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a professional organization  
of writers of popular fiction



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# *Nink* February 2019

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# President's Voice

*By Wayne Stinnett*



Staring at a blank page this morning, with the rain falling outside my office, I'm trying to think of what NINC members might like to hear from me. The truth is, although I've only just started my tenure as your president, I could fill this whole volume with information of things that are going on inside NINC.

As I write this, we're less than a month into the year, with eight months to go before the conference. A lot of things are already falling into place. Our new Basecamp platform is proving to be a very valuable organizational tool. So much so, that I'm planning to start my own account for my business. We have the basic structure of the conference outlined, with quite a few guest speakers already under contract, and many industry professionals anxious to attend.

In my writing, I'm what some would call a "pantser" or free writer. I don't outline, I have no idea what the plot is when I start a new project, and I have no clue how the book will end. I don't even know what the next paragraph will be about. I tell my characters to go to Mexico and they end up in Cuba. I tell my protagonist to fight and win the day, and he ends up in the hospital.

But in my business, I'm a planner. You can give me any date in the coming year, and I can look at my schedule and tell you exactly where I will be in my writing process. It's right here on my computer and the file auto-starts when I turn it on. Yes, every day on my 2019 calendar has something on it, even if not always writing related. We can't work, work, and work every day of the year. We have to have our downtime to recharge the creative synapses in the brain. So, I plan that down time.

What a difference just a few years can make when you actually plan to succeed. On this day, only six years ago, I'd been a truck driver just letting life happen to me. I was probably sitting out a snowstorm in a truck stop out west, reading the latest story by one of my favorite authors. Somewhere in the back of my mind there was a story of my own to tell. My plan to be a successful writer was just beginning to take shape, and I hadn't even written, "Once upon a time," yet. That wouldn't come for five more months. But before I started, I had a rudimentary plan in place, on just how to make it work.

I consciously chose to emulate a storyteller I very much respect and admire. A man who also worked outdoors most of his life, and who picked up stories and met characters that would become fodder for his fiction. He and I share some of the same background. Both of us lived in Florida and we were avid outdoorsmen—watermen, who had earned a living from the sea. I wasn't always a trucker. Six years ago, I decided that if Randy Wayne White could earn a living as an author, then I could at least earn enough to get off the road.

So, I started dreaming of the day when I could make it happen. Dreaming, as it turns out, is a very necessary part of what we do. As a kid, if my dad saw me just staring out the window, he'd say something like, "Quit daydreaming, boy, and get to work." I wonder what Dad would think of how those daydreams turned out. Or had he meant something else? Quit dreaming it and do it!

A dream is a fantasy—an unrealized fictional story that exists and plays out only in our minds. But if you write that dream down, whatever it is, it stops being just a dream; it becomes a goal. Or it will, when you add a little bit below it. As a Marine, I learned that to reach an objective or goal, you had to have a plan. Just wanting it wasn't enough. A written goal, without a plan to achieve it, is just a word on a piece of paper. Randy succeeded as a storyteller, so all I had to do was follow his steps. I began to make a plan to be a successful storyteller.

Being president of NINC wasn't part of my plan. This is an organization unlike any other. To be asked to lead a group of multi-published, successful career authors wasn't a skill set I had in my wheelhouse. But I'm learning and planning. I'm looking forward to the challenges of the coming year, and really excited about the conference.

Speaking of the conference, have you registered yet? Are your NINC dues current? Have you reserved your room at Tradewinds? These things should be a part of your plan, I know they're a huge part of mine.

See ya at the beach,

*Wayne*

P.S. This past week, the NINC board voted unanimously to support and be an initial signatory on an Appeal from National Writer's Union, to block Controlled Digital Lending, a form of book piracy that is becoming more and more rampant. There will be more details on this in the March issue of *Nink*, as we gather more intel. For now, you can look to see if your books have been digitized without your knowledge or consent by searching for them on this website: [www.openlibrary.org](http://www.openlibrary.org). The following author organizations are also in support.

National Writers Union  
Novelists, Inc  
Authors Guild  
American Society of Journalists and Authors  
Textbook & Academic Authors Association  
National Association of Science Writers

Association of American Publishers  
The Writers Union of Canada  
Union des Écrivaines et des Écrivains Québécois  
Association Nationale des Éditeurs de Livres  
Society of Authors  
International Authors Forum  
International Federation of Journalists  
European Federation of Journalists

### **NINC Member Benefits**

Don't forget to sign up for the [email loop](#), [critique/brainstorming group](#), and the members-only [Facebook group](#) if you haven't already. The Pro Services Directory, member [discount page](#), and [sample letters](#) are also great resources.

Missing a newsletter? Past issues can be found [here](#). You can also [propose an article](#) or submit a [letter to the editor](#).

### **Accessing the NINC Website**

Not sure how to log in to the NINC website? Visit the login page here: <https://ninc.com/membership-overview/login-to-ninc/>

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*Wayne Stinnett writes your typical murder and mayhem in paradise. His characters and plots come from real people and situations he's encountered, fictionalized to protect the guilty.*

## Letter from the Editor



Dear Reader,

It's February and most of us have hopefully survived the polar vortex if we were in its path. By now, you should have renewed your dues, because if not, this will be your last issue of *Nink*, and it's chock full of good stuff.

NINC has many traditionally published members, some of whom remain traditionally published exclusively, and others who have gone hybrid. Some have given up traditional and have fully embraced indie publishing. We also have those who have always indie published.

As NINC wants to make sure it represents all of its members, and one way to do this is by expanding *Nink*, this is what you will see this month—something driven by traditionally published authors who asked to see some additional content. You'll see an agent interview with agent Veronica Park. It's long, but you will get a great grasp of her voice and how she sees publishing. We have an interview with Deb Werksman who has attended many NINC conferences. She shared her insights, including what she's purchased recently. We're also focusing on how authors can network, and to do that, we have an article on cover quotes.

That's simply in addition to the other great articles we have, creating a total of nine separate features this month. When I assumed editorship of *Nink*, my goal was at least five feature articles when counting our two columnists, Laura Resnick and Denise Agnew. We've consistently delivered that minimum of five and this year the plan to do a minimum of seven. This issue exceeds that.

The bottom line is that, as your *Nink* editor, my goal is to always to provide at least one or two articles that everyone can learn from, no matter how you publish and no matter how often—that *Nink* should have at something for you. To this end, the *Nink* production staff works approximately two months ahead, and we are currently looking for articles ideas to for the May to October issues, so please send any my way at [ninkeditor@gmail.com](mailto:ninkeditor@gmail.com)

*Michele*

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*Michele Dunaway* is an award-winning educator and a traditionally published author of over 26 romance novels.

# Do Reviews Still Matter?

*By Lindsay Randall*



## Consider this

- As far back as 1740, advance reviews helped Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* become [what is considered to be the first best-selling novel](#).
- In 1957, Gilbert Millstein's *New York Times* review of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* took the book—and Kerouac—from obscurity to fame ([and became Millstein's legacy](#)).
- In today's digital age, online "influencers" hold sway over the media consumption of avid followers often numbering in the millions.

The old adage "everyone's a critic" is possibly never truer than right now. But while we know reviews mattered long ago, do they still?

## Some say yes

Journalist, author, and well-known literary critic [Maureen Corrigan](#) believes reviews do indeed still matter, even though today's literary culture is more fragmented.

"Reviewers still have a lot of power to resurrect, restrict, and direct attention" to a book or even an entire genre, said Corrigan, who has been a book critic for [NPR's \*Fresh Air\*](#) for more than two decades, and who serves as a columnist for [The Washington Post](#).

Corrigan noted that sometimes reviews matter most by who is writing them (note the Millstein review of Kerouac's work, above), while other times a review matters due to its passion and power ([read here about the landmark Dwight Macdonald review of Michael Harrington's \*The Other America\*](#)).

Carlyn Robertson, product marketing manager at [BookBub Partners](#), shared that positive reviews can increase interest in a title. “We have a lot of evidence that reviews influence BookBub readers’ book-buying habits. In our Featured Deal blurbs, mentioning that a book has at least 150 five-star reviews increases clicks by [an average of 14 percent](#). Additionally, when we [surveyed our readers](#), 36 percent said reader reviews are a factor that can convince them to buy a book,” she said.

Even more powerful than reader reviews are “reviews and recommendations from trusted sources, including family, friends, and even favorite authors.” Robertson noted [77 percent of surveyed readers](#) said they buy books after getting recommendations from friends and family members.

Leah Koch, co-owner of [The Ripped Bodice](#) in Culver City, California, the only exclusively romance bookstore in the United States, also sees a connection between positive reviews and book sales. “A lot of romance readers get ideas for new books to check out from bloggers/reviewers. Many people have some reviewers they trust and will check out what they recommend,” Koch said.

[Jacqueline Diamond](#), author of more than 100 novels, among them the Safe Harbor Medical series, including 17 romances and three mysteries, believes that, cumulatively, reviews are a contributing factor to book sales. “Reviews have taken on a much more significant role in the digital age. Reader reviews play a big role in whether a site/newsletter, such as BookBub, accepts a book ad, and those stars at the top of the page are immediately in the face of a potential buyer,” she said.

