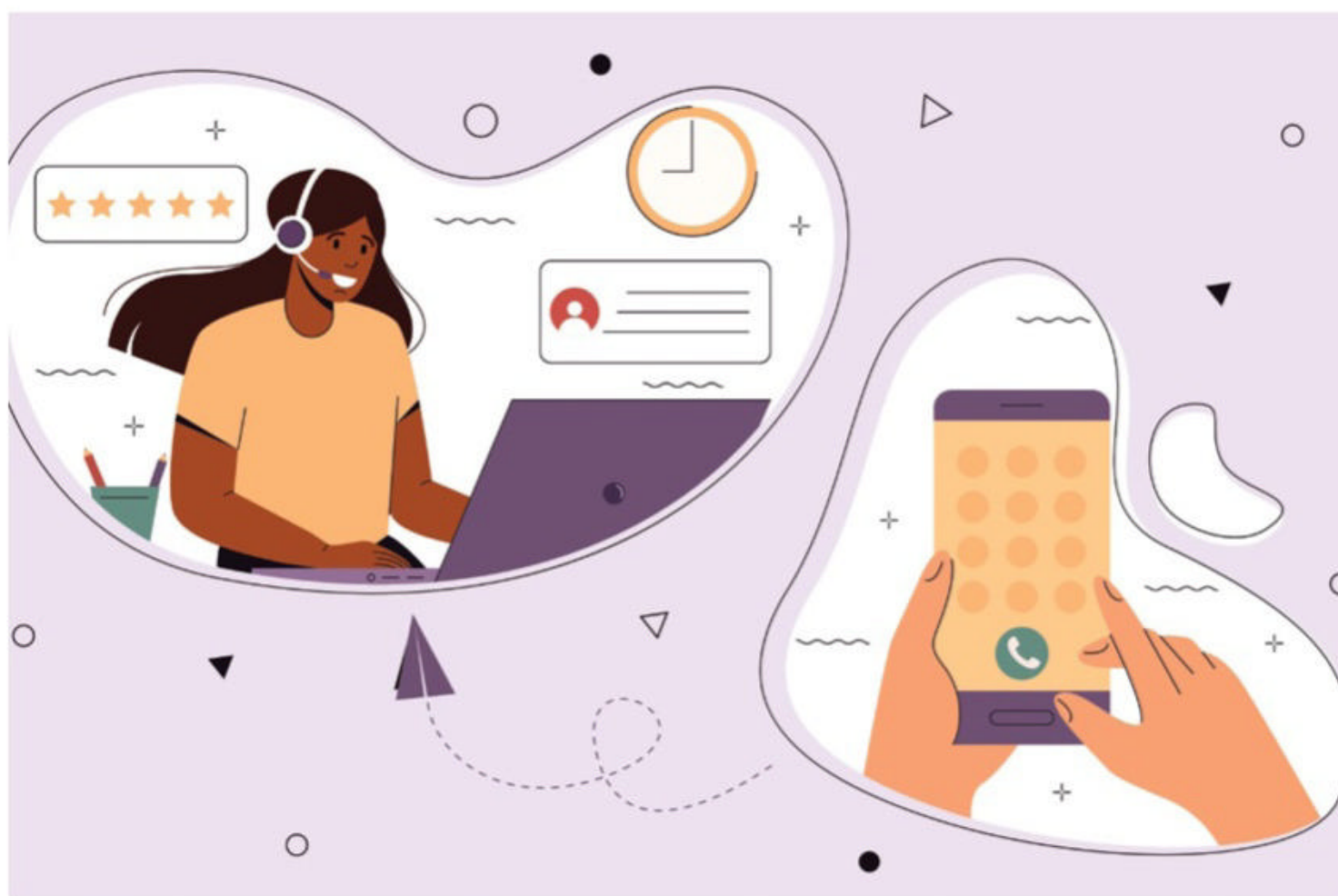
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*Natalie Weiner is a Dallas-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, Rolling Stone, Billboard, and NPR, among other publications. A selection of her work can be found at [natalieweiner.com](http://natalieweiner.com).*

# Postscript

LITERARY AGENTS

Before you can approach an editor or publishing house, it's a good idea to seek agent representation. The following agents are a small sampling of what the industry has to offer. Find more listings at [writermag.com](http://writermag.com). →



## THE MONTH AHEAD

### April 1

The We Are ALL Readers annual book festival will be held in North Kingstown, RI, celebrating diverse children's literature. [weareallreaders.com](http://weareallreaders.com)

### April 8

Freelance writer and *Demon Copperhead* author Barbara Kingsolver was born on this day in 1955.

