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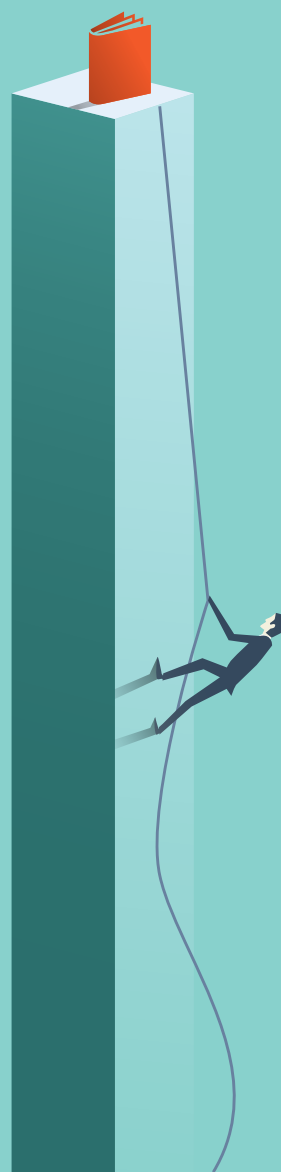
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SUMMER

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The Writer

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NUMBER 6

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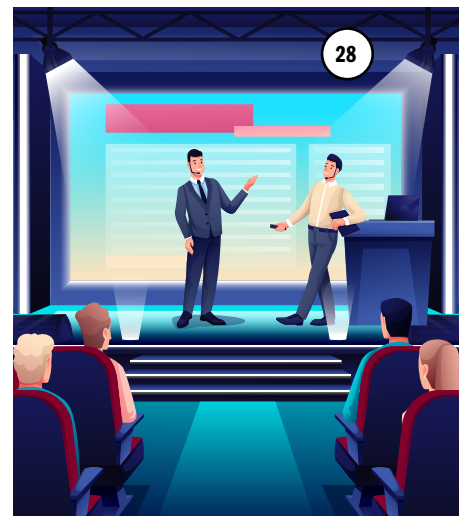
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38TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
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Prologue

*When I became a writer, I understood that writing meant a life
and profession open to feminists and antiracists and queers and single
moms — open to people who didn't care if governments didn't like them.*

—ARIEL GORE, AUTHOR OF *THE WAYWARD WRITER: SUMMON YOUR POWER
TO TAKE BACK YOUR STORY, LIBERATE YOURSELF FROM CAPITALISM, AND
PUBLISH LIKE A SUPERSTAR* (MICROCOSM PUBLISHING, 2022)



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An End to Solitude

A LONG TIME AGO IN WHAT FEELS like a galaxy far, far away, I was a theater major at the University of Iowa. Occasionally, the department would bring in a star actor or playwright to talk to us about their careers, like the time actor Paul Winfield paid us a visit.

I'd never seen a movie star in real life, and Winfield (who passed away in 2004) had appeared in two movies I had seen: *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* and *The Terminator*. I have a feeling (thinking about it now) that the University of Iowa was introduced to Winfield through Nicholas Meyer, a graduate of their theater program, who directed *Wrath of Khan*.

I remember two things about Winfield's talk: First, he told us how great of an actor William Shatner was. He said something to the tune of, "He can take any line from any script, no matter how out-there it is, and make it work."

The other thing I remember is what Winfield said about writing and writers.

"I would never want to be a writer," he said, pacing back in and forth in what used to be a black-box theater space in the U of I's Old Amory building (long since demolished). "The work is too lonely."

I was focusing on acting back in those days, and life in acting classes and acting in plays was many things, but it wasn't lonely. I can't imagine a less lonely educational experience than theater studies. In fact, after being together in classes during the day, we'd gather for night rehearsals at the Old Armory, bats swooping down from the rafters to join the fun.

My personal experience was limited, and I accepted Winfield's proclamation that writing was a lonely career choice. I imagined the hard answers could be found in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which at the time was a couple of hundred yards from the Old Armory, in



the English-Philosophy Building (the EPB). The closest I ever came to the Iowa Writers' Workshop was a several floors below in undergrad rhetoric and literature classes. If graduates from the workshop like John Irving, Lan Samantha Chang, or T.E.C. Boyle led lonely lives, I didn't know anything about it.

Over the years, my life detoured from acting to writing and journalism, and there were periods of time when I appreciated what Winfield had to say about how lonely it could get. There was a stretch of time, for instance, when I was freelancing from a wedge of a room in a decrepit warehouse space in Bushwick, Brooklyn (before Williamsburg spilled over), and I would go for days without speaking words out loud to anyone.

More recently, along came new buzzwords like COVID, Zoom, remote, and hybrid, and I imagine even actors dealt with too much solitude.

I found myself recalling Winfield's words when I attended the AWP Conference & Bookfair in Seattle this past March. At the end of my first day, my wife had texted me to ask how it was. I wanted to avoid sounding dewy-eyed about it, but I'm pretty sure I sounded dewy-eyed.

And here I go again: I was awestruck by how good it felt to be with such a wonderful, caring community of people. In a world where billionaires will scratch everyone's eyes out to make yet another billion so they can construct personal space stations, being with the people who attended a writing conference gave me hope. Like when I dropped a paper bookmark on my way to a panel discussion, a woman ran me down from 30 yards to get it back to me. That kind of stuff happened all the time. It was my first time at a writing conference, and I'm committed to it not being my last. A bunch of people together who loved writing, literature, books, and poetry, with a shared belief that everyone should be included in the writing and publishing journeys, all getting together, catching up, and offering mutual support. It was a reminder that we can take a break from solitude.

That was my experience. Let me know about how a conference experience went for you: tmurphy@madavor.com.

T.J. Murphy
EDITOR

PHOTO COURTESY OF AWP

2022 500-Word Essay Contest

Beverly Rose (second place) and Maureen Sauvain O'Connor (third place) join contest Michelle Y. Green (published in the May issue) as winners in our 2022 short-essay contest.

Half a Bear Hug

By Beverly Rose

MY GRANDFATHER BECAME MY LEGAL guardian after tragedy made me mostly an orphan: a mother dead from childbirth and a disinterested dad.

Leo, named after his mother's favorite fruit peddler, was gruff, opinionated, fiercely protective, and had only one arm.

In 1932, he was rounding a corner on a two-lane country road, his left arm dangling out the window, when an oncoming car crossed the center line, sheering the arm off. Leo crashed into a tree and was taken to the hospital by a carload of strangers. The story goes that the men were rum runners, so they couldn't stick around to file a police report.

His arm was never found among the Michigan maple leaves. His wedding band lost forever. He was in his 30s with three kids.

"My stub," he always called it...that left arm that ended where his bicep bulge began.

He played piano using complicated arpeggios to mask the lack of a bass line. He won trophies for skeet shooting, the rifle firmly against his shoulder and his strong right hand balancing the muzzle and working the trigger. He played poker, sailed, drank martinis, swam, smoked Camel unfiltered cigarettes, fly fished, mowed the lawn, chopped wood, made homemade pizzas, and turned slabs of pork into sausages.

There were only two things he

couldn't do: tie his shoes and wash his hand. Those were my jobs.

If his shoe ever came untied out in the world, he would have to ask someone for help. He probably would have walked barefoot rather than bother a stranger or his secretary at the insurance company where he worked. We practiced tying tight double knots, over and over and over again. I perfected the technique. We teamed up every morning.

The hand washing was easier: always 20 Mule Team Borax, the graininess making his hand red but getting it clean, even after gutting the trout and blue gills I would catch; me holding the fish steady while he slit them open and removed the slippery gray and bloody parts.

He died of lung cancer the week I started my junior year of high school. The last time I visited the hospital, he took my left hand and raised it to his mouth. That kiss was a thank you and a goodbye.