Additionally, she pointed out that reviews can highlight particular details of a title. “I have heard from readers that they look for specific pluses and minuses—such as, some religious readers won’t buy books with paranormal elements, and reviews may indicate these exist in a seemingly real-world story,” she said.

In this age of self-publishing, where editors and agents aren’t solely deciding which books will be published, reviews can aid readers in the decision-making process. “While readers can still use the publishing history of an author in deciding whether they might enjoy one of our books, reviews are especially helpful and I believe carry more weight now,” Diamond said.

### **Some say no**

“For the most part, whether a book has five reviews or 500 will not affect the sales of that book,” [M.L. Banner](#), an author of apocalyptic thrillers, said. Banner, who operates several businesses and is a former business journalist, says he has studied the data with his 10 titles along with the works of other authors.

“When a book is brand new, it’s expected that there will be no reviews. So, most readers won’t care, if everything about the book (cover, blurb, first few pages, etc.) speaks to them. Having a few reviews (i.e., advanced reviews) might help one or two potential buyers buy it. And some seriously bad reviews could hurt book sales. Otherwise, I do not believe it makes much of a difference,” he said.

Banner sends the first book of a series to his advance readers (about 100 total) who will then post reviews for the print version on Amazon and/or Goodreads a week or two before release



of the eBook version. He also includes suggestions for keywords to add. That, he says, is the end of his worry about reviews.

“Reviews, by their nature, are related to the number of sales of the book. The more regular-priced sales my book gets, the more Amazon and Goodreads reviews it will receive. It’s a given,” he said. “Two to four years ago, I found this number to be between 50 to 80 sales for each review. Today it’s closer to 200-to-1. Of course, discounted sales and KU downloads (which we can only guess at) can skew these numbers one way or the other.”

For longtime reader Beth Eberth, it isn’t so much what she finds in online reviews that prompts her to make a purchase. A reader who enjoys realistic and historical fiction and who reads upwards of two dozen books per year, Eberth doesn’t give a whole lot of weight to posted reviews. “What matters more to me is word-of-mouth buzz,” she said. “A heads-up from people whose opinion I value will prompt me to buy a book faster than a number of five-star reviews.”

When she does pay attention to online reviews, Eberth said she likes to see a mix of good and bad. “Too many rave reviews make me wonder if the author’s family and friends posted them,” she said.

### **Making the most of today’s reviews**

[Carole Nelson Douglas](#), an author of 60+ novels, remembers the days of the “old print warhorses” that were chockful of reviews. These magazines covered the various genres and guided readers to the latest titles filling racks in grocery stores, drugstores, and airports.

When Nelson Douglas began indie publishing in 2013, she sent galleys and cover sheets of her first two print books to the publications that had always reviewed her traditionally published books. Only one reviewed the new books.

“Although I thought not having mainstream book trade magazine reviews was a big disadvantage for going indie, I realized I have 21 pages of glowing review snippets from those major trade journals and various mystery and other genre sources,” Nelson Douglas said.

Today, she will make use of “credited online reader reviews,” if needed, and also pulls quotes from “legacy publications like the *New York Times* or *Publishers Weekly*” to add to a book cover to give readers the “flavor of the book.” And sometimes readers give Nelson Douglas ideas through a review.

“Readers loved a short story I did combining my Las Vegas feline PI, Midnight Louie, with my ‘monster apocalypse’ Vegas heroine, Delilah Street. So, Louie and Delilah are starting a mystery series together this fall,” she said.

**NOW THAT MIDNIGHT LOUIE, P.I., HAS FINISHED HIS BINGE-READING-AVAILABLE  
 28-BOOK ALPHABETICAL MYSTERY SERIES...**

**YOU ASKED FOR AN ADDED TWIST. YOU GOT IT!**

**Meet Louie's intriguing new ally in  
 neon-noir Las Vegas crime-solving,  
 Delilah Street, Paranormal P.I.,  
 with a mentor named Perry Mason**

**"Two of Carole's best characters  
 together. Now if she could get  
 Irene Adler in the mix!"  
 J Bee on Amazon.com**

**Challenge accepted, JB:  
 Irene cameo in Midnight Louie's  
 new series debut in October, 2018**

**ABSINTHE WITHOUT LEAVE**

**"Each character, every situation has a mystery, dishing  
 out surprise after surprise. Rich details and inventive  
 puzzles completely submerge you in dire straits and grave  
 consequences...an unexpected twist, an  
 action-packed cinematic finish. Powerful stuff."  
 —SciFi Guy on Delilah Street noir fantasy novels**

**CAT IN AN ALPHABET SOUP**  
 AQUA STORM  
 BLUE MONDAY  
 CRIMSON HAZE  
 DIAMOND DAZZLE  
 EMERALD EYE  
 FLAMINGO FEDORA  
 GOLDEN GARLAND  
 HYACINTH HUNT  
 INDIGO MOOD  
 JEWELLED JUMPSUIT  
 KIWI CON  
 LEOPARD SPOT  
 MIDNIGHT CHOIR  
 NEON NIGHTMARE  
 ORANGE TWIST  
 HOT PINK PURSUIT  
 QUICKSILVER CAPER  
 RED HOT RAGE  
 SAPPHIRE SLIPPER  
 TOPAZ TANGO  
 ULTRAMARINE SCHEME  
 VEGAS GOLD VENDETTA  
 WHITE TIE AND TAILS  
 ALIEN X-RAY  
 YELLOW SPOTLIGHT  
 ZEBRA ZOOT SUIT  
**CAT IN AN ALPHABET  
 ENDGAME**

**NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE AUTHOR  
 CAROLE NELSON DOUGLAS**  
 Werewolf Mobsters  
 Demon Dog Wars  
 Celebrity Zombies  
 Oh My! Las Vegas  
 Book Superheroes

Spectacularly stylish  
 spices the action with  
 fabulous characters  
**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**  
 starred review

**A DELILAH STREET PARANORMAL P.I. ANTHOLOGY  
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Over at BookBub, authors are regularly invited to share reviews and book recommendations.

“Seventy-six percent of surveyed readers purchase because of recommendations from authors,” Robertson said. “This is one reason we launched a tool that allows authors to [recommend their favorite books](#) on [BookBub.com](#).”

Readers will see the recommendations in their feeds on the BookBub site and also in the weekly email roundup of recommendations from people they follow. Robertson noted that anywhere from one to four recommendations per month is a good cadence for authors to stay visible and top-of-mind with their followers.

“Consistently recommending books can also get an author exposure to a larger audience of BookBub readers—we highlight notable recommendations from authors in several places on our website, on our blog, and in emails,” she said. “If a reader likes an author’s recommendations, they may be interested to learn more about what that author writes.”

Diamond, who once crafted book reviews for *Publishers Weekly*, has joined the ranks of authors sharing recommendations and mini-reviews. “I have been thanked by readers for recommending a particular book, so I presume my mini-review led to a purchase,” she said.

## Review Rules

For authors interested in writing a review, Corrigan shared a few tips:

- Provide no full plot summary; instead, shrink it to a paragraph.
- Review the book on its own terms.
- Demonstrate your authority through sharpness and the strength of your writing.

- Consider how books fail and fall short. Don't shy away from creating a negative review.
- Determine if the book succeeded on its own terms and if it did so in a lively and engaged manner.

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*Lindsay Randall, who serves as assistant editor of Nink, believes reviews still matter. She enjoys reading (and writing) them.*



# Advanced Author Branding

*By Nicole Evelina*



In the October 2017 *Nink* newsletter, I covered the basics of author branding—from internal aspects like mission statements and core values, to external elements such as taglines, colors and fonts—and how they influence your book themes, website, swag, etc. Now I'd like to take that a step further.

Believe it or not, your brand can and should influence everything you do, or as a lot of experts say, you should “be the brand.” Now, this doesn't mean being inauthentic; if you've done the work in your basic branding, it should already reflect who you are. This is just taking it to the next level. Your brand should be reflected in:

## **What you wear**

You only get one chance to make a first impression, right? When you're at an event, a reader should be able to look at you from across the room and gauge your brand. Most of the time, that doesn't mean wearing a costume (but you can, more on that later). It's all about purposefully choosing your clothing based on the message you want to convey.

On the minimal side of things, think about incorporating your brand colors in your outfit or makeup or wear a shirt with your book cover or logo on it. If you want to go a step further, you might think about what kind of clothing would appeal to or make you fit in with your audience. For example, a YA author would likely wear something more casual and fun and a non-fiction business author would wear a suit. I know an author who is very open about writing erotica and she dresses in revealing outfits and red lipstick to compliment her brand. It's a perfect fit for her, but it wouldn't be right for me because the heat level in my books isn't nearly spicy enough. It would be false representation for me to dress that way.

If you want to go all out, you can dress like your characters. I know several steampunk authors who regularly show up to events in full costume. Whimsical children's author Sheri Fink attends events in colorful wigs and sometimes dresses as a unicorn or mermaid, per her brand and characters. Leanna Renee Hieber actually lives her brand by wearing Victorian/

gothic dresses all the time, even when she is not at an event, and by leading spirit tours of New York. It is just who she is.