### April 13

The Monterey Writers Retreat starts today. Hang out with veteran authors and agents while taking breaks to visit the majestic coastline. [montereywritersretreat.com](http://montereywritersretreat.com)

### April 13

National Scrabble Day. Rainy out? Break out the Scrabble. Not that rainy? Get outside for a while. *Then* break out the Scrabble.

# Literary Agents

Information in this section is provided to *The Writer* by the individual markets and events; for more information, contact those entities directly.

F = Fiction N = Nonfiction P = Poetry C = Children's Y = Young adult O = Other

## **F N C Y 3 Seas Literary Agency**

Represents romance, women's fiction, science fiction/fantasy, YA and middle-grade fiction, and select nonfiction titles. No email queries accepted.

**Contact:** 3 Seas Literary Agency, P.O. Box 444, Sun Prairie, WI 53590.  
threeseaslit@aol.com  
threeseasagency.com

## **F N The Aaron M. Priest Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. Query by email only. No attachments.

**Contact:** The Aaron M. Priest Literary Agency, 200 W. 41st St., 21st Floor, New York, NY 10036.

See website for specific agent email addresses.  
aaronpriest.com

## **F C Y Andrea Brown Literary Agency**

Represents mainly authors of children's literature but some romance and upmarket titles as well. Seeks picture books, easy readers, chapter books, middle grade, YA, juvenile nonfiction, crossover fiction, illustration, and graphic novels. Accepts queries by email only.

**Contact:** Andrea Brown Literary Agency. Check website for agents' email addresses.  
andreabrownlit.com

## **F N C Andy Ross Agency**

See website for all categories. Submit via email.

**Contact:** Andy Ross Agency, 767 Santa Ray Ave., Oakland, CA 94610.  
andyrossagency@hotmail.com  
andyrossagency.com

## **F N Y O Ayesha Pande Literary**

See website for all categories. Submit via website form.

**Contact:** Ayesha Pande Literary. Email through website.  
pandeliterary.com

## **F N Barbara Braun Associates**

See website for all categories. Send queries by email only.

**Contact:** Barbara Braun Associates, 7 E. 14th St., #19F, New York, NY 10003.  
bbasubmissions@gmail.com  
barbarabraunagency.com

## **C Y Barry Goldblatt Literary**

Represents authors of picture books, chapter books, middle-grade books, and

YA. Submit queries via website.

**Contact:** Barry Goldblatt Literary, C/O Industrious, Brooklyn, 594 Dean St., 2nd Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11238.  
query@bgliterary.com  
bgliterary.com

## **F N Baldi Agency**

See website for all categories. Submit queries by email or regular mail.

**Contact:** Baldi Agency, 233 W. 99th St., Suite 19C, New York, NY 10025.  
212-222-3213.  
info@baldibooks.com  
baldibooks.com

## **F N C The Bent Agency**

Represents authors of commercial and literary fiction, memoir, nonfiction, and children's literature. See website for specific agents' interests.

**Contact:** The Bent Agency, 529 W 42nd St., Suite 3P, New York, NY 10036. Check website for agents' email addresses.  
thebentagency.com

## **F N Betsy Amster Literary Enterprises**

See website for all categories. Submit queries by email only.

**Contact:** Betsy Amster Literary Enterprises, 607 Foothill Blvd. #1061, La Canada Flintridge, CA 91012.  
b.amster.assistant@gmail.com  
amsterlit.com

## **F N Beverley Slopen Literary Agency**

Represents literary and commercial fiction, history, narrative nonfiction, anthropology, biography, and some true crime and self-help.

**Contact:** Beverley Slopen Agency, 131 Bloor St. W., Suite 711, Toronto, ON M5S 1S3 Canada.  
beverley@slopenagency.ca  
slopenagency.com

## **F N Y B.J. Robbins Literary Agency**

See website for all categories.

**Contact:** B.J. Robbins Literary Agency.  
robbsliterationsubmissions@gmail.com  
bjrobbsliterations.com

## **F N C Blue Ridge Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. Submit a synopsis and the first three chapters by email.

**Contact:** Blue Ridge Literary Agency.

BRLA@blueridgeagency.com  
blueridgeagency.com

## **F N Y C BookEnds**

Currently considering romance, YA, mystery, science fiction and fantasy, picture books, middle grade, and women's fiction. Also represents books on current affairs, reference, business, parenting, pop culture, and general nonfiction.

**Contact:** bookendsliterary.com

## **F N The Book Group**

See website for all categories. Submit query and 10 sample pages by email (no attachments).

**Contact:** The Book Group.  
submissions@thebookgroup.com  
thebookgroup.com

## **F N C Y Bradford Literary Agency**

Accepts email queries only.