Even after 50 years, I think of him every time I tie my shoes, always in double knots. 🐾

~~~~~  
*Beverly Rose writes essays, short stories, flash non-fiction/fiction, plays, and novels. She also helps others find their unique voice and writing style.*

*Formerly, a corporate communications, marketing, and public relations executive in the San Francisco Bay Area, she nows lives on a farm with fruit trees and chickens in Portland, Oregon.  
([pinterest.com.mx/prflak/](https://pinterest.com.mx/prflak/))*



## Mother and the Whale

By Maureen Sauvain O'Connor

DADDY'S SAILBOAT CAP-sized in a giant seiche off a northern Lake Michigan shore, and his body was never found. Mother believed he was swallowed by a whale and would one day be coughed up, alive and whole.

I remember being ten 10 years old, Daddy gone three years, and Mother deciding that we could finally go to our local pool. I had been begging her all summer, but she feared any body of water seeing as they had taken my Daddy, and fearing it might take me, which to me made no sense at all. Our pool had no waves.

The turquoise blue sky, dotted with white puffy clouds, was reflected in the water of the community pool. My mother sat on a striped towel on the concrete decking, watching me, while I laid on my back in the water and watched the clouds become dogs, then angels, then a host of birds. On my back, I could imagine looking up at the same blue sky that I sailed under with my father and hearing him call me "mate.". Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a blow-up whale in the shallow water.

She must have seen the whale at the same time because I heard a scream as sharp and loud as a lightning strike, and then a loud splash and the sound of body hitting concrete in the shallow end of the pool. My mother's body floated there and



teeth like kernels of corn floated around her in streams of red ribbons. She must have dove into the water to save me from the whale.

I went to live with Aunt Margie. Mother was hospitalized for a long time, and she returned to live with us on my twelfth birthday. When she walked up the long brick sidewalk to our door, I watched from behind the ivy-rimmed picture window, while my aunt in her floral mumumumuu, ran to hug her. Mother held a small plaid suitcase in one hand and a large flat package wrapped in brown paper

under her other arm.

My hands were trembling as I opened my present, and Mother explained that she had spent every spare moment painting it for me. I had never known her to paint a picture before or after that, but as I pulled the brown paper off my gift, a beautiful image of a whale emerged. It was both lifelike and ephemeral. The opalesque colors of the whale against the dark blue waves were mesmerizing. My painting hung over Aunt Margie's mantel, and when they found the skeletal remains of my father, tangled in seaweed, the urn holding his ashes sat under the painting like an offering.

The whale floats above my fireplace now. Aunt Margie and Mother are gone. For me, there is still something magical about this painting, this whale. My whale. But Daddy's ashes— — I gave him back to the lake that he so loved. ♾

*Maureen Sauvain O'Connor is a poet, flash fiction writer, and psychotherapist practicing in Oak Park, Illinois. Her clients have brought meaning and depth to her life, and the work has helped to create a space for her own self-exploration and writing. She is grateful, too, for the inspiration provided by the magical gardens, outside her writing window, tended by her husband and daughter.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF MAUREEN SAUVAIN O'CONNOR





## Into the Light

Great new summer reads — hot off of small literary presses — that may be energizing the trends of tomorrow.

IT CAN BE ARGUED THAT THE LITERARY forces driving mainstream trends begin within the bold and fearless alliances between authors and small literary presses. With this dynamic in mind, one especially good way to load up your summer reading list is check out the following books and collections included here — all vital reads that may

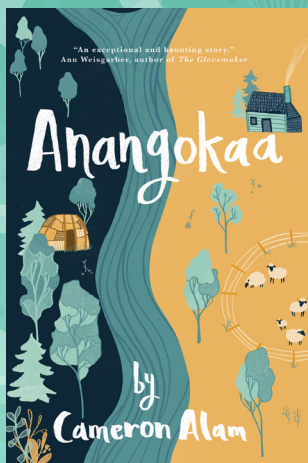
be driving the next generation of trends in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction.

You can support these alliances by purchasing your books through Small Press Distribution (SPD). Each title within this guide is available through SPD. Their mission? To bring “readers independently published literature, emphasizing small press values — equity,

experimentation, and access. We connect underrepresented literary communities to the marketplace and to each other via book distribution, events, and public advocacy. Prioritizing artistic and activist visions, SPD’s nearly 400 presses publish a full diversity of writers who rely on us to reach readers nationwide.” Visit [spdbooks.org](http://spdbooks.org).

# Prologue » *Summer Book Recommendations*

## FICTION



### ANANGOKAA

By Cameron Alam

Upper Canada, 1804, on the edge of Chippewa territory. Flora MacCallum wakes from a malarial coma and witnesses the staggering loss her siblings have endured during their first days on the mosquito-infested banks of the Chenail Écarté. Lured by Lord Selkirk's promise of fertile grazing land and freedom far from the Highland clearances, Flora's father staked his life to bring his family across the Atlantic, alongside a motley assortment of Scottish islanders, to settle this deeply forested and foreboding land.

During the settlement's first bleak North American winter, Flora discovers hope through an unlikely friendship. The eldest son of a Chippewa chief offers Flora the gift of his mother tongue. It is a gift which shifts Flora's relationship with the land and the truth of her own spirit. As their furtive fellowship attracts attention, conflict arises in Baldoon. And among Flora's own family.

Set amid the privation of a struggling frontier settlement, the seduction of the natural world, and an intimate Chippewa forest camp, *Anangokaa* is the evocative coming-of-age story of a young woman who must determine what sacrifices she is willing to make for the life she longs to live.

PUBLISHED BY BLACKWATER PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

Cameron Alam was born and raised in Buffalo, NY. When she isn't writing, you may find her barefoot in the vegetable patch, swimming with her kids in the river, reading from the stack of books by her bedside, cooking savory foods, traveling with her family, or laughing in the company of friends. She lives in eastern Ontario along the St. Lawrence Seaway with her soldier husband, two children, playful dog, and alpha cat. [cameronalam.com](http://cameronalam.com)



### HOUSEHOLD TALES

By Rachel Linn

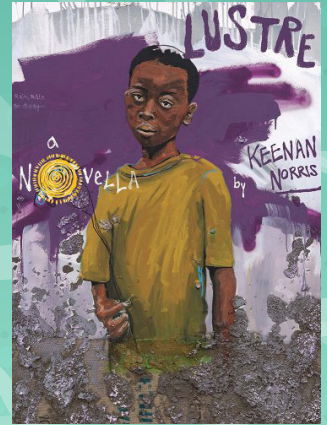
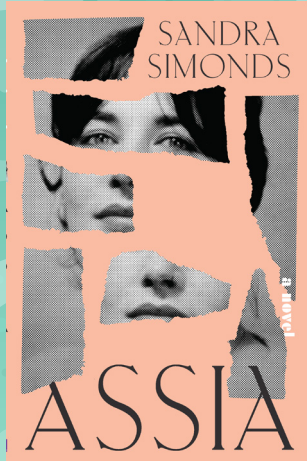
Riffing off The Brothers Grimm's famous collection of fairy tales, Children's and Household Tales, this *Household Tales* updates its tales for the 21st century, with episodes that include a dapper talking cat, a woman who births squirrels uncontrollably, and a series of quantum endings. It's also pop-up book that includes a set of paper dolls at the end, that invites you, dear reader, to participate in its surreal adventures.

PUBLISHED BY MEEKLING PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"Linn's mysterious Household Tales begins with a snowstorm that may or may not lead a couple into another dimension via tactile adventures in cut paper and feral animals. Odd and beautiful, a good read for our imaginations and our fingertips."*

— KELLY FROH, COMIC ARTIST & CO-FOUNDER OF SHORT RUN COMIX & ARTS FESTIVAL

Rachel Linn writes and illustrates across multiple forms and genres. She has published stories, essays, poetry, and translations. Her visual art merges drawing, watercolor, and needlework techniques and often takes the form of handmade books, including some to be assembled by the reader. She was the 2020 Artist-in-Residence at the Printery Book Arts Lab at Central Print St. Louis. She lives with her partner, Jessica, a fairy-tale scholar. [rslinn.com](http://rslinn.com).



## ASSIA

By Sandra Simonds

Sandra Simonds gives us a fresh portrait of Assia Wevill, a woman previously conceived mostly as a consort, a homewrecker, or a femme fatale. Simonds' novel refuses to be bound by the pedantry of what we think we know about Assia Wevill's life, reimagining timelines, history, and Assia's inner life and creative work to bring her to life as never before.

PUBLISHED BY NOEMI PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"This book is mind-blowing. Just when we thought we knew the tragic story of Sylvia Plath or the disturbing details of Ted Hughes' behavior, these pages present Assia Wevill, poet, artist, mother, person. Simonds' brilliance is in reminding us that narratives are just that — a single perspective designed to hold our gaze. Here, Assia moves beyond and around those limited frameworks. In short, this work is more than a reappraisal or a new version of events. It is more like life: striking, messy, quietly revelatory, and beautiful, even in its darkest moments."* — MAURICE RUFFIN

Sandra Simonds is the award-winning author of eight books of poetry. Her poems and criticism have been published in The New Yorker, The New York Times, Best American Poetry, Poetry, American Poetry Review, Chicago Review, Granta, Boston Review, Ploughshares, Fence, Court Green, and Lana Turner. She is the recipient of the Readers' Choice Award for her sonnet "Red Wand," which was published on Poets.org. She went to UCLA for her BA, University of Montana for her MFA and Florida State for her PhD. She lives in Tallahassee, Florida and is an Associate professor of English and Humanities at Thomas University in Thomasville, Georgia. [sandrasimondspoet.com](http://sandrasimondspoet.com).

## LUSTRE

By Keenan Norris

Taking place in the other California, the desert city of San Suerte, Lustre is about the luckless Lustre Little, a boy haunted by the violence of his hometown; ex-convict Sharone Bonilla, who is haunted by his history; and Destiny Deveraux, an orphan, come of age, who is learning and teaching love and responsibility.

PUBLISHED BY NOMADIC PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SMALL PRESS DISTRIBUTION \(SPDBOOKS.ORG\)](http://SMALL PRESS DISTRIBUTION (SPDBOOKS.ORG)).

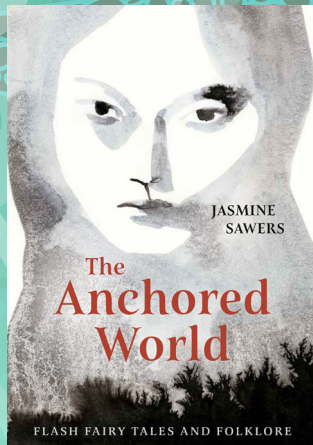
*"Lustre is a pleasure! In his thoroughly distinctive voice, Keenan Norris seduces the audience into a world of Bibleizing hustlers, where sleep is cavernous and the khakis stiff. As a lifelong resident of the city Norris has fictionalized in this profound story of an Empire, a people and their placelessness, this reader finds himself full 'like so much syrup risen and settled, thick-sweet and still...' In San Suerte, the barbershop feels like church, and church, like revival. A masterful offering."* —ERIC DEVAUGHNN, AUTHOR OF THE BEAUTY OF DRAGONS

Keenan Norris's books include the novel The Confession of Cope-land Cane, which won the 2022 Northern California Book Award, the book of essays Chi Boy: Native Sons and Chicago Reckonings, and the novel Brother and the Dancer, which received the 2012 James D. Houston Award. Keenan teaches at San Jose State University, where he is coordinator of the Steinbeck Fellows Program. In 2021, he served as a University of Virginia Rea Visiting Writer. His essays have appeared in Alta, the Los Angeles Review of Books, and the Los Angeles Times. [keenannorris.com](http://keenannorris.com).



# Prologue » *Summer Book Recommendations*

## FICTION



### THE ANCHORED WORLD: FLASH FAIRY TALES AND FOLKLORE

By **Jasmine Sawers**

A goat begins to grow inside a human heart. The rightful king is born a hard, smooth seashell. Supernovas burst across skin like ink in water. Heartbreak transforms maidens into witches, girls into goblins, mothers into monsters. Hunger drives lovers and daughters, soldiers, and ghosts, to unhinge their jaws and swallow the world. Drawing inspiration from a mixed heritage and from history — from the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen to the ancient legends of Thailand, from the suburbs of Buffalo, New York to the endless horizon of the American Midwest — Jasmine Sawers invents a hybrid folklore for liminal characters who live between the lines and within the creases of race and language, culture and gender, sexuality, and ability.

PUBLISHED BY ROSE METAL PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

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*"In this slender book you'll find stories small as pills — and in each pill a stimulant, a hallucinogen, a vitamin. Jasmine Sawers is a practitioner of fine narrative pharmacology."* —REBECCA MAKKAJ,

AUTHOR OF *THE GREAT BELIEVERS*.

---

Jasmine Sawers is a Kundiman fellow and Indiana University MFA alum whose work has appeared in such journals as *Foglifter*, *AAWW's The Margins*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and more. Their fiction has won the *Ploughshares Emerging Writer's Contest* and the *NANO Prize*, and has been nominated for *Best of the Net*, *Best Small Fictions*, and the *Pushcart Prize*. Sawers is proud to serve as an associate fiction editor for *Fairy Tale Review*. Originally from Buffalo, Sawers now teaches creative writing and pets dogs outside of St. Louis. [jasminesawers.com](http://jasminesawers.com).

### HOW TO START A COVEN

By **Deirdre Danklin**

*How to Start a Coven* is a flash fiction collection on transforming the quiet moments of life into magical, off-kilter experiences.

PUBLISHED BY VARIANT LITERATURE. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

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*"Perceptive, moving and very funny, How to Start a Coven crosses time spans and lives: a pair of Galapagos tortoises living in peace centuries ago morph into a married couple trying to find the best toilet seat in Home Depot. A contemporary and striking bildungsroman for our times, Danklin's flash fiction chapbook combines the earnest and the surreal in the best ways to address the urgent question of how we should live now. Danklin's answer is to re-imagine life with creativity and humor: and, maybe, start a coven with your friends."* — HONNI VAN RISKSWIKJ

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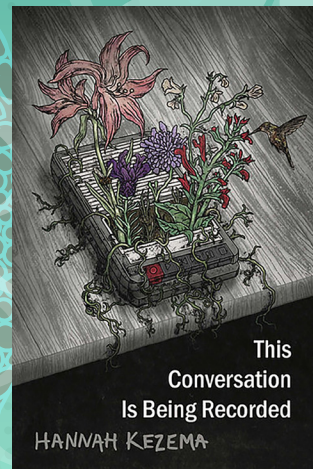
Deirdre Danklin holds an MFA from Johns Hopkins University. The pieces in this collection were published in numerous literary magazines including *Wigleaf*, *Hobart*, and *The Jellyfish Review*. These pieces were also nominated for numerous awards and anthologies including *Best American Short Stories* and *Best Small Fictions*. Danklin's novella, *Catastrophe*, won the 2021 *Clay Reynolds Novella Prize* and was published by *Texas Review Press*. She won a 2022 independent artist grant from the *Maryland State Arts Council*. She lives in Baltimore with her husband and two cats. [deirdredanklin.com](http://deirdredanklin.com).



## POETRY

EARLY  
WORKS

ALICE  
NOTLEY



### EARLY WORKS

By Alice Notley

*Early Works* collects Pulitzer-Prize nominated poet Alice Notley's first four out-of-print poetry collections, along with 80 pages of previously uncollected material. A must have for any Alice Notley fan. Includes original cover artwork as well, by Philip Guston, Philip Whalen, and George Schneeman, among others.

PUBLISHED BY FONOGRAPH EDITIONS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"Alice Notley is a disobedient medium: the dead speak through her and she speaks back. Sometimes she's a poet of intimate address, sometimes of epic sweep. Notley's formal experiments allow us to make contact with poetry's originary and anarchic force."* — BEN LERNER

Alice Notley was born in Bisbee, Arizona in 1945 and grew up in Needles, California in the Mojave Desert. She was educated in the Needles public schools, Barnard College, and The Writer's Workshop, University of Iowa. Notley may be most widely known for her epic poem *"The Descent of Alette."*

### THIS CONVERSATION IS BEING RECORDED

By Hannah Kezema

Hannah Kezema's hybrid debut, *This Conversation is Being Recorded*, is a vibrant collection of poems and erasures of painted, dirtied, and flora-filled legal documents and interview notes from her experiences as an investigator and editor in the insurance fraud industry. Blurring documentary poetics, memoir, and visual mediums, Kezema examines the corrupt nature of the U.S. healthcare system and increase in workers' compensation claims amidst a global pandemic and climate change crisis. These poems were written as a means of survival during widespread tragedy, wildfires, and late-stage capitalism.