You might also consider adopting a trademark visual as part of your brand, especially if it appears in one of your books. For example, the ouroboros is important in Deborah Harkness's *All Souls Trilogy*, so she wears a necklace with one on it to her events, which allows her to connect with fans in a different way. Similarly, Joanna Penn has recently adopted an octopus bracelet she often wears to events. It's unusual enough to be eye-catching and memorable, it's obviously symbolic of something she likes, plus it ties into her book *Desecration*. Author Laini Taylor is known for her bright pink hair, which fits with her being a YA fantasy author.

### **Your event booth/table**

When you have a designated area to sell books and/or promote yourself at an event, your brand should be center stage. Your stand-up banners and table banner should reflect your colors and fonts, as should the items you place on your table, which should tie into your books. Oversize items, things that shine or sparkle or are interactive are all great attention getters. Like Penn's bracelet, if you can make them odd, they will serve as a great conversation starter and a natural segue into talking about your books.

This is especially true if an item seemingly contradicts your brand and makes a passerby ask, "Why do you have XYZ on your table?" Take an author whose brand is light in color and tone, yet she has a big sugar skull on her table. On first glance, those two things don't seem to go together. But perhaps when you ask about it, she explains her book takes place in Mexico during Dia de los Muertos, or her characters are of Mexican heritage and really love the feast. Perhaps this is her opportunity to educate on the holiday being a joyous festival (as reflected in her books), rather than the spooky/evil time often associated with Halloween. That's a connection a reader won't soon forget, even if they didn't buy her book.

Additional ways your brand will be reflected in your events include:

- **Interaction** – The way you interact with people ties back in to your internal branding. Are you open to answering questions? Do you pose for pictures with fans and engage them in conversation? Or are you more standoffish? Some authors will sign books for hours, while others refuse to ever give an autograph.
- **Hashtags** – Hashtag mentions and brand impressions on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram can easily show fans and followers what they're missing and get them engaged even if they can't attend.
- **Giveaways** – Make sure they tie into your brand and your books. Giveaways that have thought and symbolism behind them are special to fans and give you another chance to connect with people as you explain their meaning.

### **Where you speak/appear and the topics**

Obviously what you write and the opportunities you are given will be the driving factors in the events you attend, but your brand should factor in as well. For example, I'm a feminist and it shows in my writing, so you aren't likely to see me at conservative functions; it's just not a fit.

Likewise, while my books have light fantasy in them, I may not be the best person for a convention that focuses on high fantasy and science fiction.

What you speak about should also reflect your core values as an author and the themes in your books. Sheri Fink speaks about courage, never giving up, and having fun every day, no matter what life throws at you—themes found in her books and also in her story as an author. If she were to attend an event and be serious and stern and speak in monotone, yet you pick up one of her books and it is all bright and cheery, you'd feel the disconnect, even if she was talking about raising brave children.

### **Do we really need all of this?**

You may be thinking this is overkill, and you may be right. But the purpose of a brand is to help readers distinguish you from other authors. They need to know what to expect; it's a promise you make to them. All of these things tie into that promise and help strengthen it.

It's up to you whether you just dip a toe into advanced branding or jump in with both feet. Neither way is right nor wrong. But I have personally found that every little bit helps.

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*Nicole Evelina is a historical fiction, non-fiction, and women's fiction author whose six books have won three Book of the Year designations. Her fiction tells the stories of strong women from history and today, focusing on biographical historical fiction, while her non-fiction focuses on women's history, specifically little-known figures.*



# Six Takeaways to Make Your Manuscript Better

By Michele Dunaway



During her October all-day workshop, Angela James, editorial director of Carina Press, gave my local RWA chapter the secret of publishing: “Readers care most about your characters and story.”

Now wait, you may say. We’re NINC members. We’ve published at least two books. We work with either our traditional publishing houses or a freelance editor because we’re indie or maybe a combination of both. We know that secret.

Let’s face it, so do I. It’s nothing new, rather like that “Write. Edit. Publish. Repeat.” or “You can’t publish a book if you don’t finish it.”

But James had some nuggets to share during “Before You Hit Send,” and I learned something, which, as your *Nink* Editor and an English/journalism teacher, is often hard to do. This old dog knows lots of tricks (and looking for clichéd writing will be one of them).

First, let me give James a plug as being a great instructor: Her all-day workshop condensed three-plus weeks of content into six hours and I loved every minute of it, proving after 29+ manuscripts, there’s always growth to be had. You can find more about her online course [here](#). My takeaways follow, representing a fraction of the notes I took.

## Takeaway #1: Listen

I wrote a conference report on dictation—Danielle Norman’s “I Hear Voices: Writing with Dictation” (even bought the Sony voice [recorder](#); although, confession—haven’t tried it yet). The steps are simple—use the device and talk into it. However, when you plug in the device, you walk away and come back to find it’s uploaded. Then you edit the writing. This process, however, doesn’t allow you to hear your writing aloud after editing, only during the recording of you speaking the manuscript.

James saying that it’s more valuable to listen as you read your book aloud really brought home how important it was to my work as well. I always tell my students to read out loud because you can hear the errors. I do this with a scene or two, but never with the majority of the work. This is one reason critique groups may have the author read the work aloud. James said,

“It allows you to hear where the dialogue stutters. You can note where you’ve left out or used the wrong word. You can realize where you’ve written description that makes the reader giggle or snicker. You can hear pacing issues.”

Considering I occasionally leave out words when I write because I’m typing so fast, why haven’t I been doing this all along? The technique also helps with blocking, which is a movie term. It’s the movement of the characters on the page—what they are doing. Listening to your work can help, as James indicated, “Many authors have issues with deciding what is interesting and what’s not.” She also suggested not editing as you listen, for doing so interrupts the flow. Put a sticky note or something to remind you where to return.

### **Takeaway #2: Make your computer work for you**

Whatever word processing program you are using, make it work for you. Use track changes. Don’t be afraid to use find and replace all. View formatting marks which will show you tabs, indents, paragraphing, spacing, etc. She suggested being careful when using programs like Grammarly as she’s seen it mess up a manuscript. She also suggested one thing you find is exclamation marks and colons. Most publishers do not use colons and these can be replaced by the em dash. Exclamation points are very noticeable to the reader, so pare them down. Try to convey enthusiasm with words, not marks.

### **Takeaway #3: Don’t be cliché**

James said readers buy media based on tropes. You can find lists of these tropes on the internet; BookBub published a Nov. 1 article called [“Publishing Trends: Tropes Readers Adore Across 15 Fiction Genres.”](#) During the workshop, James emphasized the key to tropes is to not make them cliché. James also wanted to point out many times clichés can be micro-aggressions. She noted a common one in romance writing is when a man and woman are eating and he remarks how he likes to see a woman who eats her food and doesn’t pick at it. These can also cause overwriting or damaging writing. Be careful with what women say to men and vice versa. Don’t show how women are not like other women through comparing them. Avoid judgment calls when possible. For romance, there is a balance between sexual fantasy and consent.

### **Takeaway #4: Search and destroy filler & garbage words**

Most of you know this, and there are lists you can find on the internet, but it’s only been recently when I’m actively searching for words like “that” or “feel” or unnecessary adverbs like “very.” James said that there will be times you want shallower words, as filler words can keep the pace going. If you get rid of all of the filler words, you run the risk of overwriting. Really. (See what I did there?)

### **Takeaway #5: Why your book is rejected**

James said that overwriting and pacing are two reasons why books are rejected either on submission to an editor or during reader sampling—when the readers are previewing your book and determining whether to buy. Pacing must be magical for it’s what keeps the reader engaged. Overwriting is prose that is too descriptive. The reader has to work through the

description and often ends up skimming. Ask yourself what information are you sharing? What does the reader need to know? Reading aloud is again a solution here. She shared others, but I can't give away all her trade secrets.

### **Takeaway #6: Avoid pop culture references**

One of my first books used a Dennis Quaid smile, like in 2000, and there he is, back on TV looking a bit worn as he hawks Essurance. Many of us use pop culture references in our works, and while you may not want to avoid them in all cases, James said that you should be careful. Her examples included Mel Gibson and Taylor Lautner—do you see Lautner as *Twilight's* Jacob or the boy in *Sharkboy and Lavagirl*? She said books are global, so be careful because your reference might bring up a negative association for someone. My take while I listened to her was that your pop culture reference can be on top of the world one day and then arrested and the scourge of the Earth the next. Someone said Bill Cosby. I was thinking Kanye West.

Ask yourself, is your reference something someone else will understand? Many of my students have never seen *The Matrix* (seriously). The current generation in my school is the generation after Harry Potter—many haven't read the books.

James also said, for example, that celeb couples can get divorced—another reason cultural references can date your manuscript. You also can't anticipate death—one day they're alive and the next they may not be, for whatever tragic reason. She said to keep in mind that not all of your readers may know your reference, and that your recognition may not be the same as someone else's.