**Contact:** Bradford Literary Agency, 5694 Mission Center Rd. #347, San Diego, CA 92108.  
hannah@bradfordlit.com  
bradfordlit.com

## **F N The Bukowski Agency**

Accepting fiction and nonfiction submissions from authors who reside in Canada. Send submissions by regular mail.

**Contact:** The Bukowski Agency, 20 Prince Arthur Ave., Suite 12-1, Toronto, ON M5R 1B1, Canada.  
info@bukowskiagency.com  
bukowskiagency.com

## **F N Carol Mann Agency**

Represents general fiction, biography, and general nonfiction. Submit queries by email.

**Contact:** Carol Mann Agency, 55 5th Ave., New York, NY 10003.  
submissions@carolmannagency.com  
carolmannagency.com

## **F N Chalberg & Sussman**

See website for all categories. Submit queries by email only.

**Contact:** Chalberg & Sussman. See website for individual agents' email addresses.  
chalbergsussman.com

## **F N The Cheney Agency**

Submit a query by email or by regular mail with a SASE.

**Contact:** The Cheney Agency, 39 West 14th St., Suite 403, New York, NY 10011. submissions@cheneyliterary.com cheneyassoc.com

#### **F N C Y Cooke McDermid**

See website for all categories. Email query only. No attachments.

**Contact:** The Cooke Agency, 320 Front St. W #1105, Toronto, ON M5V 3B6, Canada. admin@cookemcdermid.com cookeagency.ca

#### **F N Cornerstone Literary Agency**

See website for all categories.

**Contact:** Cornerstone Literary, 4525 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 208, Los Angeles, CA 90010. info@cornerstoneliterary.com cornerstoneliterary.com

#### **F N C O Curtis Brown**

Represents adult and children's authors of all genres, including illustrators. Not accepting plays, screenplays, or musicals.

**Contact:** Attn: Agent's name, Curtis Brown, Ltd., 228 East 45th St., Suite 310, New York, NY 10017. info@cbltd.com curtisbrown.com

#### **F N Y Darhansoff & Verrill Literary Agents**

Most interested in literary fiction, narrative nonfiction, memoir, sophisticated suspense, and both fiction and nonfiction for younger readers. Submit via email.

**Contact:** Darhansoff & Verrill, 275 Fair St., Suite 17D, Kingston NY, 12401. info@dvagency.com dvagency.com

#### **F N Y David Black Agency**

Represents fiction and nonfiction for adults and young adults. Check website for agents' individual interests, email addresses, and submission instructions. No paper queries.

**Contact:** David Black Agency, 335 Adams St., Suite 2707, Brooklyn, NY 11201. davidblackagency.com

#### **F N Doe Coover Agency**

See website for categories represented

and specific agents' interests. Query by email only.

**Contact:** The Doe Coover Agency, P.O. Box 668, Winchester, MA 01890. info@doecooveragency.com doecooveragency.com

#### **F N Don Congdon Associates**

Represents authors of fiction and nonfiction. Check website for individual agents' interests. Accepts queries by email or regular mail.

**Contact:** Don Congdon Associates, 88 Pine St., Suite 730, New York, New York 10005. dca@doncongdon.com doncongdon.com

#### **F C Y Donald Maass Literary Agency**

Welcoming authors of nonfiction and all genres of fiction: science fiction, fantasy, mystery, thriller, women's, literary, and middle grade and YA. Only email queries accepted.

**Contact:** Donald Maass Literary Agency, 1000 Dean St., Suite 252, Brooklyn, NY 11238. maassagency.com

#### **F N Y Doug Grad Literary Agency**

Represents fiction and narrative nonfiction, including memoir, thrillers, mysteries, historical fiction, romance, military, and theater. Query via email before submitting.

**Contact:** Doug Grad Literary Agency. doug.grad@dgliterary.com dgliterary.com

#### **F N C Y Dunow, Carlson & Lerner**

Handles literary and commercial fiction, narrative nonfiction, children's, and YA fiction. Submit queries by email or regular mail (include SASE with adequate postage for return of materials).

**Contact:** Dunow, Carlson & Lerner Literary Agency, 27 W. 20th St., Suite 1107, New York, NY 10011. mail@dclagency.com dclagency.com

#### **F N Dystel, Goderich & Bourret**

Represents authors of fiction and

nonfiction. See website for specific agents' interests and email addresses.

**Contact:** Dystel, Goderich & Bourret LLC, 1 Union Square West, Suite 904, New York, NY 10003. dystel.com

#### **F N C Y Einstein Literary Management**

Founded in 2015. See website for all categories. Email queries and first 10 pages only.