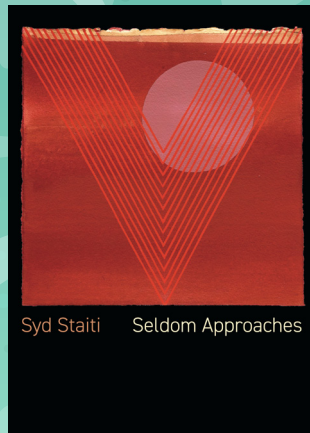
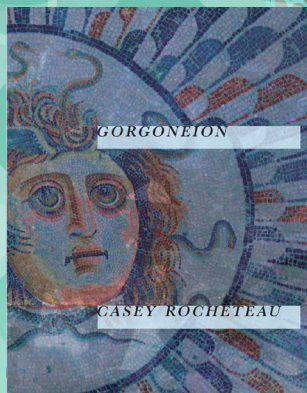
PUBLISHED BY GAME OVER BOOKS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"Kinda like Tarkovsky's Stalker, Hannah Kezema is our intimate guide into 'the field,' a temporal and liminal space that exists outside of the jobs of California, where 'if someone dies at their job during their lunchbreak, their family may not be compensated' and an injury acquired on a Monday morning 'is a capitalist's / favorite ammunition.' In some of the most elegant and exquisitely sparse language I've ever encountered, we listen in on recorded conversations, look upon scenes that may or may not have happened (or did, but maybe not like that), and are shown by Kezema what capitalism is not only capable of, but does — to bodies, to lives, to space, and to time."* — TATIANA LUBOVISKI-ACOSTA, AUTHOR OF *LA MOVIDA*

Hannah Kezema is an artist who works across mediums. She is the author of the chapbook, *three* (2017, *Tea and Tattered Pages*), and her work appears in *Black Sun Lit*, *Grimoire*, *New Life Quarterly*, *Full Stop*, *Spiral Orb*, and other places. She was the 2018 *Arteles Resident* of the *Enter Text* program, and she is currently the co-editor of *Moving Parts Press's* broadside series of *Latinx and Chicana* poetry, in collaboration with Felicia Rice and Angel Domínguez.

# Prologue » *Summer Book Recommendations*

## POETRY



### GORGONEION

By Casey Rocheteau

*Gorgoneion* explores the us or them mentality that has permeated U.S. culture since the mid 2010's. Whether personal, political or historical, this collection constantly asks the questions "what are we doing?" and "where do we go from here?" Taking on a number of social justice issues, *Gorgoneion* weaves in wit and humor to add levity to the more somber subject matter throughout the collection. In moments, it reflects a tender interiority and desire to belong while using this sense of alienation to poke holes in the logic of groupthink. Winner of the 2021 Noemi Press Book Award in Poetry. Longlisted for the 2023 PEN America Open Book Award.

PUBLISHED BY NOEMI PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"Casey Rocheteau's Gorgoneion is a thousand-headed beauty lithely slithering from the past, present, and future as it examines the nature and pervasiveness of empire."* —TOMMYE BLOUNT, AUTHOR OF *FANTASIA FOR THE MAN IN BLUE*

Casey Rocheteau is an author, filmmaker & visual/sound artist living in Detroit, Michigan.

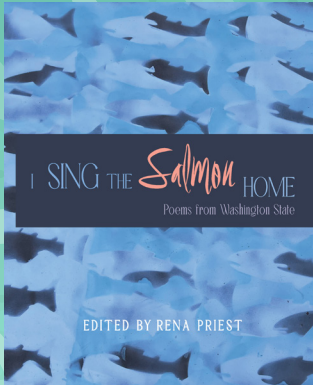
### SELDOM APPROACHES

By Syd Staiti

A set of characters engage in a mission to destroy a building — a poem from the past. The narrator and writer intersect and part ways. The characters are extensions, fantasies. Time loops, events repeat. The book exposes its beams and scaffolding, as the writer's body in transition bears its own process. *Seldom Approaches* is a collection of poems, transcribed readings, and prose writings spanning nearly a decade, presented asynchronously, and interlaced with narrative passages, both abstract and autobiographical: a book formed and unformed in a process of becoming.

PUBLISHED BY THE ELEPHANTS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

Syd Staiti lives in the Bay Area and is author of *The Undying Present* (Krupskaya 2015). Staiti is director of *Small Press Traffic* ([smallpresstraffic.org](http://smallpresstraffic.org)) and a collective member of *Light Field*.



## I SING THE SALMON HOME: POEMS FROM WASHINGTON STATE

By Rena Priest

For this unique collection celebrating salmon, Washington State Poet Laureate and Lummi tribal member Rena Priest gathered poems from more than 150 Washington poets ranging from first graders to tribal elders, all inspired by the Northwest's beloved, iconic salmon. A diverse chorus of voices, they join together in poems that praise salmon's heroic journey, beauty, courage, and generosity and witness the threats salmon face from pollution, dams and warming oceans.

PUBLISHED BY EMPTY BOWL. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"At long last salmon — the soul of the Pacific Northwest — have been given words to match the ongoing miracle of their existence. With this anthology, some of the better poets from our corner of the world show us dimensions of life, legacy, and culture that we might otherwise overlook in our rushed tumble through the years. It's a book to grow old with—and a book to share with those just learning the power of verse to change hearts and minds."* —TIMOTHY EGAN, AUTHOR OF *THE GOOD RAIN*

Rena Priest is a member of the Lhaq'temish (Lummi) Nation. She is the incumbent Washington State Poet Laureate and Maxine Cushing Gray Distinguished Writing Fellow. Priest is also the recipient of an Allied Arts Foundation Professional Poets Award and fellowships from the Academy of American Poets, Indigenous Nations Poets, and the Vadon Foundation. Her debut collection, *Patriarchy Blues*, received an American Book Award. [renapriest.com](http://renapriest.com).

## QUICK MILLIONS

By Paul Maziar

A gorgeous collection by poet and art writer Paul Maziar available as a trade edition for the first time.

PUBLISHED BY CUNEIFORM PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"I hear an unerring genius for phrasing in this voice, a poet brimming with charm and 'self-selecting' vividness. I am reminded of the work of Eileen Myles, Pierre Reverdy, and John Wieners. The voice is being reshuffled to the point of constant motion, like when a notebook poem just fits together endlessly, and the poet can even speak through someone else's text with an alarming clarity."*

— CEDAR SIGO

Paul Maziar is the author of two books of art writings, *One Foot in the Other World* and *Flower Power*, as well as a handful of chapbooks of poems including *To The Air*, a collaboration with artist Cynthia Lahti (Cooley Gallery); *New Kind of Neighborhood*, a collaboration with Sam Lohmann (Great Fainting Spells); and *Little Advantages* (Couch Press). He's the proprietor of Breather Editions and, alongside Aaron Simon, editor of Ergo Press. [linktr.ee/realism](https://linktr.ee/realism).

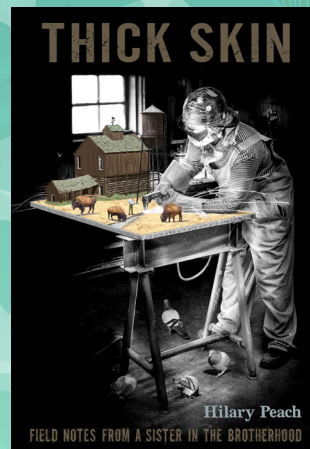


# Prologue » *Summer Book Recommendations*

## NONFICTION



John ASHBERRY  
John BERGER  
Octavia BUTLER  
Joan DIDION  
Carlos FUENTES  
William H. GASS  
Toni MORRISON  
Grace PALEY  
W.G. SEBALD  
Stephen SONDSHEIM  
Susan SONTAG  
David Foster WALLACE



### BOOKWORM: CONVERSATIONS WITH MICHAEL SILVERBLATT

By Michael Silverblatt

Michael Silverblatt, host of KCRW's Bookworm, the nation's premier literary radio program, has been bringing writers and readers together in close company for more than three decades.

*Bookworm: Conversations with Michael Silverblatt* gathers interviews with some of the most influential luminaries of our time: John Ashbery, John Berger, Octavia Butler, Joan Didion, Carlos Fuentes, William H. Gass, Toni Morrison, Grace Paley, W.G. Sebald, Stephen Sondheim, Susan Sontag, and David Foster Wallace.

PUBLISHED BY SONG CAVE. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"Michael Silverblatt is a better reader than any writer deserves. He brings such intensity, such respect, to any book, not for its level of achievement in every case, or the richness and generosity of imagination reflected in it, though he is greatly moved by these things, but simply for the fact of it as a book, an utterance in the language above language that speaks of the fact of humanity, and the miracle of our mutual intelligibility at the highest levels of subtlety and beauty, wit and candor."* — MARILYNNE ROBINSON

Michael Silverblatt is the host of KCRW's Bookworm, a nationally syndicated radio program showcasing writers of fiction and poetry. In 2018, he was the inaugural recipient of A Public Space's Deborah Pease Prize, awarded to a figure who has advanced the art of literature.

### THICK SKIN: FIELD NOTES FROM A SISTER IN THE BROTHERHOOD

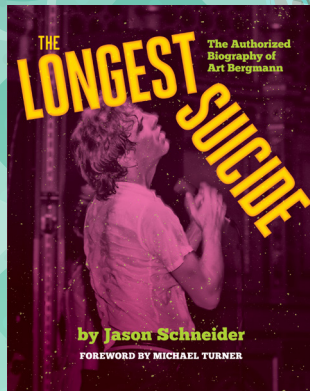
By Hilary Peach

For more than two decades, Hilary Peach worked as a transient welder — and one of the only women — in the Boilermakers Union. Distilled from a vast cache of journals, notes, and keen observations, *Thick Skin* follows Peach from the West Coast shipyards and pulp mills of British Columbia, through the Alberta tar sands and the Ontario rust belt, to the colossal power generating stations of the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. At times edging up to the surreal, *Thick Skin* is a collection of strange stories carefully told, in tenderness and ferocity, for anyone who has spent time in a trade, or is curious about the unseen world of industrial construction.

PUBLISHED BY ANVIL PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

Hilary Peach has released three audio-poetry projects, *Poems Only Dogs Can Hear*, *Suitcase Local*, and *Dictionary of Snakes*, and a collection of poems, *BOLT* (Anvil Press 2019). For twenty years she worked as a welder for the Boilermakers Union, dabbled in blacksmithing, and produced unusual art projects on Gabriola Island. She is now a boiler inspector for the provincial safety authority and is writing a novel. [hilarypeach.ca](http://hilarypeach.ca)





## THE LONGEST SUICIDE: THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF ART BERGMANN

By Jason Schneider

As Canada's punk poet laureate, Art Bergmann has been tearing up stages, and terrifying the music industry, for half a century. Often referred to as "Canada's Lou Reed," Art's story is one of rock and roll's great tales untold. Working with veteran music journalist Jason Schneider, Art lays it all out in his own inimitable way, with dozens of people who took part adding their own voices to corroborate (and sometimes dispute) the often-incredible chain of events.

PUBLISHED BY ANVIL PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG)

"Schneider's contextualization of the era is valuable for demonstrating how the concerts happening in Vancouver in 1979, and especially *The Clash*, literally set the stage for a range of bands to form and persist, Joe Keithley underlining that, "It kinda was the show that really opened up the scene" (p. 40). Schneider is a colourful documentarian of this wild time, his selection of details punctuated by cool photos of bands and posters." — CATHERINE OWEN, *THE BRITISH COLUMBIA REVIEW*.

Jason Schneider has written for *Exclaim!*, *The Globe & Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *Paste*, *American Songwriter*, *Relix*, *Shindig* and many other media outlets. He is the co-author of *Have Not Been The Same: the CanRock Renaissance 1985-1995*, and his other books include *Whispering Pines: the Northern Roots of American Music*, and the novel *3,000 Miles*. He currently lives in Kitchener, Ontario.

## THE COMING MENTAL RANGE

By Will Alexander

*The Coming Mental Range* brings readers deep into the revolutionary poetics and philosophy of multi-disciplinary artist, writer, and musician Will Alexander. Gathering together a group of Alexander's short prose writings in his signature "vertical philosophy" with essays in poetics touching on the work of admired artists and poets (Byron Baker, Wanda Coleman, Pablo Jofré, Bob Kaufman, and Ghérasim Luca to name a few), in addition to several key interviews with the author, *The Coming Mental Range* serves as a critical introduction to Alexander's work and thought, and as a companion to volumes in poetry and philosophy like *Divine Blue Light* (City Lights, 2022), *Refractive Africa* (New Directions, 2021), and *Towards the Primeval Lightning Field* (O Books, 1998).

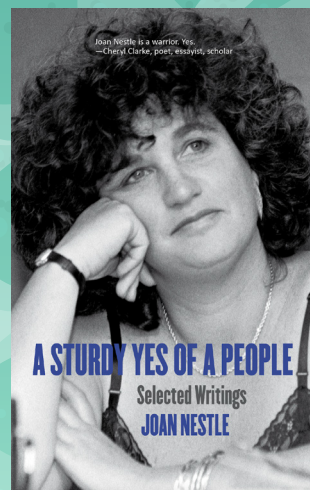
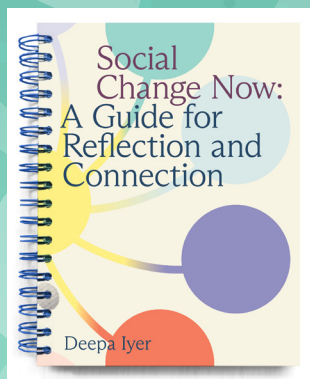
PUBLISHED BY LITMUS PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

"As readers of Alexander's writing have come to expect, it is swarming with information from a vast library — like one lost in Alexandria — that the author has absorbed into his bloodstream: philosophy; science of all kinds from color theory to the study of insects and lemurs; alchemy, geography; the Dogon; mining in Zimbabwe in 41,000 B.C.; science fiction; and the output of little-known writers. And really this is just the tip of the iceberg." — JOHN YAU

Born in 1948, Will Alexander is a poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, visual artist, and pianist. Author of 20 books, Alexander has taught at various colleges including University of California, San Diego, New College (San Francisco, CA), Hofstra University, and Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, in addition to being associated with the nonprofit organization Theatre of Hearts/Youth First, serving at-risk youth. He is a lifelong resident of Los Angeles.

# Prologue » *Summer Book Recommendations*

## NONFICTION



### SOCIAL CHANGE NOW: A GUIDE FOR REFLECTION AND CONNECTION

By Deepa Iyer

We are living in a period of overlapping social, economic, and environmental crises, accompanied by failures in public systems and institutions. It's not surprising, then, that when we attempt to engage in social change efforts, many of us feel like we are on a seesaw, swinging from outrage to overwhelm. For those who are just beginning their social change journeys to those who are weary and disillusioned, how can we effectively anchor our commitments to equity, solidarity, and justice?

This is the entry point for *Social Change Now: A guide for Reflection and Connection*, Deepa Iyer's heartfelt offering to individuals and groups seeking to initiate or deepen their actions in service to social change values.

PUBLISHED BY THICK PRESS. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

*"Social Change Now: A Guide for Reflection and Connection enables readers to individually and collectively chart practical pathways and strategies for creating equitable, just, and life-affirming communities. For any educator and professional seeking to help build the anti-oppression capacity of their students, colleagues, or community, this book is an excellent place to start!"* —JAZMIN PICHARDO, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

OF DIVERSITY TRAINING & EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Deepa Iyer is a weaver, frontline responder, storyteller, and guide. Through her work at the Building Movement Project, Deepa creates narratives, provides trainings, and facilitates networks around social change and solidarity practice. Her political and community homes include Asian American, South Asian, Muslim, and Arab spaces, where she spent fifteen years responding to the backlash of the September 11th attacks. Her first book, *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future* (The New Press 2015), received a 2016 American Book Award. An immigrant who moved to Kentucky from Kerala (India) when she was twelve, Deepa graduated from the University of Notre Dame Law School and Vanderbilt University. [deepaiyer.com](http://deepaiyer.com).

### A STURDY YES OF A PEOPLE: SELECTED WRITINGS

By Joan Nestle

For over fifty years, Joan Nestle has been chronicling lesbian and queer life boldly with guts, heart, and moral suasion. *A Sturdy Yes of a People* gathers Nestle's most influential writing into a single volume presenting her persistent involvement in liberation movements, LGBTQ histories, erotic writing, and archives that document gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer lives. Embedded in tales of lesbian desire are Nestle's concerns with the power of class and race in America to exile bodies.

PUBLISHED BY SINISTER WISDOM. AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT [SPDBOOKS.ORG](http://SPDBOOKS.ORG).

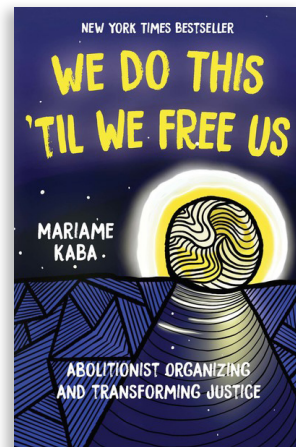
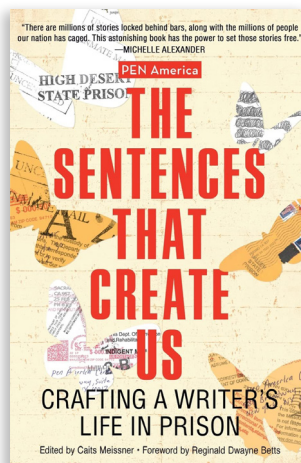
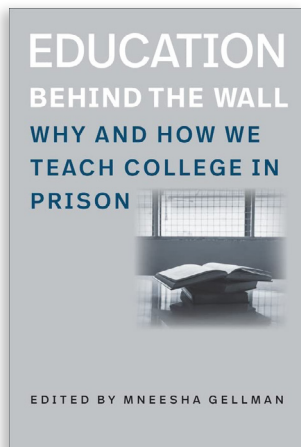
*"Where would I be without Joan Nestle? I can't imagine my life without the fierce generosity of her writing on erotic pleasure, lesbian archives, Jewish working-class wisdom, and, above all, femme ways of knowing and being."* —ANN CVETKOVICH, AUTHOR OF *AN ARCHIVE OF FEELINGS: TRAUMA, SEXUALITY, AND LESBIAN PUBLIC CULTURES*

Joan Nestle is working-class Jewish lesbian, writer, editor, teacher, activist, and co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. She is the author of *A Restricted Country*, winner of an American Library Association Gay and Lesbian Book Award, and *A Fragile Union*, a Lambda Literary Award recipient. She edited over a dozen award-winning collections. She lives in Australia with her lover, Di Otto. [joannestle.com](http://joannestle.com).