However, she did say that one will find a lot more references in young adult books, but that is because the YA market is more immediate. The reader is immersed in the books now. My take was that the book's longevity is much shorter (for as young adults grow, they leave the age group behind), which makes those references timely compared to adult reads, which people may find a year or two after release.

I've seen this as well with my high school students, who find flaws in books published even as little as three years ago—their world has moved past them. At some point, though, we all know our books will be dated because we can't predict the future: who knew VCR tapes would go to DVDs and then streaming, or that your floppy disk is now a flash drive and your laptop needs an external DVD drive? So don't give up your references, but do consider them carefully and think them through. A final thought from James: "Pop culture references assume your reader is sighted and can see."

*Editor's Note: The conference report for Danielle Norman's "I Hear Voices: Writing with Dictation" was in the November issue of Nink.*

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# Five Things You Need to Know About Ghostwriting

by Melanie Stiles



Ghostwriting can be quite lucrative as an additional stream of income. But as with any other genre, ghostwriting possesses particular methods for obtaining clients, quoting the work, and building a reputation. An additional factor, which must be added to the process, is the temperament/personality of the writer. Here are five things you need to know about ghostwriting.

## You must pass the Ghostwriter Ego Test

William Zinsser is still considered a guru to most writers. In his book, *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, he cites the following true statement: "Writing is an act of ego and you might as well admit it." Most writers are passionate wordsmiths and can find it incredibly difficult not to shout to the world, "Hey, planet! Look what I've written!" It is extremely rare that a ghostwriter would ever get to pick up the bullhorn.

Let's imagine the book you ghosted. You **know** it contains better vocabulary, syntax and grammar than the mishmash of information you were originally given. Suddenly, it's a bestseller! Next, your client is on television, sitting across from a national talk show host. Amazingly, he's saying, "I wrote this book to help the world. I'm truly honored so many have responded to my work." The voice, raging inside **your** head, says, "*Those are my words!!*" What's an author to do? If you're considering this stream of income, you're not only going to have to agree with Zinsser, you're going to have to get past any emotions that go along with your secret career.

## The one major ghostwriting rule

A ghostwriting career grants any writer opportunities to delve into unfamiliar subjects. Many people specialize in particular fields, yet they recognize they are not able to create a manuscript. Curiosity is one singular facet of a ghostwriter's attitude that can keep the job continually interesting. In fact, for a ghost, more curiosity and willingness to learn equals more

clients. There is only one pitfall that those with a spirit of inquiry need to avoid.

Ghostwriters should never attempt to write material that goes against any core belief they may possess. A large part of writing behind the scenes requires finding and staying inside your client's voice. The finished product should be indistinguishable from your client's personality and style. It is very difficult to write anything that goes against your own ideology. The voice of a client will, no doubt, stay in disagreement with your personal voice every step of the way. There is also the added, although uncommon, concern that somehow the project's true authorship will slip out and into the public eye, connecting you and the topic forever. Ghostwriters always have the right to adhere to personal standards. You should adequately review any information supplied before accepting or rejecting a job.

### **Think fees, fees, and more fees!**

A non-ghostwriter's incoming fees are relatively simplistic, compared to the fees charged by a ghostwriter. It's highly advisable to ditch the idea of the standardized contract that is regularly traded back and forth between a writer and a publication source. Instead, envision fee variety. The client who submits 1,000 Post-it Notes (that he lovingly calls his future book) will need more levels of pricing than the one who sends a journal. There are also many clients who prefer recording their thoughts. Those thoughts will have to be transcribed before any writing can be accomplished. A smart ghost dictates what ancillary pricing will, most likely, be needed up front. It is wise to create an hourly fee schedule for the various tasks that have to be addressed. They can include assessment fees (time to evaluate material), sorting fees, telephone time, transcription, and clerical duties, along with writing fees. In the interest of clients referring other clients, consistency within each fee type can be reputation relevant.

### **Be a proactive advertiser**

All writers advertise as unknowns. The difference, in advertising as a ghost, is that there will never be any impactful book reviews to splash around on our websites or on social media outlets. In fact, there won't be a single supportive word for the public to see. But there are still ways to achieve a presence. First, author websites are particularly valuable in this genre. They serve as a social media business card that can detail various services. A LinkedIn page is helpful, as well as a Facebook business page. Additionally, advertising can be purchased on sites such as [linkedin.com/profinder](https://www.linkedin.com/profinder), [freelanced.com](https://www.freelanced.com) and [thumbtack.com](https://www.thumbtack.com). Speaking engagements, on any topic, are a great place to put postcards into hands. Most certainly, the title "Ghostwriter" must appear in every author bio submitted. Interestingly, ghostwriting clients are apt to refer other clients, even though they will never publicly admit the writer exists, as far as their own manuscripts go. Though these avenues are relatively silent forms of advertisement, ghostwriters have to proactively participate as much as any other type of writer promoting a platform.

### **Breaking in takes time**

In a 2002 article titled *Think You Have a Book in You? Think Again*, the *New York Times* stated that 81 percent of all Americans feel they have a book in them. By 2015, [iamselfpublishing.com](https://www.iamselfpublishing.com)

moved the stat up to 90 percent. Obviously most Americans believe they have a story to tell or something to say. Yet, the truth is many, if not most, are in various stages of comprehension as to how hard it is to accomplish the feat. The perk, for a ghostwriter, is that realistic non-writers are willing to pay for someone else to make it happen. The postcard you placed into the palm of the elderly man at the Elk Lodge may end up being your path into writing family legacies for him and several of his buddies. The need for ghostwriting can travel into every community in some way. It can take on forms such as family history books, blogs, speeches, personal experience stories or anything where an invisible writer is deemed advantageous. The trick to breaking in lies in how vocal a writer is about what they are willing to do. Consider ghostwriting as a slow, but steady building income stream. Aim to get the message out and the label of “ghost” attached to your name. Consider writing project samples for free, allowing your future client to further envision a finished product.

The road to ghosting has ample market to pursue, perhaps even more so than in other writing arenas. It can be a steady source of profitability for the right kind of writer. It also has the added advantage of expanding a writer’s skillsets within the exploration of new topics. Perhaps you are a future ghost! If so, I wish you all the best, even if I’ll never see you.

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*Melanie Stiles is an award-winning author and life coach who has accumulated hundreds of bylines in various publications. She has authored three books specifically for writers and frequently speaks at conferences. She offers writing-related services including editing, ghostwriting, coaching and more.*

# An Insider Look at Traditional Publishing

An interview with Deb Werksman, Sourcebooks

By Michele Dunaway



*Deb Werksman*

*This the first feature for Nink in which NINC members will interview agents, editors, and marketing professionals so that authors can get an in-depth look at how to network with traditional publishing. All questions came from those culled from questions asked on the traditional publishing loop, some verbatim. If you have a house/editor/marketing professional you'd like to see interviewed or if you'd like to volunteer to do an interview, please email: [ninkeditor@gmail.com](mailto:ninkeditor@gmail.com)*

Although Deb Werksman has been attending NINC conferences since 2012, I first met her in 2017, when she graciously sat down with me and hashed out an idea for a three-book series. Deb has been with Sourcebooks for the past 20 years, before which she had her own publishing company. She is the editorial director of romance fiction, and she acquires single title romance in all subgenres. She said, "As a company, Sourcebooks publishes six to eight romance titles per month, in print and ebook formats simultaneously. We are the country's largest woman-owned independent publishing house. We're known for our sales and marketing, as well as our focus on building authors' careers."

On Dec. 19, 2018, Sourcebooks announced that Poison Pen Press will become the mystery imprint of Sourcebooks. More information on that announcement can be found [here](#).

What follows is my interview with Werksman. Please note, Werksman is only speaking as an editor of Sourcebooks, and only about her company in her answers below, and as such, her answers should not be taken as being indicative of all publishing companies or as representative of NINC.

***1. Besides “writing the best book,” what are things an author can do to advance their career? What are some “career” busters or mistakes that traditional published authors may not even know they are making?***

Communication is key here. Ask a lot of questions of your publisher and learn as much as you can about how the process works. Talk to other authors who are successful and have positive things to say about their work with their publishers. Don't participate in negative conversations about publishing unless there is a specific, actionable strategy to learn from the conversation. Never use social media to communicate with or about your publishing company.

Commercial publishing is a team sport, and you are part of a team. Bring your most professional demeanor, and learn how all the parts of the team operate together.

***2. How can authors be part of their publishing team? How can authors create sustainability in their careers and what steps should an author take for achieving that?***

An author who develops a brand identity and delivers consistently on that brand can create a career that's sustainable over many, many years. Think of the biggest brands: McDonald's, Starbucks, Royal Caribbean. McDonald's always has the same amount of pickles on their burger, and Starbucks always sells coffee. You'd be confused if you went to Starbucks today and all they have on the menu is pizza. Royal Caribbean is selling an experience of luxury.

Translating this into your writing, think in terms of consistent heat level, world-building, word count, emotional resonance, everything that goes into your readers' reading experience. Think strategically about your brand and talk to your publisher strategically about your brand. How you position yourself, each series you write, and each book within a series matters every time.