**Contact:** Einstein Literary Management. info@einsteinliterary.com einsteinliterary.com

#### **F N Emilie Stewart Literary Agency**

Specializes in literary and commercial fiction and nonfiction. Query by email only.

**Contact:** Emilie Stewart Literary Agency. info@emiliestewartagency.com emiliestewartagency.com

#### **F N Emma Sweeney Agency**

Handles general fiction, historical fiction, and narrative nonfiction. Submit query via email only.

**Contact:** Emma Sweeney Agency, 245 E. 80th St., Suite 7E, New York, NY 10075. queries@emmasweeneyagency.com emmasweeneyagency.com

#### **F N C O The Ethan Ellenberg Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. Submit by regular mail or email.

**Contact:** Ethan Ellenberg. agent@ethanellenberg.com ethanellenberg.com

#### **F N Fairbank Literary Representation**

See website for all categories. Query by email or postal mail.

**Contact:** Fairbank Literary Representation, 21 Lyman St., Waltham, MA 02452. queries@fairbankliterary.com fairbankliterary.com

#### **F N Y FinePrint Literary Management**

Seeks fiction and nonfiction for adults and young adults.

**Contact:** FinePrint Literary Management,

## THE MONTH AHEAD

### April 15

Now in its fourth decade, the Rally of Writers - held in Lansing, MI - features more than 15 sessions with Michigan writers, poets, teachers, publishers, and editors. arallyofwriters.wordpress.com

### April 18

National Tax Day in 2023. Use the following Albert Einstein quote as a prompt to write 500 words: "The hardest thing in the world to understand is the income tax." Go crazy.

### April 18

It's National Haiku Poetry Day. Seventeen syllables, three lines. Have at it.

### April 28

It's National Great Poetry Reading Day. Treat yourself to a new volume and read aloud to a family member or friend.

207 W. 106th St., Suite 1D, New York, NY 10025.

info@fineprintlit.com  
fineprintlit.com

#### **C Y Flannery Literary**

Fiction and nonfiction for middle grade and young adults, all genres. Email queries only.

**Contact:** Flannery Literary.  
jennifer@flanneryliterary.com  
flanneryliterary.com

#### **F N Frances Goldin Literary Agency**

See website for all categories.

**Contact:** Frances Goldin Literary Agency, 214 W. 29th St., Suite 1006, New York, NY 10001.  
agency@goldinlit.com goldinlit.com

#### **F N Y The Friedrich Agency**

See website for all categories. Submit via email only. No attachments.

**Contact:** The Friedrich Agency.  
Check website for agents' email addresses. friedrichagency.com

#### **F N Gelfman Schneider Literary Agents**

See website for all categories.

**Contact:** Gelfman Schneider Literary Agents, 850 Seventh Ave., Suite 903, New York, NY 10019.  
mail@gelfmanschneider.com  
gelfmanschneider.com

#### **F N Y The Gernert Company**

See website for all categories. Do not send queries to individual agents. Submit via email or regular mail.

**Contact:** The Gernert Company, 136 E. 57th St., New York, NY 10022.  
info@thegernertco.com  
thegernertco.com

#### **C Y Great River Literary**

Specializes in fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry for children and teens, from board and picture books to middle grade (including chapter books) and young adult. No attachments.

**Contact:** Great River Literary.  
greatriverliterary@gmail.com  
greatriverliterary.com

#### **C Y The Greenhouse Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. See website for specific agents' interests. Online submission manager queries only.

**Contact:** The Greenhouse Literary Agency.  
info@greenhouseliterary.com  
greenhouseliterary.com

#### **F N Hartline Literary Agency**

Represents fiction and nonfiction for inspirational and mainstream markets.

Submit queries via email per website instructions.

**Contact:** Hartline Literary Agency.  
See website for agents' email addresses.  
hartlineagency.com

#### **F N C Y Harvey Klinger Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. See website for specific agents' interests and email addresses.

**Contact:** Harvey Klinger Literary Agency, 300 W. 55th St., #11V, New York, NY 10019.  
queries@harveyklinger.com  
harveyklinger.com

#### **F N Y Helen Heller Agency**

Represents authors of commercial and literary fiction, nonfiction, and YA fiction. Submit through email. See website for specific agents' interests and email addresses.

**Contact:** The Helen Heller Agency.  
info@thehelenhelleragency.com  
thehelenhelleragency.com

#### **F N C Y HG Literary**

See website for all categories. Check website for agents' interests and email addresses. Email submissions only.

**Contact:** HG Literary, 6 West 18th St., Suite 7R, New York, NY 10011.  
See website for agents' email addresses.  
hsgagency.com

#### **F N Hornfischer Literary Management**

Specializes in serious and commercial nonfiction and select fiction. Submit by email or regular mail.