# Broadening the Bookshelves

This month, we're focusing on literature of incarcerated populations.

By Yi Shun Lai



This month's The Nightstand picks from Jessica Dobson



# Lessons Learned

**I**t's been a year and a half since I undertook a mission to introduce myself, and you, to literatures we think get overlooked in the American literary landscape. I've met so many new writers I didn't know of; read books that never would have crossed my radar screen before; learned so much about my own internal prejudices and inadvertent associations.

This will be the last installation of "Broadening the Bookshelves." It's not because there aren't ever more demographics and cultures to discover for ourselves. It's because part of the aim of this column was to provide us all with some critical thinking skills to move forward with and some added perspective with which to enrich our lives. But, even as we accomplished our goal of learning so much more with each and every interview, some common threads made themselves apparent: We heard over and over again that traditional gatekeeping, from agent to book reviewer, can limit the perspectives we see. We know that the role of mass media in determining which books get seen can present a problematic road block. And we were reminded that stories that must be told will somehow get heard, whether by small press, self-publishing, or literary magazine.

We are hoping that you will have learned enough to keep you curious about books from other cultures

and demographics. (Professor Lindy Greer, of the University of Michigan's Sanger Leadership Center, defines diversity as "any difference that makes a difference." I've found this a good reminder to look for diversity, and intersectionality, outside of the corporate norms of ethnicity and protected class.) We wanted you to see that storytelling traditions from other cultures are a resource for you to draw from, learn from, admire. We want you to read these books and authors from cultures that are different from yours, and support them in their work.

Every time I interviewed someone for "Broadening the Bookshelves," I walked away with something new. But a few lessons in particular stood out as things I'll have to keep reminding myself of, lest I slip back into a world where I didn't have this knowledge.

Alvin Pang, in our coverage of Southeast Asian literature, and Celeste Mohammed, in our issue on Caribbean literature, each posited that colonialism and the damage it's done isn't a universal obsession. Some regions have been around long enough that colonialism is just a blip on the timeline. And focusing on it can limit the way we tell stories — and the stories we hear.

Michael Thompson, B.L. Blanchard, and Michaelson Knapp, in our issue on literature from indigenous populations, encouraged me to look beyond the past, and focus on the present and future. Presuming that

literature of a population is rooted primarily in lore can be just as harmful as not considering it at all. Instead, we can look to modern storytellers from demographics with deep storytelling roots, and ask ourselves why we're not seeing entire populations as being part of our here and now.

Erika Dreifus and Hannah Young, in our issues on Jewish literature and writing from incarcerated populations, respectively, taught me that, in our desire to respect individual populations, we can go too far in the wrong direction: We can be too willing to pigeonhole writers. Or, we can center the reader's experience, instead of the writer's need and right to bear witness.

I welcome your thoughts: Write to me via my web site, [thegooddirt.org](http://thegooddirt.org), and tell me what you learned from our time together here. 📖



SHUTTERSTOCK



# Getting to Know: Literature from Incarcerated Populations

**L**ast month, while researching for this column, I learned that veterans are a protected class in the United States, just like people of color, just like people with disabilities. That is to say, it is illegal to discriminate against someone because of their identity as a veteran.

Perhaps it's natural, then, that my thoughts turned to a class that enjoys no protections at all — an identity that shares our tax burden, but, in some cases, cannot vote in the United States: the incarcerated populations. (People who are incarcerated for felonies in all but two states cannot vote, and the bureaucratic hurdles around voting while incarcerated often get in the way of incarcerated populations being able to exercise their right to vote.)

To get more insight, I talked to Hannah Young, the associate director of the American Prison Writing Archives, which aims to collect, preserve, and highlight the first-hand experiences, or witness accounts, of incarcerated people. The archive resides at Johns Hopkins University's Sheridan Libraries, and which is available online, and has big plans for the future, among them expanding the archive itself and its visibility and compensating authors of these testimonies for their work. Ultimately, the archive hopes to influence policy by making these witness accounts —, and the ones it hopes to collect in the future —, readily available to anyone who is writing or influencing policy.

Young says that one of the most important steps that the group can take is to establish a network through which

these witness accounts of the incarcerated experience can be distributed. With a recent grant from the Mellon Foundation that also enabled the archive to move from its former home at Hamilton College to Hopkins, the archive will become “more of “a what we call a prison witness collective t,” she says. “That’s really creating a space where we can be in larger collaboration with a lot of other organizations, advocacy groups, archives that do similar work. [From there,] the archive [can] be a home base for first-person, narrative-writing-based organizations that house collections similar to ours, maybe from differing demographics than we generally have so far; or with slightly different focuses that might not have the resources to house their collections in a well resourced well-resourced archive like we have.”

I’m immediately thinking of all the ways a collective like this can and should be available to those of us who want to gain more knowledge of what life for an incarcerated population is like. “We don’t want to advocate for everything being digitized because, we for several reasons, that’s a dehumanizing process,” she says. “If everything is digitized, it’s not allowing for people inside to have things that belong to them coming in from

outside— --letters from their family members that they can hold in their hands; reading the handwriting of their grandmother that wrote to them. Digitizing all of those just means that now everyone has an iPad and or a tablet. And everything is scanned through; everything is read previously [by someone else].”, pointing out that digitalization requires yet another point of contact, someone other than the intended recipient reading the work and scanning it in before the incarcerated person gets to see it.

Young’s response reminds me that the point of this archive isn’t for me and users like me. It’s to highlight the experience of the population.

One of the biggest tenets in inclusivity work, part of how I make my living, is how we handle “good work,” which can sometimes slide directly into saviorism: It’s what happens when we do charity work or work on behalf of marginalized populations, only to reap immediate benefits in the form of kudos from our friends or our family and from society.

Instead of turning the spotlight on the people you’re ostensibly helping, all the light is now on you, the person who gave up your time to go do the good work. Social psychologist Dolly Chugh asks us to ask ourselves the question, “Who gets the ego boost?” from the good work you’ve done.

In the case of my question to Young about how we can make these archives better available for people who need to know about these witness statements, I’ve moved the spotlight off of the folks who are telling their stories.

Still, I can’t shake the idea that it is

important for those of us who don't understand the life of an incarcerated person to gain access to that work, so I ask Young the question from another direction: Why is it important for people to know about these eyewitness accounts?

Young gently and adeptly steers me back in the right direction: "There are so many restrictions and limitations on what people experiencing incarceration have access to, and that that means larger exposure to things that are happening in the world, but it also means things that are happening in other prisons. And it also means things that are happening in other cellblocks," she says. "It's not an accessible thing, to have access to other people experiencing similar circumstances. And that's by design. It wouldn't be to the benefit of people who are trying to manage people to allow access to how that experience has been in other places for other people." In other words, Murray is pointing out that the people in power in prisons, in prison governance, don't necessarily want prisoners to be talking to each other about their individual experiences. "But," Young says, "that is part of the humanizing experience: to be able to know and feel a connection to a community that you are very much a part of, but siloed away from. It's allowing for a platform to build that community, or to allow greater access to others within that community, and have shared experiences, and have an understanding of the background and the similarities and the differences across different prison populations."

Looking back on the interview now, I can see how utterly blind I am to the fact that nothing could be more important than helping people to understand just how valuable the perspective of incarcerated persons is

— but right then, talking to Young, I'm still going to the mat, trying to get her to tell me how we can convince the public that this perspective is important. Young tells me, "The more we can strengthen our base of understanding that this narrative matters, by building this collective, [the more] it can influence exactly how we then shift to a greater audience of impacting thought." Young says she eventually hopes that strengthening the archive and making these stories available to the people who can influence policy will help to eventually change it, as policymakers gain access to a wider pool of experiences from people who are incarcerated. The work that we're doing right now will absolutely be influential in laying the groundwork for how to tackle those more complex issues."

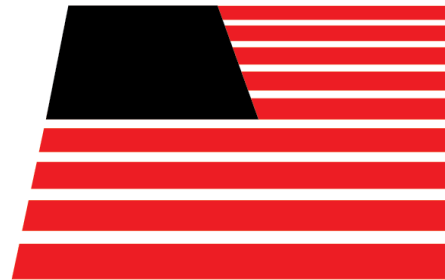
In our interview, you can hear me not getting the answer I want, so I finally resort to the interviewer's bane, the hypothetical situation: "Anecdotally speaking," I say to Young, "if you're having conversation with somebody and they don't understand why, why it's important to elevate these voices, what do you say to them?"

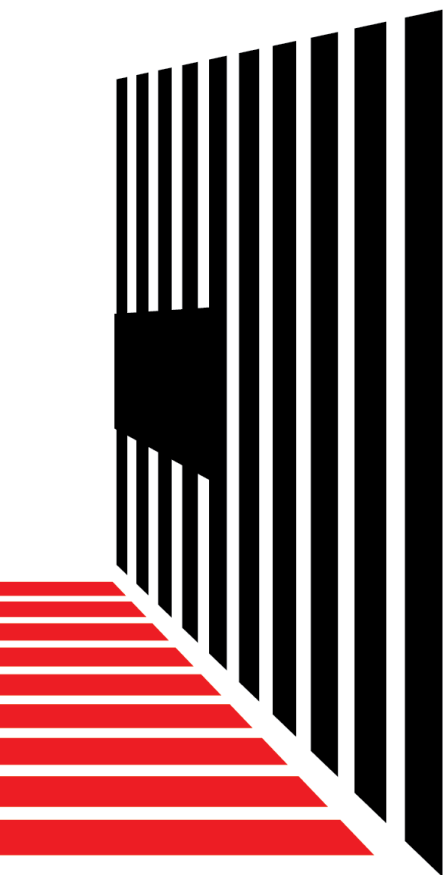
I'm sure I'm imagining this now, but I can hear there's a smile in Young's voice as she replies: "How can we ever expect to have a holistic understanding of what incarceration means in our country and the impacts of incarceration without [hearing from] people that have experienced it directly? [Hearing them] speak for themselves, and speaking of what that process has looked like [for them]."

There's an interesting awakening going on for me at this moment — internally, I'm beginning to realize that maybe I've gone about this all wrong, that maybe, in my trying to get to know this population, I'm suffering

from a blinkered perspective myself: I'm so hung up on why it's important for me, for those of us on the outside, to understand the perspective of the incarcerated population that I'm overlooking the inherent value of the demographic and their stories.

It's a stunning realization, for someone who makes part of her living on encouraging people to sit down and listen to those whose perspectives differ from our own. Young's next comment is in line with this thought. Of the archive's next steps, she says, "[We can build] these connections between other movements that are happening that...have had similar trajectories. That is a connection that we are very intentionally fostering. For instance, I have been building relationships with archives that have nothing to do with incarceration, but [which] are collecting oral histories history or writing samples from populations that also





have had a lack of access to platforms. I just had a meeting with a representative from the Trans Oral Histories History Project. I think it's really important that we maintain those connections because this is a well-traveled road, not from an incarceration perspective, but we have a lot that we can learn and continue to learn. We don't want to reinvent the wheel every time we realize that we need perspectives from people that haven't had access to giving their perspectives before. Maintaining those connections is paramount to this project, to this work. Because they are all interconnected. Incarceration is a huge intersection of a lot of different marginalized spaces."

I make one last valiant effort to go down a wrong road by asking Young if she's talking about creating enough demand for prison narratives. Her response sets me firmly and finally on the track toward the better

understanding.: She tells me, "That is a communications aspect [of our project], but there's also so much that can be gained from continuing to build on what we already have: a pretty worthy collection of writing of samples of these experiences. And the more that we can ingest, the more that can influence people who are working on policy. And although that isn't so much of a communications piece, I think that they're both really important. You can't really do much with policy unless the general public is ready. And so it is important to be building that communications piece at the same time.

"But there's also that's why all of these things are happening simultaneously: We also need to build more perspective so that not one perspective from the archive can be treated as a monolith; And and so that people who are working on informing policy or having these larger debates can pull directly from experiences that right now are very inaccessible."

Part of this, Young adds, is encouraging perspectives from populations that the archive doesn't often hear from —: women and nonbinary people who are incarcerated, for example, and —and the archive is lacking in certain stories from certain states. "Louisiana has the largest prison populations, but we don't have nearly as much representation from Louisiana as we would like, and we don't have a lot of writings from Spanish-speaking populations."

Our interview is winding to a close. I only have one last question on my list, but I can't bring myself to ask it.: It's a now-embarrassing question about whether the archive looks for literary quality or if every story matters.

I tell Young I was going to ask the question, but that I'm not going to, now. She tells me, "I do have

something to add to that, though: We don't limit anything that is submitted. We don't refuse anything. The only things that we will redact are names or descriptors of other people that have not given permission to be represented within the archive. And if there are plans for violence, we will redact that, or we will enter into more communication with that author. We won't post those on the archive if it is calling for violence.

"When it comes to this bigger question of editing work for its quality — --we take everything at face value, exactly how it is, as it was intended. If we are asked for resources on how to improve your writing skills, we will connect people with resources that we have found that are specifically designed for [that].

"There are many, many universities and professors that host writing workshops within prisons. And, although we do transcribe all of the writing that we get for accessibility reasons, we always put the original piece as the first thing that any user on the website sees. Because we think that an incredibly important piece of experiencing these works is to see the writing as it was written. See the intentional choices made with punctuation and lyrics."