***3. What are traditional publishers such as Sourcebooks doing for their mid-list and new-to-them authors (anyone other than your NYT/USA Today best sellers). What type of house-wide plan and process should authors expect?***

We are known for our marketing and sales approach. We expect every book to succeed, and create our marketing plans based on the retailers whom we expect to produce the best results. We look for promotional opportunities at the retail level, and plan media/reviewer/librarian/bookseller outreach to maximize discovery. Every book we publish gets a tailored marketing plan that includes pre-publication review strategies, a launch plan, and long-term marketing strategies. An author's preferences for how to connect with readers is an integral part of the strategy.

***4. How important is an author's social media when choosing to purchase a series or author?***

For a non-fiction author, the web presence and social media platform are an important part of the selection process, but in fiction, we expect to be supportive of an author to build their web presence and social media, so it's not necessary to have that all in place before we acquire.



*5. Will editors consider purchasing authors who perhaps need new branding (such as a new name) because of low sales? When should the rebranding begin? Before? After the sale?*

We often acquire authors who need rebranding, or who are branching into a new area of writing. Key here is the hook for the project/s we're acquiring. If the author's track record is low, then we have to push that much harder to position the new projects for a new audience. The rebranding should begin with the new project/s.

*6. One author who has been in publishing nearly 40 years asked the following question on the NINC loop: I have seen many 'cycles' in NY—a pub would 'give' an author about six books to see sell-through growth. Then it was bye-bye. For a while that number seemed to slip lower before hearing 'don't let the door hit you in the rear on your way out.' Are there, now, pub houses who really mean it when they say they want to 'build' authors, are they really 'in this for the long haul?' Or is that all gone? Is that only found now, maybe, in smaller presses? Because, sadly, what worked for an author even as little as five years ago may not work today. If you could address any or all of this, that would be great.*

This is about the retailers. The buyers are looking at sales data as they make decisions on the buy for the author's next book. If the first book's sales are weak, it's tough to get promotion for the second book, and that will impact sales because the book will be in fewer stores in fewer quantities. We often pivot on a second or third book if sales of the first one are disappointing—we'll look again at the positioning, the packaging, everything about the way we're talking about the book. It is always about attracting the author's readership—authors today have to have a strategy for interacting with their readers. Even modest levels of build are encouraging for a publisher to continue to invest in an author. Sometimes an author's sales will rise or dip depending on market conditions—if we can understand and overcome a dip in sales, we can keep going forward. If neither we nor the author has a strategy for building readership moving forward, it becomes more difficult.

*7. What does a publisher do for an author in the way of marketing (there's a basic minimum of house support that every book gets of which authors may not even be aware when they say, "My publisher did nothing for me!")?*

Every book we publish is considered for promotion at the retail level, ARCs are provided to booksellers, librarians, reviewers, media and influencers, and we work with the author on their web presence and social media. Authors may not realize the amount of time/effort that goes into launching a book to the sales force, positioning it for success, market research, titling, packaging (cover design, cover copy), interactions with buyers and media. Sometimes the author and publisher do everything right and the book still doesn't attract a readership. I think it's important for authors to ask a lot of questions at every stage and that will help an author know what to expect.

*8. What stands out about your approach to marketing?*

Our approach to marketing is well known in the industry. Every book gets individual attention, long past its launch date. We work very closely with authors to build their platforms,

and we work closely with the retailers to make every opportunity available to each book. Authors are not expected to spend any of their advance on marketing. We run experiments constantly, cross-promote authors, and replicate success across the list. We also market our backlist aggressively.

**9. *What have you just bought in each genre and what direction is that genre heading?***

Super excited about Amanda Bouchet's success in fantasy romance and her new sci-fi romance series.

Maria Vale is writing paranormal romance with fantasy-level world-building, featuring wolf shifters and some of the most stunning writing I've ever read.

Terry Spear is also starting a new werewolf romance series—she's got five series already going.

Pat Simmons' Caregivers series sheds light on what so many people are dealing with these days—taking care of elderly loved ones or children who have special needs and may not be able to live on their own. The stresses and strains this puts on relationships is unexplored territory.

I just added two thrilling self-pubbed authors to my list—Blue Saffire who writes really hot interracial romances, and Kathryn Le Veque who'll be writing a Scottish Highland romance series for us that's *Gladiator* meets *Fight Club* in the Scottish Highlands.

We just added a new series from hot contemporary cowboy romance writer Jennie Marts, expanding her cowboy hockey player series into a horse rescue ranch. Also in cowboys, June Faver is expanding her cowboy family sagas, and Kari Lynn Dell's rodeo series keeps growing.

In romantic suspense, we've got a new series from Katie Ruggle, whose slow-burn romantic suspense is all set in the Rocky Mountains, and Sharon Wray's romantic suspense series has elements of *National Treasure*/Dan Brown in secret warrior societies, Shakespearean undertones, and a band of dishonored Green Berets struggling to clear their names. I love gorgeous writing, and Sharon's books are truly unusual.

**10. *Besides having a great manuscript, what does an author need to know about switching genres?***

Data seems to indicate that the bulk of your previous readers will not follow you, so be prepared to build a new readership in the new genre. If you have a successful genre already going, consider not abandoning it altogether—keep it growing alongside the new genre.

**11. *How does a professional author handle ghosting (never getting a reply) from a potential editor who'd requested a work?***

We have a policy of responding to every single submission, so I'm not sure how to answer this one. If you're not hearing back from one of our editors, it probably means we never received the work. Please resubmit, and if that doesn't work, reach out to me directly via email or phone. If you met with an editor in person and got their business card, it might be worth a quick phone call, to say "I met you at [conference] and you requested my work. Have you received it? Do you need anything else? When can I expect to hear back from you?"

If all else fails, alas, you may just have to move on.

*12. How has the #metoo movement affected romance? What should authors be aware of here?*

Workplace romance is tough to do inside of the #MeToo movement and I think everyone is more conscious of consent and what consent looks/sounds like and how to make it sexy. A hero now can't get away with what he might have a few years ago—authors should be sensitive to this cultural moment by making sure sexual activity in their books is consensual and even alpha male heroes don't get too jerky. It's a wonderful opportunity.

*13. How has the #own voices movement affected romance? What should authors be aware of here?*

We are actively seeking and acquiring Own Voices romance, and have been reaching out to Own Voices authors. I think the movement has opened up new opportunity for authors and I'm very hopeful that the audience will step up to support the authors. We are aggressively experimenting with how to market to the Own Voices readership. It's an exciting time!

*14. Tell me all about the exciting things at Sourcebooks that make it a great company to work with.*

Our data-driven creativity, willingness to experiment, and drive to succeed make Sourcebooks a great place to work and to publish with. We're always sharing our thought processes, so authors feel very much involved in every aspect of the process, and I'm so proud of the many authors thriving and growing here.

Deb also wanted everyone to know that she welcomes individual outreach. She said she is "happy to answer further questions, or to discuss your projects vis a vis today's book marketplace, or to receive pitches from NINC members." She can be reached at [deb.werksman@sourcebooks.com](mailto:deb.werksman@sourcebooks.com).



*Michele Dunaway is your Nink editor. She's an award-winning educator and a traditionally published author of over 26 romance novels.*

# An Insider Look at Traditional Publishing: Part II

An interview with Veronica Park, Fuse Literary

*By Michele Dunaway*



*Veronica Park*

Full disclosure, I follow Agent V (@VeroniKaboom) on Twitter, and when she posted a comment on helping wallflower authors, I knew Veronica Park (AKA Agent V) of Fuse Literary had to be the first author for our debut feature.

First a bit about Veronica from her bio: Veronica Park is an associate agent, journalist, and marketing consultant with more than 10 years of experience writing and editing for publication. Before joining Fuse, V worked as an acquisitions editor and PR director at REUTS Publications before joining a New York literary agency in 2014, where she represented nonfiction and fiction authors with projects from middle grade to adult.

V is also the CEO of VPA Consulting, LLC, a brand strategy and process consulting firm. She graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in print/broadcast journalism with an emphasis in linguistics and business marketing. After working as a broadcast journalist and independent film producer, she ran away in her twenties to work on cruise ships in the Caribbean as a port lecturer and marketing specialist. Life only got weirder and more interesting from that point on.

Born in Alaska and raised in Oregon, V is naturally fond of unique stories about niche communities and experiences (e.g. roller derby, competitive robotics, study abroad programs, immigration, etc.) especially if those stories are told from personal experience (#ownvoices) and written in a powerful way. Currently, V specializes in nonfiction (the more creatively structured your narrative, the better), women's fiction, and romance for all ages. Darker subject matter and wry humor are encouraged, even if they go hand in hand.