**Contact:** Hornfischer Literary Management.  
queries@hornfischerlit.com  
hornfischerlit.com

#### **F N Y InkWell Management**

Seeks fiction, YA, and nonfiction. Currently accepting submissions in all genres except screenplays. Submit queries by email.

**Contact:** InkWell Management, 521 Fifth Ave., Suite 2600, New York, NY 10175.  
info@inkwellmanagement.com  
inkwellmanagement.com

#### **F N Y IGLA**

See website for all categories. No screenplays or children's picture books. Email queries only.

**Contact:** Irene Goodman Literary Agency, 27 West 24th St., Suite 804, New York, NY 10010.  
irenegoodman.com

#### **N James Peter Associates**

Accepting queries for adult nonfiction

books of all subject areas. Send queries via regular mail with SASE for reply.

**Contact:** Gene Brissie, James Peter Associates, Inc., P.O. Box 358, New Canaan, CT 06840.  
gene\_brissie@msn.com  
writersservices.com/reference/  
james-peter-associates-inc

#### **F N Y Jane Rotrosen Agency**

See website for all categories. Submit via email or snail mail; no attachments.

**Contact:** Jane Rotrosen Agency, Attn: Submissions, 318 East 51st St., New York, NY 10022.  
info@janerotrosen.com  
janerotrosen.com

#### **F N C Y Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency**

Represents authors of commercial and literary fiction, nonfiction, and YA/children's books. Check website for agents' specific interests. Query via website submission form.

**Contact:** Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency, 216 E. 75th St., Suite 1E, New York, NY 10021. Email from website. jvnla.com

#### **F N C Y John Hawkins and Associates**

See website for all categories. Submit queries via email.

**Contact:** John Hawkins and Associates, 80 Maiden Ln., STE 1503, New York, NY 10038. jhalit.com

#### **F N Judith Ehrlich Literary Management**

See website for all categories. Submit queries by email only. No attachments.

**Contact:** Judith Ehrlich Literary Management, 146 Central Park West, 20E, New York, NY 10023.  
See website for specific agents' email addresses.  
judithehrlichliterary.com

#### **F N Y Julia Lord Literary Management**

See website for all categories. Submit by email or regular mail. No attachments.

**Contact:** Julia Lord Literary Management.  
query@julialordliterary.com  
julialordliterary.com

#### **F N The LA Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. Contact: Ann Cashman, The LA Literary Agency.  
ann@laliteraryagency.com  
laliteraryagency.com

#### **F N Y C The Laura Dail Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. Submit queries by Query Manager. Check website for agents' specific interests.

**Contact:** The Laura Dail Literary Agency, 121 West 27th St., Suite 1201, New York, NY 10001.  
ldlinc.com

**F N Liza Dawson Associates**

Represents authors of literary and commercial fiction and nonfiction.

**Contact:** Liza Dawson Associates, 121 W. 27th St., Suite 1201, New York, NY 10001.

lwu@lizardawson.com

lizardawsonassociates.com

**N Marcil O'Farrell Literary & Denise Marcil Literary Agency**

See website for all categories.

**Contact:** Anne Marie O'Farrell, 86 Dennis St., Manhasset, NY 11030.

annemarie@marcilofarrellagency.com

marcilofarrellagency.com

**F N C Y Marsal Lyon Literary Agency**

See website for all categories.

**Contact:** Marsal Lyon Literary Agency LLC, PMB 121, 665 San Rodolfo Dr. 124, Solana Beach, CA 92075.

See website for agents' emails.

marsallyonliteraryagency.com

**F N McCormick Literary**

Represents authors of literary and commercial fiction and nonfiction, including memoir, history, narrative, biography, cookbooks, humor, and essays.

**Contact:** McCormick Literary, 150 West 28th St., Suite 903, New York, NY 10001.

queries@mccormicklitt.com

mccormickwilliams.com

**F N C Y Mendel Media Group**

See website for all categories. Submit by email only.

**Contact:** Mendel Media Group LLC, P.O. Box 5032, East Hampton, New York 11937 (Note: Agency is using this address only during pandemic; check website for changes).

query@mendelmedia.com

mendelmedia.com

**F N Movable Type Management**

Represents authors of high-quality commercial fiction and nonfiction with archetypal themes, stories, and characters, especially if they have strong film/TV potential.

**Contact:** Movable Type Management, 244 Madison Ave., Suite 334, New York, NY 10016.

achromy@movabletm.com mtmgmt.net

**F Y C Nelson Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. Submit queries by email only. No attachments.

**Contact:** Nelson Literary Agency, 1732 Wazee St., Suite 207, Denver, CO 80202. 303-292-2805.

info@nelsonagency.com

nelsonagency.com

**F N Y C Park & Fine Literary and Media**

Represents fiction and nonfiction authors, as well as graphic novels, middle grade, and YA. Check website for each agent's specific interests. Submit queries by email only. No attachments.