When I hang up with Young, I need to sit for a while with what I have learned over our time today, because the answer to the question of vetting for literary quality, for me, is finally, glaringly, obvious: No one person can represent everyone's experience. Every story matters.

Every single perspective matters. 📖

*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.*





**P**rofessor Jessica Dobson teaches English at Norco College in Southern California. She has been teaching writing and composition to the incarcerated population at the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco since 2017. She's currently a doctoral candidate for her EdD, where her dissertation is on the motivations of teaching within the prison system. We asked her to come up with five must-reads for us that would help us to center this population better. Here's what she told us.

***Education Behind the Wall: Why and How We Teach College in Prison, Mneesh Gellman, editor.***

This series of case studies compiles best practices from people teaching college in prison, along with some first-person accounts of learning within the prison system. "There is this fascination with what [teachers in the prison system] do. I'm hoping [books like this] are going to demystify the logistics of what this feels like," says Dobson. "Because the reality is,

as an educator, you get to leave the prison, but you also have to walk through it. And there's an element of being watched and being aware of your positionality in there — not just your positionality of power but your positionality of not-power with the custody officers. I think the more we can talk about this, the more we can create context around teaching in prisons. We need to demystify it from the place it's currently in, this place of saviorism or exoticism."

***We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice (Abolitionist Papers No. 1), Mariame Kaba.***

Dobson says this "deep look at what it means to be an abolitionist of prisons" is more about what it means to transform justice. "It builds an argument, it invites people in," she says. "It forces us to question our beliefs... It's not just about witnessing trauma but about really understanding and digging in and reflecting on our own ideals and ideologies and beliefs of what we believe should happen with the system."

For Dobson, as a prison educator, the book strikes from another angle. "We're [teaching in prisons] because we believe education is a right for all. We maybe believe that there's a value in this as a rehabilitative process. Studies that have shown that it might help with recidivism. Those studies are limited a bit and very targeted in small populations. But who cares? Because we truly do believe that there should be an opportunity for education, especially for this highly marginalized population, [who are] marginalized in very different intersectional ways. My role here is maybe to help these individuals in this moment. And I might have to be ready for that to shift because I don't believe the system is working OK. Or — the system is working exactly the way it wants to work. But I don't believe it's working for the human right, for rehabilitation, or for actual restoration of wrong. And I want it to work in that way. So education, for me, is twofold. I'm going to offer these classes. I'm going to be there for [the incarcerated population]. I'm going to try to find space for that. But I'm also going to educate myself and push towards a different system."

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*The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison*, Caitis Meissner, editor.

This work is a resource for those incarcerated persons who want to write. The volume includes writing exercises, a section on building a writing community, and samples of writing from incarcerated people. Dobson says this book is a good tool to provide her students the space to explore their creative voices. “My students have experience, right? They write by hand all the time. They write letters all the time. They’re always so nervous about being in my class at times, but their writing skills, even if they dropped out of school at eighth grade, are beautiful because they’re [always] reading and writing. Finding a space for them to also create in that space is really beautiful. [This] really shows that there are organizations that are building this space, this creative space, for them.

“The book is written for people in this experience. In some ways, [writing] is that little bit of autonomy [incarcerated persons] might have.”

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Bitch Planet, Kelly Sue DeConnick; Valentine De Landro (illustrator).

Dobson has used this comic book in her college classes on feminism. “It really touches on some uniqueness about women’s incarceration and the intersectionality of identities for women,” she says. “DeConnick did a lot of thinking and considering about intersectional feminism and how that plays a role in how we can experience varying levels of oppression.”

Dobson also praises the art in the book.

“I feel like De Landro particularly captures some vulnerability and some really interesting scenes in terms of

“Because
the reality
is, as an
educator,
you get to
leave the
prison,
but you
also have
to walk
through it.”

loss of autonomy and loss of self,” she says. “And the negotiating of power within those spaces that you have no power. I think that that’s the key — this loss of autonomy, of power, that gets captured and explored with a prison trope.”

Dobson points out that comic books allow for a level of accessibility that prose works do not.

“There’s a way of exploring through imagery that’s super fascinating to me,” she says.

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*Felon*, Reginald Dwayne Betts.

This book of poetry was a 2019 winner of the NAACP Image Award and is Betts’ first book of poetry. Betts is an attorney who was also formerly incarcerated. Dobson recalled an event at her college where two formerly incarcerated students who were studying for their college degrees interviewed Betts.

“There were conversations between them that were for them,” she says. “I witnessed a deep connection, a deep sense of belonging with one another, and also a kind of mentoring, encouragement. It was beautifully authentic for the students.”

Dobson adds that Betts brings this same kind of authenticity to this volume about the effects of incarceration. (Betts has also published a memoir, *A Question of Freedom*, and a play, *Felon: An America Washi Tale*.)

“You read his memoir or his play,” says Dobson, “and you can just tell he loves language. In some of his poems, he’s very much playing with space — there are short vignettes that could very well be prose. He’s chosen to split those lines in specific ways because it’s important. Some of his poems are not focused on iambic pentameter or a rhyming scheme. It’s more about getting across imagery.” ❧







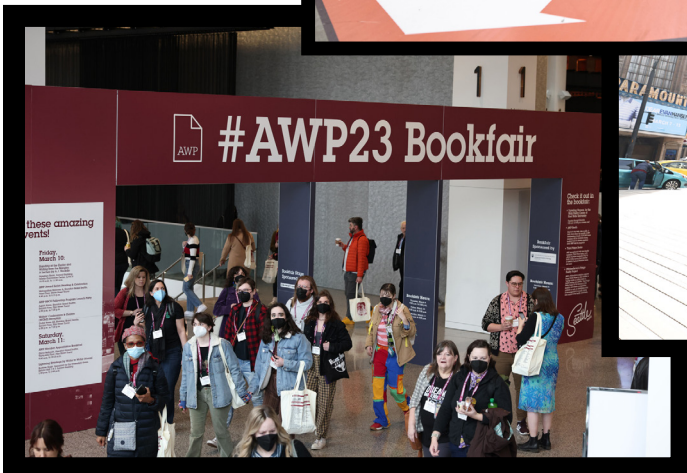
# Writing World

A dispatch from the 2023 AWP Conference & Bookfair.

By T.J. Murphy

It was a Wednesday night when I landed at the Seattle Airport for the 2023 AWP Conference, held March 8 through 11, at the Seattle Convention Center. Making my way that night to a hotel in the Capitol Hill area, I was reminded of the city's reputation for cutting-edge tech. My hotel was effectively automated (no front desk or staff; everything pretty much handled by smart phone codes). After dropping my bag

off, I walked a block to a grocery store, passing several electric scooters randomly scattered across the sidewalk — each available to rent (using your phone). At the store, I walked through a flap-gate turnstile (that I opened with a QR code on my phone) into a warmly lit grocery space unlike I'd ever encountered. There were no checkout lanes or cash registers. Just a single, bored looking attendant slouching at a desk.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF AWP



To my surprise, all I had to do was grab whatever I wanted, like an orange, a salad, and some trail mix, then walk out through the exit turnstile where “computer vision algorithms” and “sensor fusion” figured out what to charge me. My phone dinged and there was the receipt.

In the future, it seemed, we will never have to talk to anyone.

Back at my robot hotel – with eerie coincidence — I was two-thirds through Neal Stephenson’s 883-page novel, *Fall; Or Dodge In Hell*. One of the

primary locations of the monster work of speculative fiction is the Capitol Hill neighborhood, where (in the book) they scan and digitize the brains of wealthy people and upload their consciousnesses to a rather nightmarish digital universe. No mention of sensor fusion.

So that was weird. And perhaps why I very much appreciated the next morning — my first day wandering the conference — where it was filling up with some of the 9,000 living and breathing writers that would attend. People happy to be there, see old friends or make

new ones, and eager to catch up.

AWP stands for Association of Writers & Writing Programs. Some key AWP 2023 numbers: 563 exhibitors and 632 organizations represented (everything from small press literary publishers to major universities showcasing their writing programs), along with 350-plus in-conference events and 250-plus off-site events.

It was often tough making a selection. Thursday morning, for example, at 10:35am, I had 20 events to choose from. From “The More-Than-Human





Multiverse: Celebrating the Poetry of Widening Circles” to “Book Promotion By the Numbers” to “Crafting Voice in YA Fiction” to “Too Small to Fail: The Indie Press Prerogative in Advancing Diverse Voices” to “Creating Virtual Community.” Hour upon hour, the offerings did not let up.


One event I particularly enjoyed was held Friday afternoon: “Supporting One Another as Small Press Authors.”

After an introduction, we formed into breakout groups. These breakouts were my favorite part of the conference.

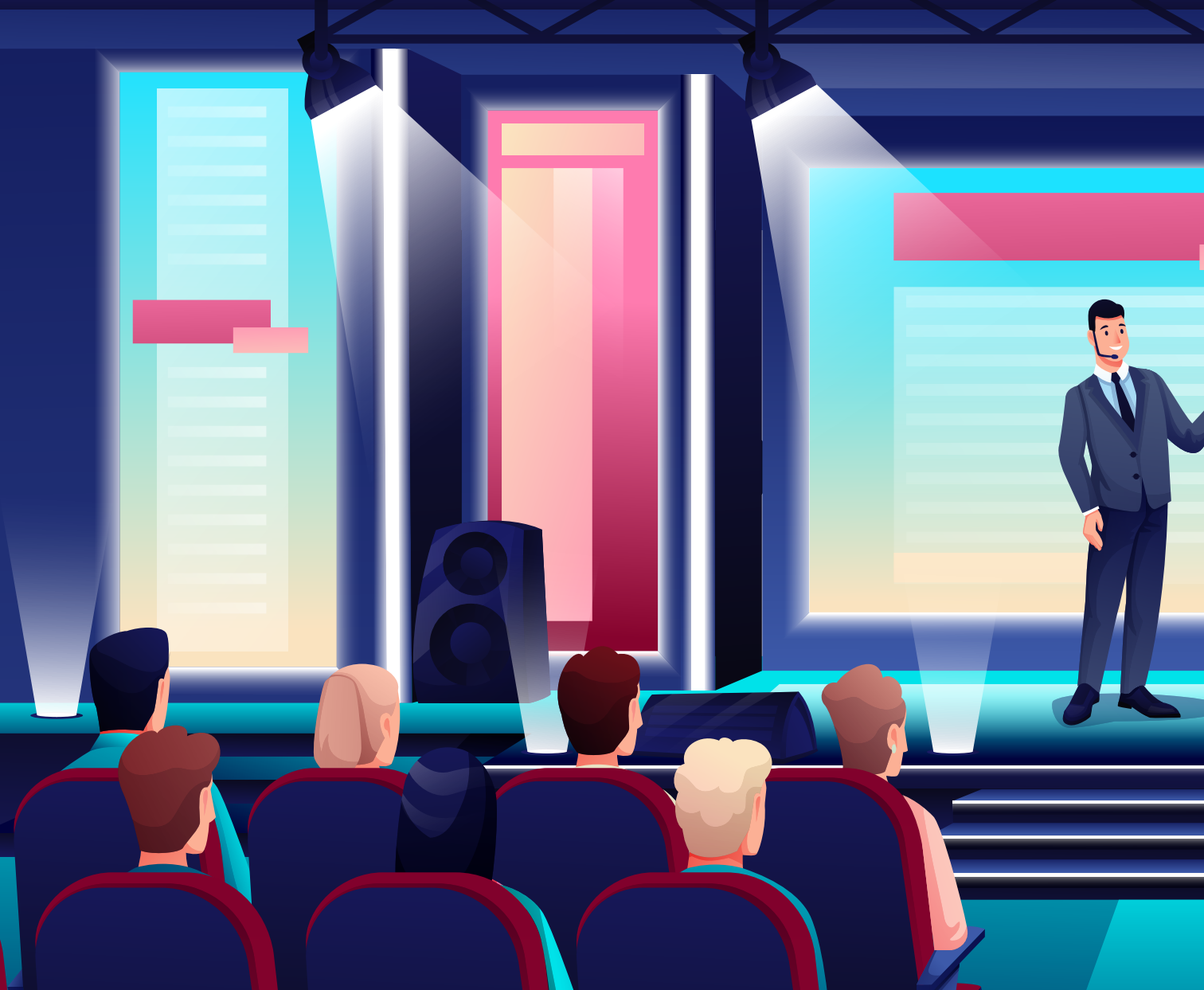
It was such a pleasure to meet and engage with a diverse group of people, where we were all on each other’s sides. In this breakout, our task was to come up with ideas. People in my group spanned the country, from San Diego to Chicago to New York. I sat with Jane Muschenetz, Sean Glatch, Brian Conn, Ben Niespodziany, and Kiik Araki-Kawaguchi. We had fun coming up with 11 ideas. Each group in the room handed their ideas to the panelists, who compiled it all into a Google doc and shared it with anyone and

everyone.

This was the kind of energized camaraderie I found flowing throughout the conference. Perhaps it was the simple joy of being with people that not only didn’t judge you but were just as crazy about writing as you are. Or maybe the joy of being in a gathering again after years of pandemic restrictions. Probably both.

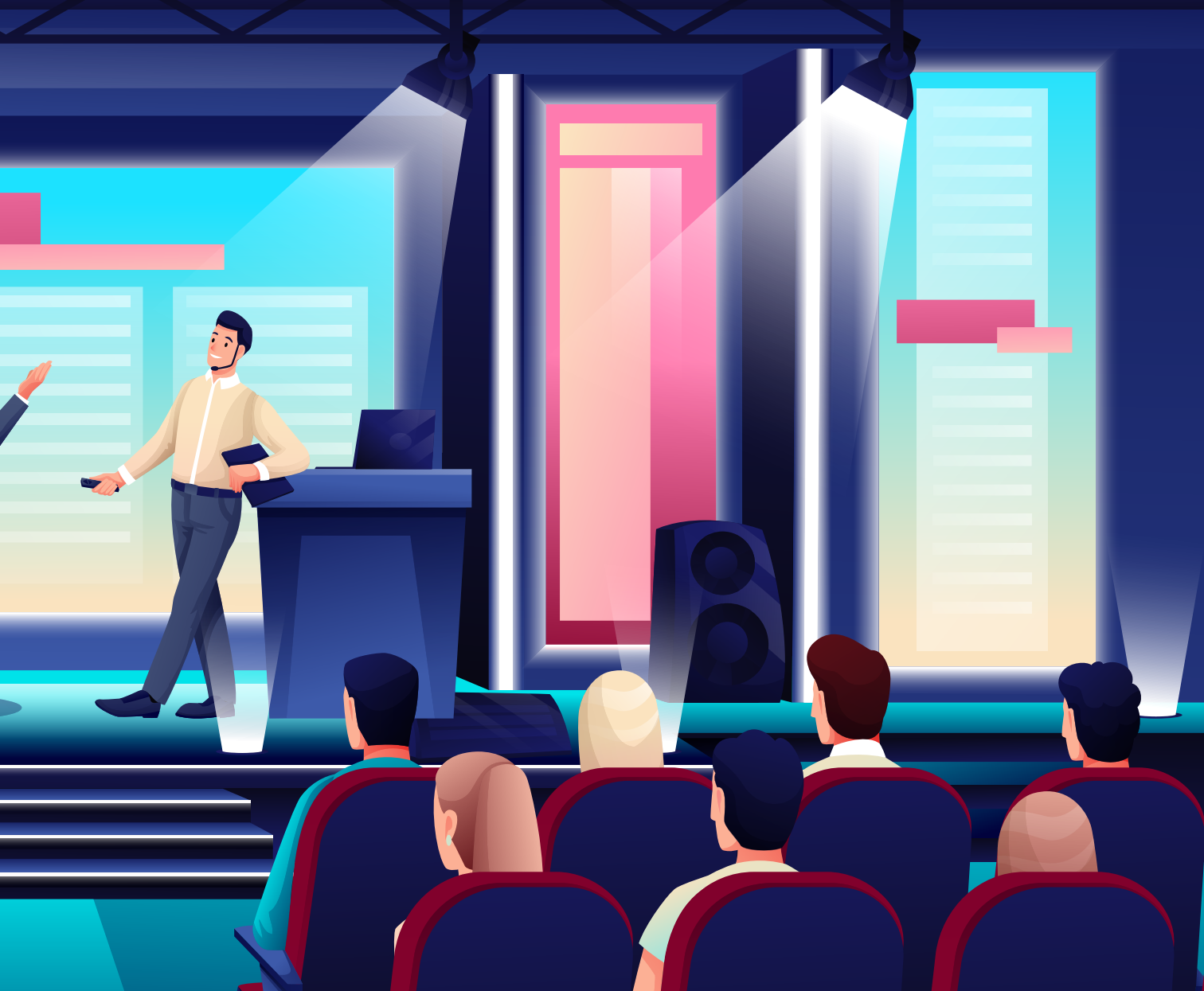
The 2024 AWP Conference is scheduled for February 7-10 in Kansas City. For more information, go to [awpwriter.org](http://awpwriter.org). 





# The **COMPLETE** **GUIDE** to **WRITING** **CONFERENCES**

SHUTTERSTOCK



Everything you need to know about finding the best writing conference for you — and getting the most out of it.

by Kerrie Flanagan

A writing conference is a perfect mix of all the ingredients you need to grow as a writer. It doesn't matter if you are just beginning or have a thriving writing career; a good conference provides everything, and it all happens over the span of a few days.

Conferences offer the opportunity to attend sessions to improve your writing, learn strategies about the business of writing, be inspired by bestselling authors, connect with industry experts, talk shop with other writers, pitch to agents, and stay current on what is happening in the world of writing and publishing.

There are many great writing conferences around the country, but that doesn't mean they are all a good fit for you. Finding the writing conference that meets your goals can take some time but will be worth it in the long run.



## THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic changed writing conferences. Initially in 2020, the events were either canceled or shifted online. Then, as we moved through the pandemic, conference directors had to rethink their approaches. People were used to staying home, and most of the country became proficient at using Zoom and other online meeting platforms.

Writing organizations and conference directors are determined and passionate about supporting writers and knew they needed to adjust how they staged events and connected to their audience.

Kate Ristau, executive director of Willamette Writers in Washington, quickly pivoted in 2020 and offered an all-virtual conference that year. Her organization also understood how fragile everyone's emotional health was at that time, deepening the need for writers to stay connected.

"During the height of the pandemic, we gathered volunteers for a Care Team to just check in on people — to make sure they were able to get online, get connected, and that they were safe and felt supported. While our conference community gathers once a year, we have programming year-round. We moved our in-person workshops online and started focusing on how we could connect with people through Zoom, Facebook Groups, and emails."

Amy Rivers, director of Writing Heights Writing Association based in Colorado, also adjusted quickly. "My organization was able to pivot successfully, focusing on what we could do — classes, workshops, readings, all online — instead of what we couldn't. One surprising result was that more of our members were able to participate,

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eliminating location and mobility as obstacles. We shifted our focus to a long-term hybrid model and gained members and conference attendees from as far away as New Zealand."

Ristau also came to a similar conclusion, and now she plans to continue making Willamette Writers Conference a hybrid event this year and into the future, with both in-person and virtual options available. "On an organizational level, it helps us bring in more agents, editors, and producers whose busy schedule makes it hard for them to travel. On a personal level, it also helps us offer reduced registrations for writers. While the cost of an in-person registration can be more expensive, the virtual registrations are more accessible, both economically

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**Remember, most agents and editors at conferences are actively seeking new clients. They understand the emotional connection writers have to their work. They are not there to crush your spirit.**

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and geographically. We will continue to offer these options for the members of our community who are in high-risk communities or prefer to attend online instead of in person."

## IN PERSON OR ONLINE

It used to be that the only decision you had to make regarding conferences was whether or not you could go. Now that many writing conferences are hybrid, there is the added decision of attending in person or online. In the past, one big reason to attend a conference was to connect with other writers and industry professionals. Conference organizers understand this, and most make a point to incorporate community-building activities (and sometimes these even begin weeks before the conference date), even for those attending online.

Ristau says, "We've learned a lot these last few years, and one of the most important things is this: community matters. Whether we're using Zoom, Facebook, or a phone call, technology can help us connect with each other to share our stories and support our writing lives."

Online conferences expand the opportunities available to writers. Location, budget, and health-related restrictions no longer present the barriers they once did. And many times the sessions are recorded for you to revisit after the event is over.

## CHOOSE THE BEST ONE FOR YOU

Most states have writing organizations that host annual conferences, and a quick Google search can usually find that information. Here are also a few websites that list conferences around the country.

- New Pages: [newpages.com/writing-conferences-events](https://newpages.com/writing-conferences-events)



- The Write Life: [thewritelife.com/writers-conferences](http://thewritelife.com/writers-conferences)
- Shaw Guides: [writing.shaw-guides.com](http://writing.shaw-guides.com)