Here's the interview:

***1. Besides "writing the best book," what are things an author can do to advance their career? What are some "career" busters or mistakes that authors may not even know they are making?***

Ultimately, publishing is a team sport. That means looking at yourself as part of the process, and focusing on the process vs. hanging everything on the end result (which you cannot always control.) But "process" isn't just the steps you take to get from Point A to Point B. It also has a lot to do with your mentality during that journey. "One of the biggest mistakes I see writers (at all levels of the process) make is failing to recognize that they need to be flexible enough to make the team in the first place, but ambitious enough to prove themselves once they get there." They either come to me as an agent and ask me to tell them who they are, or they ask me to "take their career to the next level" when they clearly haven't even begun to understand what level they're on, or how many levels there actually are in this business. (Hint: it's a lot.) Alternatively, I'll see writers who've decided like "this is who I am, and I'm not going to change for anybody, and if publishing doesn't like it, y'all can kiss my...." And that's also, obviously, not a great career move. It's a delicate balance between having a strong voice and knowing who you are as an author, but also being willing to listen to feedback and push yourself to be the best possible publishing player you can be. I could take this sports analogy further, but I think you get the idea.

***2. How can an author be the best author for their publisher? How can authors be part of that team?***

Again, number one: being a team player. Number two: constantly diagnosing and fine-tuning your part of the process. Number three: taking initiative, without always having to check in and ask if what you're doing is okay. There's a fine line between needing your publisher's input and wanting validation at every turn, because you're incapable of trusting your own talent and instincts. (Or, as I often ask my authors, "are you needy, or just wanty?") I see a lot of authors who struggle with what often feels like a very one-sided relationship, where the publisher is the junior high crush who is way too "cool" to be seen with you in public, and they always take forever to answer your texts...okay, maybe I'm thinking of another thing that is maybe still a little too fresh. Anyway, the important thing to remember when it comes to playing on a team with your agent, with your editor, with your publisher, is that you each have very different roles to play. Micromanaging your teammates is not being a good team player. Trying to do your job your way, while also trying to make someone else do their job your way, is a recipe for disaster. Trust your team, and ask questions that help you better understand how they play vs. trying to get them to play your way. Everyone plays together better that way.

***3. How can authors create sustainability in their careers and what steps should an author take for achieving that? How does having an agent fit into this role?***



In addition to being a literary agent, I've also worked for the last seven years or so as project manager and process consultant, so please allow me to drop a bit of Six Sigma nerdery for a sec. The purpose of process analysis is to figure out where you're trying to go, diagnose how you've been getting there in the past, identify problems and opportunities for improvement, and ultimately advise on how to get from Point A to Point B more quickly, simply, smoothly, and effectively for everyone involved. As an agent, I use a lot of the same skills that I would apply to helping an e-commerce company figure out how to break \$1M in revenue during their startup phase, to plot out the ideal trajectory for an author who wants to see themselves hit a list at some point in their lives. The major difference is timing, and variables unique to the publishing industry. Though it's much harder to predict how a fiction project (which is going to be up against way more subjective variables than the usual overheads, margins, market competition, etc. by nature) it's not impossible. The key is (once again, for the people in the back) to focus on the process, and put your time, effort, and money (if applicable) into enhancing the elements you can actually control. Working on your craft, for example, to minimize the amount of mechanics-based rejections you receive. Networking with fellow authors to increase your knowledge of current trends and best practices in your market sector (or genre) so you don't fall into the dreaded barrel of saturation. (That's when writers keep hearing "sorry, but this genre/theme/landscape is really saturated right now" which essentially means that you failed to show how your project is special and salable in a way that all the other recently acquired projects are not.)

An agent is one of your best market analysis tools in this case, because they are privy to data (conversations with editors, results from multiple project submissions at any given time, agency resources, trade publications, etc.) that you either cannot have access to or do not have time to access. There's a reason I roll my eyes when authors who pitch me at conferences try to tell me what's hot right now, because they've been keeping tabs on the NYT list, and such and such book is doing very well, and so their book that's basically the same thing is going to crush it in acquisitions. Again, agents are like pitchers. Don't yell at them from the dugout that you can see what's about to happen. Because unlike you, they are on the mound, and they can see the entire field. (Wow, this analogy just keeps on giving, doesn't it?)

***4. What are agents doing for their mid-list and/or new-to-you authors (anyone other than your NYT/USA Today bestsellers). What type of strategies should authors/agents be focused on when trying to sell and promote books?***

This is a really broad question, and ultimately the answer will differ wildly from agent to agent, which is why I'd like to pause and step up on my soapbox for a moment to say: *Do your research before you query an agent. Look up their sales. Email their clients. Ask your author friends.* Ahem. Anyway. So, best practices for promoting and selling authors' work. That's kind of an entire workshop full of information, but I'll boil it down as best I can. For new authors, debut authors, mid-list authors, etc. the first question in this brave new digital sales model world of ours is going to be discoverability. i.e., How will readers find you, in order to read you? A big part of that is your online platform, which includes social media, static sites, SEO, content strategy, metadata (keyword research is particularly important for writers of genre fiction, for

example) and so on and so forth ad nauseum blah blah nerdspeak blah blah ... suffice it to say, as your agent, I don't just want readers who come looking to be able to find you, easily, and on purpose.

Ideally, I want readers to accidentally trip over you and your books, wherever they go online. These days, that's the first major step (or stumbling block) between being moderately successful with a small following of loyal readers, and being a smash hit, screamingly successful, list-hitting writer who might one day be a household name. My quick advice for authors who want to get a jump start on this process, especially if they've already studied the *Other Publishing Basics* (like how to write a great book, how to get an agent, how to write a blurb, etc.) is to teach yourself everything you possibly can about digital marketing. End nerd rant.

***5. How important is an author's social media in deciding what type of author to sign? What mistakes do you see authors make, or what strategies should they apply?***

Very important. Not only because it's the first place a lot of agents and editors go to hunt for potential red flags. (For example: signs that this author is not a good team player, will be the cause of PR problems, has poor work ethic, can't be bothered to check in with readers, etc.) But also because social media is a great way to show that you're a Party Already in Progress. This is not only a vintage radio reference, but also a fantastic analogy for an agent or editor's decision making process for new author partnerships. If you get invited to a party (or better yet, for this analogy: you get invited to help plan or actually co-host the party), and the party is like Fyre Festival-level disorganized at a glance—I do not want to put my name anywhere near that party. Because it looks like it might end up being a disaster. Now, if I get invited to help plan or co-host your party (again, for those who are feeling lost, the party is your publishing career) and I see that the guest list already has a bunch of successful authors or promising debut authors you're friends with, and you've clearly chosen the perfect venue (genre) to match your vibe (voice) and it's obvious to me that you've done a lot of legwork (research) already, yeah, that's a party I'm more likely to want to be a part of. Essentially, the moral of this latest analogy is: don't wait for someone to show up and do all the work. Get the party started, invite people you want to have in your life long-term, create a culture of collaboration and positivity in your life, and author friends/agents/editors/publishers will come to you.

***6. Will editors consider purchasing authors who perhaps need new branding (such as a new name) because of low sales? When should the rebranding begin? How does an agent fit into this?***

Editors will acquire authors with work they think they can get through an acquisitions committee and who they think will sell a lot of books. However, the rules of thumb (best practices and SOPs) differ significantly from house to house, genre to genre, and year to year. I see requests all the time from authors who are like "whoops, I self-published this book before properly editing it, or before doing any research on how to be successfully self-published and now I need your help taking this same project (which clearly failed) to the next level." Yeah, that's not a party I want to join. It's at best a reboot, and at worst, an even bigger disaster the

second time around. (Fyre Festival II, anyone?) That is not to say that I would *never* consider representing a project that is based on a previous failure. Because, look around: there are a lot of bestselling projects that went through tons and tons of reincarnations before finally Making It. *But*. The thing I want to focus on here is progression. None of those authors kept doing the same thing over and over, subbing the same (unrevised) manuscript until it finally worked. They tested the market, used rejections to better their story, tested it again, learned more, researched more, and ultimately proved that they had what it took to break free of the saturation, or the stigma of past failures, or the status quo. You know what that's called? Growth. If I'm going to consider a previously published project, I need to see a huge amount of growth. I want to hear what you learned from your mistakes. I want to see a clear plan that shows me you're prepared to do better in the future, and ideally, I want to see The Next Project. Because sometimes, the answer really isn't to take that same project to the next level. Sometimes, the answer is to use that project as a stepping stone to get yourself to the next level, and moving on without it.