**Contact:** The Park Literary Group, 55 Broadway, Suite 1601, New York, NY 10006.

info@parkfine.com

parkfine.com

**F N C Philip G. Spitzer Literary Agency**

Specializes in general fiction, mystery, thriller and suspense, sports, politics, children's, and African American. See website for specific agents' interests and email addresses.

**Contact:** Philip G. Spitzer Literary Agency, 50 Talmage Farm Ln., East Hampton, NY 11937.

kim.lombardini@spitzeragency.com

spitzeragency.com

**F N C Y P.S. Literary Agency**

Represents fiction and nonfiction in literary, commercial, romance, women's fiction, LGBT, YA, middle grade, picture books, mystery, thriller, science fiction, memoir, business, politics, health, wellness, sports, humor, pop science, pop psychology, pop culture, design, and lifestyle. Query by email only.

**Contact:** P.S. Literary Agency, 2010 Winston Park Dr., 2nd Floor, Oakville, Ontario, L6H 5R7 Canada.

info@psliterary.com psliterary.com

**N Regina Ryan Books**

See website for all categories. Query online only.

**Contact:** Regina Ryan Books.

queries@reginaryanbooks.com

reginaryanbooks.com

**F N Sagalyn/CAA**

Represents authors of upmarket nonfiction, business books, and mainstream fiction. Submit queries by email only.

**Contact:** Raphael Sagalyn.

query@sagalyn.com sagalyn.com

**F N Y C Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency**

Interested in literary and commercial fiction and nonfiction, including YA, middle grade, and picture books. Check website for individual agents' interests and email addresses. See website for details on how each agent prefers to receive queries.

**Contact:** Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency.

queries@dijkstraagency.com

dijkstraagency.com

**N Salkind Literary Agency**

Seeking general nonfiction trade books

and textbooks. See website for submission instructions and email addresses.

**Contact:** Salkind Literary Agency.

info@studiob.com

studiob.com/salkindagency/agents.html

**F N Y Sarah Jane Freymann****Literary Agency**

Seeking nonfiction: self-help and spiritual books, cookbooks, narrative nonfiction, memoir, lifestyle, and multicultural issues. Also seeks literary, commercial, and YA fiction. Prefers email submissions

**Contact:** Sarah Jane Freymann Literary Agency.

submissions@sarahjanefreymann.com

sarahjanefreymann.com

**F N C Scovil Galen Ghosh Literary Agency**

Represents fiction and nonfiction for adults, young adults, and middle grade.

Email queries preferred.

**Contact:** Scovil Galen Ghosh Literary Agency, 276 Fifth Ave., Suite 708, New York, NY 10001.

sgglit.com

**F N Y C Serendipity Literary Agency**

Represents adult, children's, and YA fiction and adult nonfiction. Submit query from website form only.

**Contact:** Serendipity Literary Agency, 305 Gates Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11216.

info@serendipitylit.com

serendipitylit.com

**C Y Sheldon Fogelman Agency**

Represents authors and illustrators for all genres of children's and YA books.

**Contact:** Sheldon Fogelman Agency, 420 E. 72nd St., New York, NY 10021.

212-532-7250.

submissions@sheldonfogelmanagency.com

sheldonfogelmanagency.com

**F N Sheree Bykofsky Associates**

See website for all categories. Email queries only. No attachments.

**Contact:** Sheree Bykofsky, 4326 Harbor Beach Blvd., PO Box 706, Brigantine, NJ 08203.

submitbee@aol.com

shereebee.com

**Y C Stimola Literary Studio, Inc.**

Represents preschool through YA fiction and nonfiction, including picture books, novels, and graphic novels. Check website for current interests. Submit via website form.

**Contact:** Stimola Literary Studio.

info@stimolaliterarystudio.com

stimolaliterarystudio.com

**F N The Talbot Fortune Agency**

See website for all categories. Query by email with first five pages of manuscript.



No attachments.