Not all conferences will be a good fit for you, so research and find the ones that offer what you are looking for. Before committing to attend a conference, think about your goals. What do you plan to achieve with your writing in the coming year, and which conference's can best help you accomplish your goals?

- Are you new to writing and are exploring all aspects of writing and publishing to get a solid foundation?
- Are you seeking to traditionally publish?
- Is your goal to make connections in the industry?
- Do you already have books published and need to improve your marketing?
- Do you want to improve your writing?

The list could go on and on. The bottom line is to understand your reasons for attending and what you intend to get from the event. Knowing this will help you make an informed decision because you can weed out the conferences that don't fit your goals.

### What is Included?

An in-person conference can be a big investment, especially if you plan to travel to a different state. There are the conference registration fee, travel expenses, food, and other incidentals.

When looking for a conference, don't let the first price you see influence your decision. Delve deeper to see what is included with that price. Are meals included? Do agent/editor pitch sessions come with the registration fee? How about critiques or

special workshops? Sometimes the price looks almost too good to be true, and when you look closer, it is.

For instance, you might have narrowed your search to two conferences that are both three days. Initially, one appears less expensive, but when you look more closely, you see that there are additional fees for meals, pitch sessions, and a workshop you want to attend. The other conference includes all these items. By researching further, you find both conferences are comparable in price. Now, it's a matter of deciding which best meets your needs.

### Access to Industry Professionals

Having a chance to talk with professionals in the industry and ask them questions is a definite perk to investing in an in-person conference. Check into what opportunities are available at the event, like cocktail hours and mealtimes. Some conferences have presenters assigned to tables at mealtimes, so you can choose which table you want to sit at. These are ideal times to start up casual conversations with the agents, editors, or presenters and make a connection (this is not a time to pitch your book idea, though, unless asked).

### Selection of Workshops

Whether you are attending a conference in person or virtually, pay close attention to the workshops offered. Think back to your original goals for attending the conference. If your focus is on the business side of publishing, are there plenty of sessions related to this topic that fit with your plan? Research the presenters to see what they write and their levels of expertise. Even though you have your specific focus, also sprinkle in some other sessions

where you can explore different areas of writing.

### Pitch Sessions

If having the opportunity to pitch your book idea to an agent or editor face-to-face is important to you, find conferences where this is offered. It can be a definite plus if you have a completed manuscript or book proposal and are seeking representation. Note that even though a conference is happening in person, pitch sessions may take place live via Zoom with the agent or editor. This is still a great opportunity; just understand how the event handles the pitches. Research each editor or agent to make sure at least one represents your genre before deciding if this is the right conference for you.

### Keynote Speakers


A big-name author can be a huge draw, but I caution you not to base your decision on this factor alone. Many times, the keynote speaker comes in, does their talk, and then leaves after a book signing. This is only about one hour out of the whole event, so make sure the rest of the conference lives up to the hype of the one speaker.

## HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF A CONFERENCE

### Network

Many writers hear the word network and want to find the nearest couch to hide under. After all, our writing time is spent alone with only our thoughts, made-up worlds, and characters to keep us company. Approaching strangers to start a conversation can be downright intimidating.

With a little preparation, meeting new people or introducing yourself



to your favorite author doesn't have to be scary. Learn what you can about the different presenters. Visit their websites, find out more about their writing, and follow them on social media. Then, if you can visit with them during a cocktail hour or meal, you will know a little bit about them and already have some topics to discuss.

Another tip for easing the discomfort of networking is to have a few standard questions ready to go. People generally like to talk about themselves, so ask about their family, job, and what they like to do for fun when they are not writing. One great phrase to use is, "Tell me about..." This way, you don't have to ask questions that seem intrusive, like, "Are you married?" Instead, you can say, "Tell me about your family."

Ristau says the most important person you meet might not be at the front of the room; they might be sitting right next to you at a workshop or at a meal. "Your fellow attendees will become your colleagues and your friends," she says. "Yes, the keynotes and presenters are inspirational and very cool, but don't forget the people sitting right next to you. They are the ones who will be taking this journey beside you."

### **Be Professional**

Publishing is a business, but writing is an intimate and creative act that draws from the deepest parts of us. When it comes time to publish, your focus needs to shift from your writing being your "baby" to a commodity you are looking to sell. Dress and carry yourself like a professional. You don't necessarily have to wear a business suit, but you should dress like you take your writing seriously and understand that publishing is a business.

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**Attend sessions  
or talks outside  
your regular genre.  
If you write sci-fi,  
attend something  
on romance,  
or if you write  
nonfiction, attend  
a craft class on  
writing effective  
dialogue. You will  
be surprised at  
what you can learn.**

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### **Keep an Open Mind**

Conferences are a great time to step out of your comfort zone and expand your writing horizons. Keep an open mind with the sessions you attend, the people you meet, and the activities you participate in. If you can let go of preconceived ideas and expectations, especially if you have been writing for a while, you will get more from the event. Rivers says, "Sometimes we're so busy thinking about what we already know that we close ourselves off from what we might learn. Writers are fascinating people, and being around them at conference time can be transformative in so many ways."

Most of the time, you can find at least one gold nugget of information

from a session or conversation with someone. If you go in with narrow expectations, you might miss those. Also, attend sessions or talks outside your regular genre. If you write sci-fi, attend something on romance, or if you write nonfiction, attend a craft class on writing effective dialogue. You will be surprised at what you can learn.

### **Follow Up**

At the events, exchange business cards with people you meet and want to stay connected with. When the conference is over, reach out to them with an email to touch base and initiate a conversation. If you pitch to agents or editors, send them a quick email telling them you enjoyed meeting them and remind them what you talked about or did when you met in order to refresh their memory, since you weren't the only person they met.


If you pitched a manuscript to an agent or editor, and they requested you send pages or the full manuscript, get that to them within a week or two. This keeps you and your book idea at the top of the agent or editor's mind. In the subject line of the email or in the initial introduction, remind them you met at the conference, and they requested this material.

### **HOW TO PITCH TO AN AGENT/EDITOR (IN PERSON OR ONLINE)**

If you plan to pitch to an agent or editor at the event, here are some things to keep in mind that will help you prepare and make the most of this opportunity.

### **Preparing Your Pitch**

Angie Hodapp, director of literary development, has been with Nelson



Literary Agency for 12 years and participates in many conferences, taking pitches on behalf of the agency. As you prepare your pitch, she suggests understanding what she calls “The Big Five.”

- Who is your hero? (Character.)
- What do they want? (Goal.)
- Why do they want it? (Motivation.)
- Why can't they have it? (Conflict.)
- What happens if they don't get it? (Stakes.)

You have a limited amount of time, so you are not there to give a synopsis of the full story. Lead with a few sentences about the story with the hope it will initiate a conversation. Don't spend the time talking about the world, characters, or how you became a writer; talk about the story (this includes memoir). For nonfiction, share the topic you cover and how it differs from others currently on the market.

Hodapp says distilling your story and talking about it is a necessary skill for writers. When you pitch, you are basically applying for the job of professional writer.

“Preparing your pitch is not just a thing you do to get an agent,” she says. “A well-prepared pitch travels with the book all the way to the reader.” The agent will take this pitch to the editors, who will then take it to their teams to make the case for offering you a contract. Then the sales and marketing team will use it to get you into bookstores. “The better you do it, the better the chance it gets all the way into readers’ hands,” Hodapp says.

### Online Pitch

The pandemic made Zoom interactions more of the norm, and conference organizers have taken advantage of this. The travel expenses to bring

in agents and editors can be expensive, and many conferences don't have a big budget. By taking pitches over Zoom or other online platforms and alleviating those extra expenses, more conferences are able to offer these.

Just because you're pitching over Zoom doesn't mean you should take the opportunity lightly. You still need to present yourself as a professional, which includes what you wear (at least from the waist up). Hodapp has some tips to help you do this.

- **Stabilize your computer.** Put it on a solid surface while you pitch. Hodapp has spoken with people trying to balance their iPads on their laps during a pitch, and it makes for distractions when the background moves around.
- **Have good lighting.** Darkness or a lot of back lighting causing shadows on your face don't create the professional look you want.
- **Set the computer at an appropriate height.** It should be at eye level or a little higher. No one wants to look up your nose.
- **Look into the computer while pitching.** If you need a few notes, tape them near your computer camera, so you are not looking down or turning your head to another monitor.
- **Create a professional-looking background.** Avoid using artificial backgrounds that can make your hands disappear when you move around.

### In Person

Hodapp suggests going into the bathroom before you pitch and doing a power pose, like V for victory. “There's actually science behind putting your body in that shape,” she

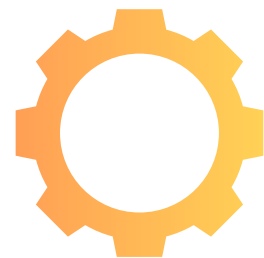
says, “and it helps you breathe a little better and expend some of that nervous energy.”

Remember, most agents and editors at conferences are actively seeking new clients. They understand the emotional connection writers have to their work. They are not there to crush your spirit.

When it's time to pitch, take a deep breath, start with your story, and show the agent what excites you about it. If they say “no thank you,” it is nothing personal or a reflection on your writing. It just means it wasn't a good fit for them. Thank them for their time, and then find the next door to knock on.

Attending a good conference can put you ahead of the game by equipping you with the best skills, tools, and knowledge to create the successful writing life you always dreamed about. The people who organize writing conferences work hard to put together a memorable event from start to finish. I encourage you to participate in as much as possible (even if you attend online) and stay until the very end. You will be exhausted, and your head will be spinning from everything you learned and all the people you met, but it will be worth it in the long run. 🍷

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Kerrie Flanagan is an author, writing consultant, and freelance writer from Colorado with over 20 years' experience in the industry. She is a frequent contributor to The Writer and the author of WD Guide to Magazine Article Writing along with 19 other books. She moonlights in the world of sci-fi/fantasy with a coauthor under the pen name C.G. Harris (cggharris.net). Learn more about her and sign up for a writing services consultation at kerrieflanagan.com.



What a writer needs

Got talent? That's great. But to develop a measure of true, enduring success, three vital lessons apply.

By Deborah Straw

In the powerful and lyrical essay “Swamp as Metaphor,” included in *The Place Within*, Florida author Harry Crews tells of lessons he learned as a young boy

from Uncle Cooter about water's power, its place in our lives. But Uncle Cooter also taught the young Crews something less tangible yet equally important: “He taught

me, without knowing he was teaching me, ways of being that would be with me all the days of my writing life: patience, perseverance, and how order is brought out of chaos.”

SHUTTERSTOCK



Even though I have two published books to my name, I still need to reexamine the importance of these three lessons and consider how I can push each of them to give me more impetus — and more courage — to keep writing.

Patience remains my biggest challenge.

Patience. Ours is not a patient society. Many of my college writing students had no interest in revising, although we talked about techniques and the importance of making changes. Some only corrected errors or added commas. I often played a taped interview of John McPhee (author

of 29 nonfiction books), in which he talked about his process. After they heard McPhee and learned of his writing and publishing history, the importance of revision began to sink in.

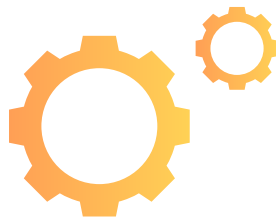
These days, many of us expect to do things once or twice and achieve mastery. What happened to striving for the best you can do?

Twice now, I have watched a documentary on YouTube, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, about 85-year-old Jiro Ono of Japan, considered to be one of the world's greatest sushi chefs. Young chefs apprentice with Jiro for up to 10 years to learn to make excellent sushi.

I am not advocating this kind of apprenticeship, although I like the idea of this precise kind of training. I can't imagine most Americans doing this kind of rigorous, sometimes tedious, work over and over again.

Of course, it generally does not take 10 years to write something worth being shared or published. But if you're new to this writing-for-publication gig, it could take a few weeks and at least three or four revisions before something is ready for readers' or editors' eyes.

Patience is something I've worked on with my college students, with my often-undemonstrative cat, and also with



inconsiderate drivers. I think I am naturally impatient because I was a premature baby and an only child; I learned to rush in and expect quick results at an early age. In writing, we need two kinds of patience: patience with ourselves, with our clumsy, first attempts at writing, and patience with editors, most of whom are strangers about whom we know nothing.

I've discovered over the 40 years I've been a freelancer that instant gratification just doesn't exist in this field. It's an illusion — and a dangerous one. I know how to revise, cut things from my stories, essays, or poems. I share my work with my women writer friends or with my husband and make many of their suggested changes. I can put a piece aside, sometimes for months, until I feel it is as nearly perfect as I can get it.