*7. One author who has been in publishing nearly 40 years now asked the following question on the NINC loop: I have seen many 'cycles' in NY — a pub would 'give' an author about six books, to see sell-through growth. Then it was bye-bye. For a while that number seemed to slip lower before hearing 'don't let the door hit you in the rear on your way out.' Are there, now, pub houses who really mean it when they say they want to 'build' authors, are 'in this for the long haul?' Or is that all gone? Is that only found now, maybe, in smaller presses? Because, sadly, what worked for an author even as little as five years ago may not work today. If, as an agent, you could address any or all of this, that would be great.*

First of all, I feel like this author is looking at the partnership between author and publisher like I used to look at my middle-school boyfriend. For the sake of this analogy, let's call him Chase. If you were looking at Chase as a member of your team, as opposed to someone you were burdened to impress, you wouldn't see it so much as "I'm giving you six weeks to prove you deserve to be my girlfriend" as you would "let's take six weeks to figure out if this relationship works." Wait, hold on, I think my therapist is calling. Nope, wrong number. Anyway, where was I? Oh, right. The myth of publishers being like these big, bad judgy middle-school boyfriends vs. being a business that sees you (the author) as a potential long-term teammate and (also, yes, because they *are* a business) a solid investment. Yes, publishers care about the bottom line, because they are a business. Yes, publishers want to see a good return on investment when it comes to selling the books that you (the authors) write and they (the publishers) produce and distribute. I know this may sound harsh, but if your relationship (business partnership) went from "oh, hi babe, I missed you this weekend" to "new phone, who dis" in *any* number of books, I'm willing to bet as an agent that it wasn't only because your sales numbers weren't what everyone had hoped they would be. As your agent, I would be wondering where the lapse in communication was. At what point did the expectations of this relationship start to go off in totally different directions? Where were the warning signs, and why were they ignored? Maybe it wasn't totally your fault, but Chase clearly expected something from you that you couldn't (or didn't want to) deliver. That's also on your agent, as

the member of your team whose job it is to ensure that everyone is on the same page when it comes to expectations. But it's also on you, because ultimately, if you're being honest with yourself throughout the process? You should never be surprised when a dysfunctional relationship ends.

**8. *What should a publisher do for an author in the way of marketing (as in, is there a basic minimum that every book should get, which authors may not even be aware of when they say, "My publisher did nothing for me!")***

This question is less cut-and-dried today than ever before. Mostly because, with the old distribution models, getting your book into stores was all publishers really needed to do to market that book. Times have changed, and the way people find and buy things has changed just as drastically. Some publishers are equipped to digitally market your books, because they've hired experts who understand e-commerce and things like SEO and metadata. Some publishers think it's fine to just have a social media intern and call it a day. To this, I will very diplomatically reply, *do your research*. Figure out what's more important to you, a traditional deal with XYZ house, or higher royalties on your ebooks? Are you the type of author who learns quickly, adapts readily, and enjoys spending hours a day marketing yourself and networking online? Are you really great at IRL networking, but terrified of technology? Do you love Facebook, but hate Twitter? Don't worry, there's a marketing strategy for you. Overall it's important that you choose a publisher who will support you in a way that makes marketing yourself seem natural, but that will be effective and will augment the publisher's own efforts. Whatever path you pick, I would highly recommend that you not be the type who wants to sit back and do none of those things, and then later complain that your publisher "did nothing" for you. Especially if you're not 100% sure what it takes to successfully sell your book in today's bonkers commercial landscape. Just saying.

**9. *What stands out about your approach to marketing?***

I'm very much a "teach a man to fish" kind of agent, which means that even if I could do all the work for my authors (because I've been doing this for companies for years) I will *not* do that. It would be really stupid for me to do that, actually. Because the absolute best marketing comes from a place of authenticity. In other words, being who you are (but a more commercially friendly, easily grasped version) as loudly and as often as possible. As your agent, I cannot and should not attempt to tell you who you are. I shouldn't try to make you be someone or something you're not. And I don't have enough hours in the day to live my own truth and live yours at the same time. Again (at the risk of beating this poor horse to death, with a baseball bat) Publishing Is A Team Sport. If you're not prepared to take what you're thrown and run with it, maybe this isn't the sport for you. Wait, no, that's football. But you get what I'm trying to say.

**10. *What is your biggest success, or your most surprising success/fail?***

I can't choose just one. But in aggregate, my greatest successes have always come from choosing to collaborate on projects with people who are extremely smart, humble, and

motivated. I might not be the best coach in the world, but I am a fantastic team player. One of my favorite lessons from publishing and other sports I've played is this: either you win, or you learn. There is no actual, absolute failure. Not in sports, not in publishing, and not in life.

**11. *What authors have you signed and what direction do you see specific genres heading?***

I currently have 15 authors, from nonfiction to romance to YA. I cannot tell you where all of these genres are heading, because nobody can ever say for sure. Also, if an agent ever tells you that they can 100 percent predict what's going to happen next in publishing: run. That person is either a liar or a warlock of some kind. (Either way, it's best to be safe.) But I will tell you my Major Rules for Trends:

- i. There's no such thing as an original idea. Nobody stole your idea. Everything is always based on something else. Always.
- ii. That said, always try to be original in your execution, if not the inception. Execution is what sells classic stories again and again.
- iii. As an extension of 2, Keep it Fresh. Update your memes. Pay attention to shifts in the wind. There's nothing worse than a stale donut packaged like it's fresh. When you bite into it, you always know.
- iv. All Your Favs are Problematic. If you rip off the classics, please note that they were written in a time when status quo was not what it is now. People believed different things fifty years ago, five years ago, five minutes ago. Don't resurrect tired tropes, uneducated mentalities, or themes that no longer make sense. Dead things should either stay buried, or reemerge as sexy vampires with much better style.
- v. Don't base your plans on what your neighbor is doing. There's no such thing as a replicable trajectory in publishing. Just because you do *exactly* what so-n-so says she did when she was writing her debut, that doesn't mean you will also become a bestseller by writing your first draft on a Starbucks napkin. That also doesn't mean you should try to get the same agent or editor as that writer who you kind of write like. They already have a Danielle Steel. Go be someone else's Danielle Steel.

**12. *Besides having a great manuscript, what does an author need to know about switching genres and/or finding a new agent?***

*Do your research.* That's it.

**13. *How can an author support their trad published books in ways that my publisher can't or won't? What can authors do? What promo works?***

- Pretend that nobody is in charge of making your book successful, except for you (and your team, the people you personally recruit to help you while you also help them.) That's always a great way to ensure you have a proactive mentality. But don't go full Little Red Hen, either.
- Publishing can be dangerous (especially mentally). Bring a friend. A bunch of friends.



- Don't treat your friends like employees. Publishing friendships are a two-way street, or they should be. Consider yourselves members of teams who all play for the same league. Sometimes you're competing with each other, but most of the time you're playing together at a sport you both love.
- Instead of asking "what should I do?" present your publisher with a plan. Publishers love plans. Start by saying, "here's what I've already done" then add "here's what I'd like to do" and then end with "do you have any comments, questions, suggestions?" In the words of Jerry McGuire, help them help you.

**14. How does a professional author handle ghosting (never getting a reply) from a potential agent or editor who'd requested a work?**

Unfortunately, this happens. I wish it had never happened to me, or because of me, but it has. And it probably will happen again. The nature of this business is that most publishing professionals have way too many plates spinning in the air at any given time, and sometimes they fall. (Or fly off into space when we're not looking, never to be seen again except in blurry photos taken by alien conspiracy theorists.) It's okay to follow up. In fact, I usually really appreciate it, especially if I genuinely forgot. Or if my email server ate your response, which sometimes happens. Honestly.

**15. If you could look into your crystal ball for 2019, where do you see the market headed? What trends might be coming? What do readers want more of, and what are readers tired of seeing?**

Nope, I'm not doing this. Sorry. I could write paragraphs upon paragraphs about what I think might happen if the wind shifts, or if Kamala Harris wins in 2020, or if the zombie apocalypse begins in Carlsbad instead of Pittsburg. But my predictions are *not* going to help aspiring authors. Because for every predictable thing in publishing, there are always approximately 9,000 lurking variables. *Do not* write to trends. Write what is authentic for your voice and experiences. Write the story that demands to be told. Write like the world is coming to an end, and maybe your story is the only thing that can save it. Authenticity, plus passion, plus timing, plus relatability. Those are the factors that matter. Those are what readers want to see.

**16. How has the #metoo movement affected romance? What should authors be aware of here?**

In my opinion, movements like #MeToo are changing our entire world, including the romance genre, for the better. For the best, actually. This may make some people uncomfortable, but I really think it needs to be said. If you, a writer, are concerned that your fiction prospects may be negatively affected by another human being's real life pain, it's possible that your worldview is more than a little backwards. If you're out here writing op-eds about how you're worried that growing public awareness of the despicable acts of actual, real-life sexual harassers, rapists, pedophiles, and serial killers might dampen the sales of your taboo erotica, or that #MeToo might be siphoning the titillation factor from your alpha-hole main character who has a questionable grasp of consent, I have some news for you. This is not about you. This

movement is about the actual victims, the real people whose lives were irreparably damaged or even destroyed by these monsters, whose non-fictional existence has been forever marked by an experience that no fictional representation can ever accurately portray to someone who has not experienced the same. That is why, in my opinion, everyone should worry less about the impact of the #MeToo movement on small things, like romantic fiction, and wonder more about how they can help to make sure that #MeToo is no longer needed to address these crimes in the future, because they no longer happen.

***17. How has the #ownvoices movement affected publishing? What should authors be aware of here?***

The #ownvoices movement, to me, is not totally about stepping back to allow someone else to move forward. I've seen others frame it this way, and I get where they're coming from. But simply saying "don't write stories that aren't actually yours" is easily manipulated into something that sounds like a gross oversimplification at best, or moral policing at slightly less best. So how do we take this idea that some stories simply do not "belong" to everyone, and turn it into more of a Do than a Do Not? In my opinion, #ownvoices means telling the story that wants to be told, in a way that's most authentic for your voice and experiences.