**Contact:** Talbot Fortune Agency.  
queries@talbotfortuneagency.com  
talbotfortuneagency.com

#### **F N Tessler Literary Agency LLC**

Full-service boutique agency representing nonfiction, including narrative, popular science, memoir, history, psychology, business, biography, food, and travel and literary, women's, and commercial fiction. No genre fiction or children's books. Submit queries from website.  
**Contact:** Tessler Literary Agency, 27 W. 20th St., Suite 1003, New York, NY 10011. tessleragency.com

#### **F N C Y Thompson Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. Email submissions only.  
**Contact:** Thompson Literary Agency, 48 Great Jones St. #5F New York, New York 10012.  
info@thompsonliterary.com  
thompsonliterary.com

#### **F N C Y O Transatlantic Agency**

Represents authors and illustrators of adult trade fiction and nonfiction, children's and YA literature, and graphic novels. See website for each agent's interests and email addresses.  
**Contact:** Transatlantic Agency, 2 Bloor St. East, Suite 3500, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4W 1A8.  
transatlanticagency.com

#### **F N C Y Triada US Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. Prefers email submissions. No attachments.  
**Contact:** Triada US Literary Agency, Dr. Uwe Stender, P.O. Box 561, Sewickley, PA 15143.  
uwe@triadaus.com triadaus.com

#### **F N Y Trident Media Group**

Actively seeking new and established authors in both fiction and nonfiction. See website for specific agents' interests and email addresses.  
**Contact:** Trident Media Group, 355 Lexington Ave., 12th FL, New York, NY 10017.  
info@tridentmediagroup.com  
tridentmediagroup.com

#### **F N Y C Veritas Literary Agency**

See website for all categories. See website for each agent's interests, email addresses, and submission guidelines.  
**Contact:** Veritas Literary Agency, 601 Van Ness Ave., Opera Plaza Suite E, San Francisco, CA 94102.  
Check website for agents' email addresses.  
veritasliterary.com

#### **F N Y Vicky Bijur Literary Agency**

See website for all categories.  
**Contact:** Vicky Bijur Literary Agency.  
queries@vickybijuragency.com  
vickybijuragency.com

#### **F N C Y Victoria Sanders & Associates**

Represents authors of memoir, commercial women's fiction, thrillers, humor, mysteries, high-concept fiction, books for kids, self-help, and YA. Query with first three chapters via email only. No attachments.  
**Contact:** Victoria Sanders & Associates, 440 Buck Rd., Stone Ridge, NY 12484.  
queriesvsa@gmail.com  
victoriasanders.com

#### **F N Wales Literary Agency**

Represents authors of fiction and narrative nonfiction, story-driven narratives, new voices, and progressive cultural and political points of view. Does not represent self-help, how-to, children's books, romance, genre (including mysteries), or screenplays. Submit queries by email only.  
**Contact:** Wales Literary Agency.  
waleslit@waleslit.com waleslit.com

#### **C Y Wernick & Pratt Agency**

Represents authors and illustrators of children's books, both fiction and nonfiction, picture books and novelty books, middle grade, and YA. Send submissions via email only.  
**Contact:** Wernick & Pratt Agency.  
submissions@wernickpratt.com  
wernickpratt.com

#### **F N William Clark Associates**

Represents authors of literary fiction, narrative nonfiction, and translations. Submit queries using online submission form. No screenplays.  
**Contact:** William Clark Associates, 54 West 21st St., Suite 809, New York, NY 10010.  
Email from website. wmclark.com

#### **F N C Y Writers House**

Seeking literary/commercial fiction, women's fiction, sci-fi/fantasy, narrative nonfiction, history, memoir, biography, psychology, science, parenting, cookbooks, how-to, self-help, business, finance, YA, juvenile nonfiction, and picture books.  
**Contact:** Writers House, 120 Broadway, 22nd floor, New York, NY 10271.  
See website for agents' emails.  
writershouse.com

#### **F N YRG Partners**

Accepting fiction and nonfiction queries.  
**Contact:** YRG Partners, 33 West 17th St., PH, New York, NY 10011.  
info@yrgpartners.com  
YRGPartners.com

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### CONFERENCES



### CONTESTS

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### RETREATS

**LIVE FREE AND WRITE.** August 13-18. Writing retreat in Sunapee, NH. Spend an inspiring week working on your memoir or poetry. Enjoy the refreshing New England summer with plentiful writing time, encouraging workshops, homemade meals, and time to relax. Scholarships available. Register early and save: [www.stockton.edu/murphywriting](http://www.stockton.edu/murphywriting)

### WRITING RESOURCES

**It's possible to learn to be funnier.** Visit [www.ThinkingFunny.com](http://www.ThinkingFunny.com) humor-writing resources, workshops, free contests. [getinfo@thinkingfunny.com](mailto:getinfo@thinkingfunny.com)

Dear Gigi,

I am hoping you will be able to help me with a question I have about making mention of celebrities in fictional writing. Would I need to get permission from the celebrity or their estate if they have passed on?