However, I still become impatient with myself at times: I just can't find the right word, or I get exasperated and put a piece aside. Who hasn't run into a wall from time to time?

Putting a manuscript away for a week, or even two or three days, often lets me see it more clearly. Writing in cafes or libraries on hard copy instead of in front of my computer also helps jar more ideas into existence. Sometimes words or ideas that I have been struggling with for weeks will magically emerge.

I love revision; this essay survived and was improved by six or more revisions. I persevered, and I pulled order out of its chaotic beginnings.

Where I still also often expect instant gratification is in my dealings with editors and publishers, a dangerous policy and self-defeating idea. In a perfect world, people would respond to each other politely and quickly. This doesn't always happen in the real world. Some editors seem rude or at least callous; some lose things, never receive your query or manuscript, and never answer questions. Then, of course, there's waiting for payment,

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to what's important.**

which differs from publication to publication. Payment is not always consistent with initial promises.

And I'm not even discussing rejection, which goes on and on (do any of the other arts receive this much rejection?) but hopefully occurs less often as you write and publish more.

In their defense, editors don't know you or your work, and most receive dozens if not hundreds of queries and submissions a day. Many are willing to work with you and will use you again if you provide what they want and need.

I am trying to lengthen the amount of time before I send a follow-up email. Of course, I would never call an editor unless it were the only way to reach them. I'm practicing patience although it continues to be somewhat unnatural for me.

Here are a few alarming statistics. Kathryn Stockett received 60 rejections from agents for her novel, *The Help*. For one of his early manuscripts, Dr. Seuss received 27 rejections from publishers.

John Grisham, for *A Time to Kill*, received 28 rejections, and Madeleine L'Engle, for her award-winning book *A Wrinkle in Time*, received 26 rejections from publishers. We know how their reputations soared.

Of course, there are exceptions to some of these problems if you write for small, online publications — or weekly or biweekly publications — that need material frequently and quickly. Once you establish a relationship with an editor who trusts your work, you may have shorter response and turn-around times to develop a piece. You both know what to expect. You may still have to wait for quite a long time to be paid.

Perseverance.

I have maybe too much of it. Despite the rejection I receive (we all receive), I keep producing. Writing is almost an obsession. When I don't write for a day or two, I'm less satisfied with my life as a whole. I feel incomplete, out of sorts, as though I'm not paying attention to what's important.

The women in my writing group admired me; none of them sent out as many pieces as I did. I believe they were wary of rejection. Because of my perseverance, I've been relatively successful: I have published two books, hundreds of articles, dozens of essays, five short stories, a dozen poems, and hundreds of book reviews.

If you don't believe in yourself and your writing, no one else will. Develop a tough skin and be sure you always have at least one reader/friend who loves your work (best not to be a spouse, mother, or best friend); gives you honest feedback, not empty praise; and encourages you.

Keep sending your work out.

Not everyone perseveres, for a variety of reasons. One is the pain of rejection and the effect it can have on one's self-esteem and belief in one's abilities.

I think of my adult students. One man of 40 had great promise, yet he told me he hadn't written or read much in the last 20 years. He had natural talent and a fertile imagination. But he didn't enjoy writing. He agonized much more than I do. Another student also had a highly creative mind. Much younger, maybe 20, he had no patience or perseverance. He didn't care about creating order out of chaos; it appeared that his life was chaos, but this didn't seem to make him particularly uncomfortable. If he was late for class or for an assignment, he shrugged it off, content to receive a C instead of an A. His innate talent may not get him anywhere. I hope I'm proven wrong.

The long, long waits for publication most probably diminished hopes for Stockett, Dr. Seuss, Grisham, and L'Engle, as they would for all of us. But in finally getting their work published — and it becoming popular and well-known — attests to their extreme perseverance.

Bringing order out of chaos.

I'm referring to two kinds of chaos. The first is world chaos, which constantly affects all of us, and the second is internal chaos. Chaos can get in the way of lots of projects — and of sleep — so we must try to conquer it in whatever way we can. When I begin to create something new, I often feel a lack of ultimate clarity. I know what I want to write, but it's coming out sideways, or there are gaps to fill in. Have I used exactly the right word?

I have always considered myself a writer-thinker rather than a speaker-thinker, so writing many drafts does help me finally discern the kernel of truth at the heart of a piece.

Author May Sarton was my mentor and friend, one who prompted me to write from my heart. Throughout her long, often solitary life, she published

more than 50 volumes of work: poetry, fiction, memoir, and journals. She was a demanding role model, one who had extreme patience and perseverance, despite a lack of critical recognition for many years. Sarton was able to pull order out of many types of chaos — deaths of friends and parents, cancer, and, most especially, a certain lack of critical recognition. She wrote of homophobia, coming to terms with cancer, women's friendship in old age, the atrocities of war, coming out, and life in a Dickensian nursing home, among other topics. She modeled the importance of precise and diligent attention to one's craft and constantly talked about the conflict between life and art. May kept producing — and publishing — into her 80s.

Especially now, in my semi-retirement, sometimes depressed because of deaths and long winters, my life often feels like chaos. My study is messier; I clean the house less often. I meet deadlines, keep weekly routine schedules, but other details, like calling people I haven't seen in weeks or reaching out to new people or keeping track of dental appointments, slip by me. Where is that shopping list? Where are my glasses?

The time I feel I'm creating the most order of any sort is when I'm writing about my life and my values. Do I learn what I value (or, to quote E.B. White, "what my heart treasures") when it appears on the page? As it did for my mentor, writing has often helped me come to terms with and resolve awkward relationships and a multitude of crises.

For example, I've written many poems and essays about death, a subject I'm still not comfortable with. I never realized that my mid and older years would involve so much death — naive, perhaps? There has been the death of my favorite teachers and of Sarton, the death of my 89-year-old dad, and that of my 6-year-old cat of pancreatic disease.

I faced my mom's dementia and slow decline and the sudden demise of my best friend from high school. Although I don't always cope well with death's finality, writing does help heal the pain and loss.

I agree with Crews that these three qualities are essential to be a successful and fulfilled writer. But, of course, what Crews didn't mention is talent. That a writer needs as surely as the other three. That can sometimes be augmented by the first three.

The other necessary ingredient in the toolbox for a successful writer is a strong — or at least adequate — sense of grammar and usage (hey, I was an English teacher!). This is not the most critical ingredient, but editors greatly prefer not to have to decipher meaning or correct incomplete sentences and poor spelling.

Without Crews' three qualities, all the talent a writer can muster just won't get her anywhere. Talent alone is never all you need. As our 30th president, Calvin Coolidge, from my state of Vermont, said: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent."

You're truly fortunate if you have great talent, but don't take it for granted.

I believe I'm realistic about my abilities; I have a moderate amount of talent. But without Crews' three ingredients, that talent would never have matured or been exposed to readers, the reason that we create most of our written work.

Persist, be patient, put time and space between drafts, and revise, revise, revise. ☺

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*Deborah Straw is the author of The Healthy Pet Manual: A Guide to the Prevention and Treatment of Cancer and Natural Wonders of the Florida Keys: A Guide to Parks, Preserves and Wild Places.*

# How to Write a (Really Good) Book in Five Weeks

Jesse Q. Sutanto produces amazing novels at an amazingly productive pace. She shares her secrets to fast writing and switching genres.

By Toni Fitzgerald

Publishing one book a year is considered an ambitious pace in the makes-sloths-look-sprightly publishing business. Jesse Q. Sutanto published three books in 2022. She will publish three more this year. No, that's not a double typo.

Sutanto is prolific. Her taut prose renders delightfully entertaining characters who leap — or, in the case of her latest adult release, scold — right off the page. She writes across genres for varying age levels, with humor forming the throughline for her work. Her novels include murder YA that skate between mystery, satire, and indictments of patriarchal capitalism; middle grade fantasy with heavy themes of death and loss (and dragons); a mystery romcom; a mafia romcom.

That latest adult release, Vera Wong's *Unsolicited Advice for Murders*, out in March, showcases Sutanto's ability to write imperfect characters who feel remarkably real. Tea shop owner

Vera holds inflexible beliefs about everything. She is not, to embrace the obvious pun, everyone's cup of tea. Her hilarious misadventures after discovering a dead body ("nobody sniffs out a wrongdoing quite like a suspicious Chinese mother with time on her hands," notes the book description) remind readers that it's never too late in life to change or make new connections. Also: Call your mom.

Sutanto sat down with *The Writer* four weeks before *Vera's* publication to discuss the model for her main character, how hopping across genres makes her a better and more facile writer, and, of course, how she writes so darn fast.

**The Writer:** Vera is awesome. The main character captures you from the moment she wakes up for her daily walk. Can you tell me about forming that character and what influences went into it?

**Jesse Q. Sutanto:** Vera [the character] is basically just 100% based on my mom. Whenever I got stuck, I would be like, what inappropriate thing would my mom do or say in this

particular moment, and then I would just get unstuck. And I'm very happy to announce that my mom read it and was like, "I approve of Vera." I was like, "Good, because she's you," and she said, "I know. She's so sensible."

**TW:** Were you nervous at all when your mom read the book?

**Sutanto:** Oh, yeah. I was so nervous because my mom doesn't hesitate to tell me when she doesn't like my books. There are books that I wrote, and she really did not like — I won't tell you what she said [laughs]. She's like, "Ah, I can't recommend this to my friends. Can you just write something that is not like this?" So when she told me, "I love Vera, I can't wait to have more copies to give out to my friends," then I was like, "Oh, good! Phew."

**TW:** Is it common for you to base characters on real people, or was that something new?

**Sutanto:** I did that a little bit with *Dial A for Aunties* [2022's bestselling mystery romcom]. I based a lot of

their personalities on my aunts and uncles. But with them, I mixed it all up a lot so nobody could recognize themselves in the books.

**TW:** *Vera* kept me guessing until the end. Can you talk about writing mysteries? And setting up the dynamic of having suspects and what a challenge that is from a craft perspective?

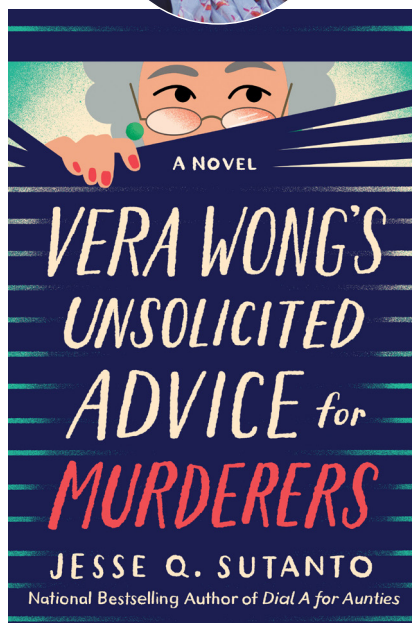
**Sutanto:** Oh, it's so challenging. *Vera* was my first whodunnit. Throughout the entire time that I was outlining and writing it, I kept moaning, "Who had the bright idea to write a whodunnit? This is a terrible idea, it's never going to come together." There were so many challenges.

Whenever you have a crime being committed, the biggest challenge is having the police come into play because I feel once the police are present, people tend to sit back and let them handle the investigation — as they should. We shouldn't get in the way of police investigations. It was really challenging to find a way that would allow Vera to perform her own investigation that's independent of the police.

Another challenge was that I had four suspects, and each suspect had their own point-of-view chapters. It was difficult for me to have chapters from their perspectives without giving away what they may or may not have done. I didn't want to annoy my readers by purposefully being misleading or obfuscating.

**TW:** Plotter or pantser? Do you outline your books?

**Sutanto:** When I first started writing, I was very much a pantser. I would write from the seat of my pants and had no idea where things would go. And it was an exciting way of doing things. But I also got stuck a lot. And I would have to rewrite a lot of sections. So, over time,



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**"Each time I write a new genre, there's the thrill of not knowing whether I'm going to pull it off. I guess I'm a thrill seeker in, like, the nerdiest sense."**

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I learned to outline, and it has pros and cons. But overall, I think that working with publishing deadlines, it's very essential for me to have an outline to cut down on discovery time and editing time and stuff like that.

**TW:** You have written in many different genres. Is that on purpose? Or do you get the idea, and you think, "well, this will make a good fantasy." Or how do you go about deciding what genre you're writing in?

**Sutanto:** I just follow the idea. It's always the concept that comes to me first. For example, with Vera, the concept was, what if a little old lady finds a dead body in her shop? And that was that. I didn't know what kind of shop it was going to be. I built from there. It's always a very short, one-sentence idea. And then if it sparks something, I try to build from that.

It's pretty clear from the first concept what genre it will be. I knew from that one sentence that Vera was going to be fun and lighthearted and very playful.

**TW:** What do you enjoy about writing in different genres? How does it challenge you as a writer?

**Sutanto:** I love how challenging it is. Each time, I'm learning something new and unexpected. And each time I write a new genre, there's the thrill of not knowing whether I'm going to pull it off. So I guess I'm a thrill seeker in, like, the nerdiest sense.

I find that my moods do get affected depending on what I'm writing. When I was writing my really dark adult suspense, which is coming out this August — it's called *I'm Not Done with You Yet*, and it's very twisted — I did actually find that I was more sullen and in a darker mood. And afterward, I was like, "Ah, that was fun, but I'm ready for something lighthearted now."



**TW:** Can you tell me something you learned from writing one genre that you then applied to another?

**Sutanto:** Right now, actually, I'm writing in a completely new genre. It's a sad love story that's kind of in the same vein of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. I've never written anything sad before, and I've never written anything that spans over so many years. I mean, *Dial A for Aunties* spans, like, 48 hours, *Vera* goes over the course of a couple of months, but this one will cover 50 years of this woman's life. So I'm learning a lot about pacing.

Also, I realized I have been using humor almost as a crutch because I'm like, "Oh, this scene isn't entertaining. I'll just write something funny, a funny scene." But with this one, I can't really do that. I'm being forced to focus on other things, which is the romantic relationships. I really feel myself learning a lot in that sense.

**TW:** What advice would you give a writer who wanted to try writing in another genre, one they have not written in before?

**Sutanto:** My advice would be to aim low. When I first started writing, the only books I had read were books sold in bookstores, so I thought that's what books are supposed to look like when you write them. I didn't realize you're looking at a finished product that's gone through 10 rounds of editing.

I would be frozen at my computer, and I'd be typing words and then thinking, "Oh, this is so bad." And then I would delete them. I was only able to write when I told myself, "You know what, it's OK. You can create trash, and then we can fix the trash." So take that approach to trying something new.

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**TW:** Do you consider yourself a fast writer? How long does it take you to write a book?

**Sutanto:** It usually takes me about five weeks to write a book now. I write at a pace of 2,000 words a day. And then when I get to 40,000 words, I go on this wonderful hotel retreat for three nights. Then I write the rest of the 40,000 words. It's just one of those magical, beautiful moments because I just dive into nothing but the story. I tell my husband, "Don't you dare call me unless there's blood — and a lot of it, OK? Not for just a little bit of blood."

**TW:** When you get to that point where you go on your retreat, do you have planned exactly what you're going to write, and it's easy for you to dive in?

**Sutanto:** I go with the 40,000 mark because that's the super saggy middle. The excitement of the beginning has worn off. The finish line is not within sight. And that's usually when writing is the most sluggish, and I hate it. I do have my outline, so I do know where the story is supposed to go. Then I think, "I'm just going to speed through the saggy middle and then hopefully end up at the finish line by the end of three days."

**TW:** Do you see yourself continuing at that three-books-a-year pace?

**Sutanto:** Yeah. People keep telling me I'm going to burn out, but what they don't know is that I'm driven by anxiety and Asian guilt. There's a lot of stress in general. And if I don't have something to occupy my mind, then I just become a big ball of anxiety that nags at my husband constantly. For myself and for my family's sake, it's good that I have no chill when it comes to my writing. 🍵

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# Postscript

LITERARY  
ADVANTAGES

Even though many don't offer payment and some are more popular than others, literary journals are a great way to get your writing's foot in an editor's door. Some writers may overlook smaller publications in order to concentrate on bigger projects, but doing so could be a mistake. Whether you're looking to apply to an MFA program or want to build your publishing portfolio, having your work appear in a literary magazine or journal can be a big first step toward your dream career. The magazines listed here are a sampling of what the industry has to offer. Find more at [writermag.com](http://writermag.com). →



## THE MONTH AHEAD

### June 3

Full moon tonight. Easy target for a writing prompt.

### June 8

Historical Novel Society North America Conference. "The place for historical fiction." San Antonio, TX. [hns-conference.com](http://hns-conference.com).

### June 8

New York Wright To Pitch Day starts. "Develop, refine, and pitch in 2023." [newyorkwritetopitch.com](http://newyorkwritetopitch.com).

### June 11-17

Kenyon Review Writers Workshops in Gambier, Ohio. [kenyonreview.org](http://kenyonreview.org).



## Literary advantages

Information in this section is provided to *The Writer* by the individual markets and events; for more information, contact those entities directly. Subscribers to *The Writer* have on-line access to information on publishers, publications, conferences, contests and agents. Go to [writermag.com](http://writermag.com) and click on Writing Resources.

**F** = Fiction **N** = Nonfiction **P** = Poetry **C** = Children's **Y** = Young adult **O** = Other **\$** = Offers payment

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**F N P APPLE VALLEY REVIEW** Online literary journal published twice annually, featuring poetry, short fiction, and essays. Seeks work with both mainstream and literary appeal. No genre fiction, scholarly work, erotic, or violent/depressing works. Submit via email. **Contact:** Apple Valley Review. Leah Browning, Editor. [editor@leahbrowning.net](mailto:editor@leahbrowning.net) [applevalleyreview.com](http://applevalleyreview.com)

**F N P O BATEAU** Features previously unpublished flash fiction, literary translations, poetry, playlets, flash nonfiction, comics/graphic stories, and B&W illustrations. Submit by online submission manager or by regular mail. Annual. **Contact:** Bateau Press. [bateaupress.org](http://bateaupress.org)

**F N P \$ BAYOU MAGAZINE** Biannual literary magazine publishing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Pays for fiction manuscripts. Submit through online submissions manager or regular mail. Reads submissions between Sept. 1 and May 1. **Contact:** Submissions Manager. [bayoumagazine.org](http://bayoumagazine.org)

**F THE BITTER OLEANDER** Features short, imaginative fiction. Submit fiction by online submissions platform only. Biannual. **Contact:** The Bitter Oleander Press, 4983 Tall Oaks Dr., Fayetteville, NY 13066. [info@bitteroleander.com](mailto:info@bitteroleander.com) [bitteroleander.com](http://bitteroleander.com)

**F N P BOOTH JOURNAL** Publishes poetry, fiction, nonfiction, comics, and lists. Accepts submissions September through March. Submit by online submission manager only. Biannual print journal. Website updated weekly. **Contact:** Booth Journal. [booth@butler.edu](mailto:booth@butler.edu) [booth.butler.edu](http://booth.butler.edu)

**F N P \$ BOSTON REVIEW** Currently paused on fiction and poetry submissions. Poetry and book reviews accepted. Submit through online submission manager only. **Contact:** Boston Review, P.O. Box 390568, Cambridge, MA 02139. [review@bostonreview.net](mailto:review@bostonreview.net) [bostonreview.net](http://bostonreview.net)

**F N P \$ BOULEVARD** Publishes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, showcasing established writers and new writers with exceptional promise. Submission period: Nov. 1 to May 1. Submit by submission manager system (\$3 fee) or by postal mail (free). Triannual. **Contact:** Boulevard Magazine. [editors@boulevardmagazine.org](mailto:editors@boulevardmagazine.org) [boulevardmagazine.org](http://boulevardmagazine.org)

**F N P O THE BLOTTER** Accepts short prose, microfiction, poetry, photo essays, journalism, and monthly columns. Prefers email submissions. **Contact:** The Blotter Magazine, P.O. Box 2153, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. [mermaid@blotterrag.com](mailto:mermaid@blotterrag.com) [blotterrag.com](http://blotterrag.com)

**N BRICK** Accepts only nonfiction submissions. Features literary nonfiction about arts and culture: book reviews, personal essays, memoirs, interviews, and letters. Two reading periods: Oct. 1 to Oct. 31 and April 1 to April 30. **Contact:** Brick, P.O. Box 609, STN P, Toronto, ON M5S 2Y4, Canada. 416-593-9684. [info@brickmag.com](mailto:info@brickmag.com) [brickmag.com](http://brickmag.com)

**N P CANADIAN LITERATURE** Quarterly magazine publishing original, previously unpublished nonfiction articles and book reviews about any subject related to writers and writing in Canada. Accepts some poetry by Canadian citizens. Submit using online submission manager. **Contact:** Canadian Literature, The University of British Columbia, #8 – 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1, Canada. [can.lit@ubc.ca](mailto:can.lit@ubc.ca) [canlit.ca](http://canlit.ca)

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**F N P CONJUNCTIONS** Online journal publishes contemporary innovative fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. Submit by regular mail only with SASE. Biannual. **Contact:** Conjunctions, Bard College, 30 Campus Rd., Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504-5000. [conjunctions@bard.edu](mailto:conjunctions@bard.edu) [conjunctions.com](http://conjunctions.com)

**F N P CRAB CREEK** Review Interested in publishing both emerging and established writers of fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. Reading period Sept. 15 to Nov. 15. Submit through online submission manager only. **Contact:** Crab Creek Review. [crabcreekeditors@gmail.com](mailto:crabcreekeditors@gmail.com) [crabcreekreview.org](http://crabcreekreview.org)

**F N P \$ EPOCH** Publishes literary fiction, poetry, essays, screenplays, cartoons, graphic art, and graphic fiction. Reading period: Sept. 15 to April 15. Submit by regular mail only with SASE. Triannual. **Contact:** EPOCH magazine, 250 Goldwin Smith Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853. Email from website. [epochliterary.com](http://epochliterary.com)

**F N P \$ EVENT** Publishes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Publishes mostly Canadian writers but is open to anyone writing in English. Most creative nonfiction accepted through the nonfiction contest only. Triannual. Submit online only. **Contact:** Event, P.O. Box 2503, New Westminster, BC, V3L 5B2, Canada. 604-527-5293. [event@douglascollege.ca](mailto:event@douglascollege.ca) [eventmagazine.ca](http://eventmagazine.ca)

**F N P \$ EXISTERE** Biannual art and literature magazine, accepting poetry, fiction, interviews, reviews, and essays. Submit by email. **Contact:** Existere:

Journal of Arts and Literature, S13 Ross Building, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON, Canada, M3J 1P3. Send direct message via Twitter or Instagram. [existere.info.yorku.ca](http://existere.info.yorku.ca)

**F N FICTION SOUTHEAST** Online weekly literary journal dedicated to fiction under 1,500 words, as well as an occasional essay, review, or interview. Submit via online platform only. **Contact:** Fiction Southeast. Email from website. [fictionsoutheast.com](http://fictionsoutheast.com)

**F N P O THE FLORIDA REVIEW** Submit fiction, nonfiction, graphic narrative, or poetry through online submission manager only for a small fee. **Contact:** The Florida Review, Department of English, University of Central Florida, P.O. Box 161346, Orlando, FL 32816. [flreview@ucf.edu](mailto:flreview@ucf.edu) [floridareview.cah.ucf.edu](http://floridareview.cah.ucf.edu)

**F N P O FLYWAY: JOURNAL OF WRITING & ENVIRONMENT** Digital magazine accepting submissions of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and visual art. Particularly interested in pieces that delve into the environment or human place, but submissions of any subject will be considered. Check website for reading periods. Submit using online form only; \$3 fee. Black and Indigenous writers may submit for free. **Contact:** Flyway, Department of English, 203 Ross Hall, 527 Farmhouse Ln., Iowa State University, Ames IA 50011-1054. [flywayjournal@gmail.com](mailto:flywayjournal@gmail.com) [flywayjournal.org](http://flywayjournal.org)

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## THE MONTH AHEAD

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Mont Blanc Writers Workshop starts. Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, France. [writingwriters.org/montblanc](http://writingwriters.org/montblanc).

### June 16

Joyce Carol Oates was born on this day in 1938.

### June 18

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### June 29

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1. Reading fee of \$3. Submit via online portal only. Biannual. **Contact:** Gulf Stream Magazine. [gulfstreamlit-mag@gmail.com](mailto:gulfstreamlit-mag@gmail.com) [gulfstreamlitmag.com](http://gulfstreamlitmag.com)

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# Endnotes

## Fail Better

By Louise DeSalvo (1942-2018)

I recently asked a group of students to reread the drafts of memoirs they had been composing for the creative writing class I teach at Hunter College in New York City. And then I asked them to write a brief summary of what they thought was working and what they believed needed reworking.

"This work is a failure," one student responded as he threw down his pencil.

How often in our writing lives have we uttered these words? And how often have we let them stop us dead in our tracks?

Through the years that I've been writing, I've learned a lot about how well-known writers deal with failure. And their insights into this stage of the process — for it is a stage — have helped me get through those moments when I think my work is worthless. They've also helped me teach students strategies for getting to the other side of that treacherous abyss into which any writer can fall: the belief that a work is a failure stops the writer from writing.

It helps me to know that as distinguished a writer as Tobias Wolff, author of *This Boy's Life*, has said that at one time or another, he has considered abandoning everything he has ever written. But he has learned to push beyond that point and figure out what he needs to do to finish because he believes that unraveling thorny problems will teach him something he needs to know about his craft.

Judging our works-in-progress as failures rather than using judgment



neutral language — What's working? What's not working, and what can I do about it? — can set up impassable roadblocks in our writing life. But if instead we view our writing as a series of creative problems we must solve, we'll be more likely to continue.

In the midst of writing *Subtle Bodies*, Norman Rush told his wife Elsa he couldn't finish the novel. She asked him why it wasn't working. As he answered, she took notes, and they determined that each problem was a challenge he could solve one at a time. Rush used her notes to revise, and he finished the novel.

If we cultivate a mindset of willingly accepting so-called failure, of viewing those thorny moments as an opportunity for growth in learning our craft, we'll be more likely to continue and complete our works. What looks like failure is often just a necessary way station on the road to success.

For five years and 1,500 pages, Michael Chabon struggled to discover what his novel *Fountain City* was about. He finally admitted he couldn't finish it. After he abandoned it, he began writing *Wonder Boys*, a novel about a failed writer struggling mightily to emerge from an

artistic impasse much like the one he had experienced. Chabon didn't let the failure of *Fountain City* stop him: He used all the frustration and despair he had experienced to create *Wonder Boys*.

A creative life can't possibly entail one success after another. Impediments in writing inevitably arise. But it's what we do after that counts. And a setback often forces us into a paradigm shift about the nature of our work that wouldn't have occurred otherwise.

When Virginia Woolf was writing *The Pargiters*, she deemed the work a failure. Her draft alternated prose chapters about women's issues in Victorian and Edwardian England with fictional chapters. But she realized the design wasn't working.

She became despondent, yes, but kept working nonetheless and devised an ingenious solution. Woolf extracted the fictional chapters, and turned them into her novel *The Years*. And she used her polemical essays to write *Three Guineas*, her analysis of the causes of women's mistreatment. Woolf emerged from that failure with two books, an important accomplishment considering her initial assessment of *The Pargiters*.

In working with writers, I've learned that it's not talent that gets the work done. It's understanding that if we stick with the process through uncertainty, anxiety and so-called failure, we'll develop the tenacity to endure and improve our craft. And like Wolff, Rush, Chabon and Woolf, we will learn to solve our creative problems, just as that student of mine ultimately did. ❧

*A Virginia Woolf scholar, Louise DeSalvo passed away in 2018. This article was originally published in January of 2015.*

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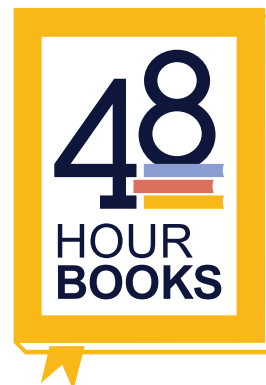
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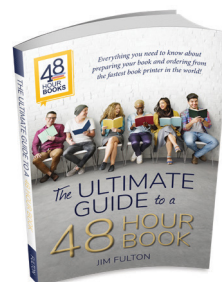


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