Thanks in advance,

—*PERMISSION SEEKER*

Dear P.S.,

If you're just mentioning the celebrity, living or dead, you don't need to get permission. They are public figures, so they can reasonably expect to get mentioned every once in a while. In the sample you sent over, the celebrities appear as part of a comedy show, but they don't seem to make an appearance to any greater extent, so you should be fine. It would be

a different story if you were thinking of prescribing actions to them; say, for instance, that you had Mariah Carey show up at a party, where she bumps into your protagonist and then proceeds to become as much a part of the narrative as your character – well, that would potentially present a legal problem.

Write on,

—*Gigi*

---

Dear Gigi,

Any tips for writing a POV character who is drastically different from yourself?

—*JUST CURIOUS*

Dear Just,

A lot has been written about this already, so I'm going to give you the broad, overarching strokes:

First of all, be sure you can answer the following question: Why are you wanting to write a POV character drastically different from yourself? What is it about this POV character's culture that interests you or that you think drives the plot in a way that your own POV (or a POV you're already expert in) won't do? You should be able to answer this question in concrete terms, and the answer to this question should serve the narrative over your own ego. (Something like, "It's easier to get published if my character is Black, Asian, or disabled" won't fly, for instance.)

Second, should you decide to go forward in the event that your answer to the above satisfies you: Be respectfully curious. That is to say, do as much research as you possibly can. Get to know the cultures of the POV character; their speech patterns; the systemic intricacies that compound, drive, and populate their lives. You should know this culture as well as you know your own before you sit down to write.

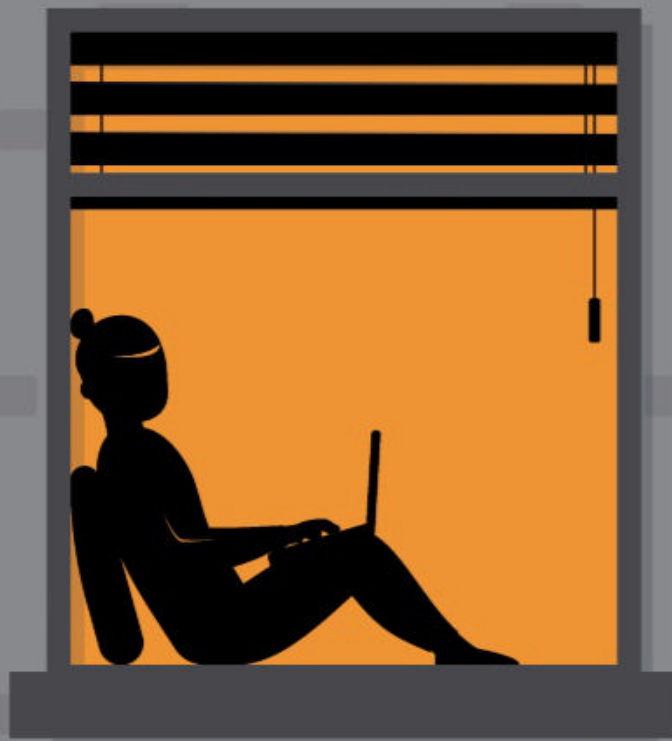
Third, you should be reading broadly in this character's POV already. You should be reading books by this demographic already. If you're not, and you still want to go ahead, then start there.

Stay curious,

—*Gigi*



**Have a query about craft? Need some clarification on an aspect of the publishing industry? Looking for career advice?** Email your queries to [tweditorial@madavor.com](mailto:tweditorial@madavor.com) with the subject line "Advice Column." We can't wait to read your questions!



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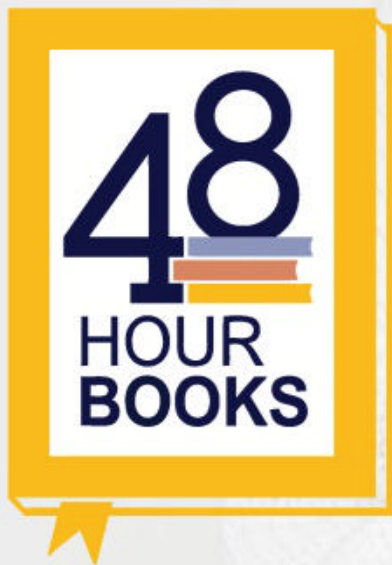
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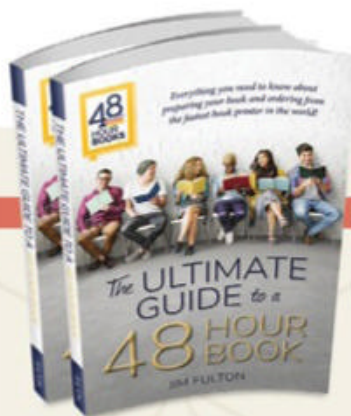
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