But because this is publishing, and publishing is a business, we also want to tell stories that we feel will appeal to the greatest portion of our target readership. (But remember: traditionally, a lot of readers have been left out of the equation when calculating which stories will sell. So we need to do better on that score, too.) In the romance business, we know that readers want to feel like they're falling in love. They want heroines who have realistic personalities, who deal with problems that they recognize from their own IRL experiences. But there's also an element of fantasy, right? Romance readers want happily ever after, or at least happily for now. So if you're writing a story that centers the experiences of a character who is a different race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. than your identity, how much of their story is directly related to the character's identity and experiences? How much of that HEA is rooted in being X, Y, or Z, vs. just being a person who happens to be X and fell in love with another person? These are questions you want to ask yourself, at every step of the process, and be very clear about your limitations and intentions. If the way you represent these stories is inauthentic, or inaccurate, or inappropriate in any way, readers will be able to tell.

***18. You recently changed agencies. Tell me all about the exciting things at Fuse Literary that make it a great company to work with.***

Fuse manages a wide variety of clients, from bestsellers to debut authors, working with fiction and non-fiction for children and adults worldwide. Their combined experience is formidable, to say the least, but I'm not intimidated by my teammates. (Okay, maybe a little.) A boutique, collaborative agency, Fuse provides each client with the expertise and forward vision of the group. We pride ourselves on our flexibility and passion for progression in an ever-changing publishing environment. For me, the collaboration is ideal, because (once more, with feeling) you really can't expect to have a successful career in publishing All On Your Own. They also share my progressive ideals and goals for publishing as a whole—which, if you've read this

far, you know I am extremely passionate about. Together, we blend the tried-and-true methods of traditional publishing with the brash new opportunities engendered by digital publishing, emerging technologies, and an evolving author-agent relationship. As a digital marketing aficionado, there's no place I'd rather be than on the forefront of innovating how we guide and promote our authors' work.

**19. Tell me a little bit about why you still love agenting after all of these years. What do you want to see?**

After "all of these years" lol thank you for reminding me that time is an ever-marching juggernaut and we are all helplessly in its thrall. (No, you're having a midlife crisis.) Honestly, it's going to sound cocky, but I love being an agent because I'm really good at it. Most days. This job is not for everyone. Not everyone enjoys exhaustive research the way I do, as a former investigative journalist. Not everyone likes having to constantly reevaluate what they know to be true, and always be tweaking the way they do things to adapt to an industry that isn't ever really sure what's going to happen next. (Spoiler alert: most industries in the world are actually like that.) Also, I've heard that most people are terrified of public speaking, and that's something I've done professionally for years. Nobody can ever really say where life will take them. (For example, six years ago, I was living on a cruise ship. Life is wild.) For my part, I definitely want to be there when publishing finally figures out what role it wants to have in building the world of the future.

**20. Anything else you think I've missed that NINC members should know?**

I am tentatively planning on reopening for queries in March. My main focus for 2019 will be commercial fiction, nonfiction, women's fiction, and romance.



*Michele Dunaway is your Nink editor. She really needs to be writing, but on the day you get Nink, she's a month away from closing on the sale of her house and reminding herself stressed is desserts spelled backwards.*

# Networking: Are We Doing It Right?

The whole scoop on cover quotes

By Victoria Thompson



*Networking: Are We Doing It Right?* is a new feature for Nink in which we will discuss the various ways authors can and do network for mutual benefit. If you have a topic you'd like to see discussed or if you'd like to volunteer to write about a topic, please let our editor know: [ninkeditor@gmail.com](mailto:ninkeditor@gmail.com)

Through my 33-year writing career, I've given many cover quotes and been given many in return. Nobody really knows if they are helpful in selling books, but they're so much a tradition in traditional publishing that no one dares launch a new career or even a new series without them.

It can be a different story in indie, but let's start with traditional publishing and how to obtain cover quotes. Here are some possible scenarios.

## **You know the author personally**

If the person you are asking for a quote is a good friend, that person may offer before you even have to ask. But maybe your friend is too modest, so you must ask. And don't be afraid to ask, either! No one was ever insulted by being asked to give a cover quote. I've started volunteering when a friend has a new book or series because they are often hesitant to approach me. Not sure if they think I'm too busy or what, but go ahead and ask. What's the worst that can happen?

An email is a good way to approach, even if the author is a good friend, because it gives the person time to consider and to formulate a reply. Maybe your friend simply can't do it (see excuses below), so she will have to let you down easy. As writers, we do better on paper than when we're put on the spot in person. But don't worry too much. Friends are usually happy to blurb other friends if they possibly can. Don't be mad if your friend can't do it, though. Life is too short for that nonsense, and the person wouldn't have refused without a very good reason.

## **You don't know the author or only know her slightly**

These requests are better coming from your editor or your agent, and in some cases you might also ask your editor or agent to ask even if the person is a good friend. Usually, if a friend asks me and I say yes, the editor is the one who actually follows up and sends the book in any case.

I get asked to blurb at least once a month, often by total strangers, so I imagine that big name authors get inundated and simply must refuse many of the requests. This is much easier to do through a third party, and it's much easier to hear the refusal through a third party, too. Your editor will appreciate getting contact info for the person, if you have that, but editors can usually track down an author when necessary. The editor can also tell the author all about your book and brag about how wonderful it is and explain why they chose the author to give a blurb (probably because it's similar in some way to the author's work so there should be some crossover readership). These are all things you probably wouldn't feel comfortable saying about your own work to a stranger, so it's nice to have someone else to do it for you.

With a third person requesting, the author will feel comfortable either accepting or rejecting the offer. By having no personal contact with the requesting writer, the introverted author can give a blurb without potentially acquiring a new "best friend." Some of my best writer friends are people I first encountered when asked to blurb their books, but some writers aren't particularly social and would prefer to keep personal contacts to a minimum. This is especially important if the author must refuse the offer. While most people can take no for an answer, a few simply can't and may become persistent or even abusive, and nobody wants that.

If the author must refuse to give a blurb, it's also easier to hear it from a third person. Trust me on this. Hearing "Victoria Thompson couldn't give us a blurb, but Gillian Flynn said she'd be delighted," isn't traumatic at all, whereas hearing directly from me that I can't give you a blurb might get your imagination going, and you know how good a writer's imagination is. The next thing you know, you'll be imagining a vast, "write-wing conspiracy" (She hates me!) or whatever. So protect your psyche and make your editor or agent earn their keep by doing the asking for you.

## **So what about cover quotes in indie?**

Cover quotes are not seen as necessary for indie books. In a quick survey of 67 indie authors, conducted by a very successful indie author, 85 percent said they never seek cover quotes. Sometimes authors use alternatives like review quotes if the book's been out for a while or a tagline (which can also be used in ads and blurbs) for a new book.

But what if you want to try for a cover quote from a fellow author?

Whether you know the author or not, you follow the same recommendations for courtesy and thoughtfulness as a traditionally published author, but you need to do it yourself. This is not something to hand off to an assistant. You're asking for a favor. Do it directly.

Because it's author-to-author without the buffer of editor or agent, be clear about why a quote from this particular author would mean a lot and why potential readers for your book would be sure to respond to that individual author's name on the cover. Also consider making



it an even softer sell by acknowledging that you understand if deadline pressure precludes them from doing a quote. Yes, you're giving them an out. That's the idea. If they say yes, you have a willing quote-giver.

### **Indie or traditional, what happens after you ask?**

Excuses. Writers have many reasons for refusing to give cover quotes. Most frequently, those reasons involve looming deadlines. The more time you can give someone to read and blurb your book, the more likely they are to say yes, but even so, some writers would rather spend their time on their own books. It's selfish, I know, but what can you do?

Sometimes a writer will decline because the description of the book simply does not appeal. One reason to get a cover quote, theoretically at least, is so the fans of the better-known author will pick up your book because if she enjoyed it, they probably will, too. The implication is that your work will appeal to the blurbing author's fans in some similar way—setting, genre, time period, plot, or something else. If the author doesn't see any potential crossover, she might decline the offer. I once almost turned down a request because I saw absolutely no crossover potential between my work and the proposed book. I did the blurb anyway because a good friend had asked me on behalf of her good friend. The book was delightful, and now that author is my good friend, too. So that happens. But probably just as often, the author chooses to pass instead. It's nothing personal. Life is short and books are long.

Sometimes the author just doesn't like the book. This doesn't happen often, of course, because no one ever sends out bad books to be blurbed. Having someone not like your book is no reflection on the quality of the book itself, of course. I have disliked many *New York Times* Bestsellers, which obviously means I was wrong, but that still didn't make me want to read the books. It's just a matter of taste. The beauty of this, however, is that you will most likely have no idea the other author didn't like your book because she will not tell you that. Even if she tells your editor that, your editor will not pass that unhappy news along to you. You will probably just get a vague reason, like "she couldn't do it," or "she didn't have time/couldn't meet our deadline."

But don't go imagining that every author who couldn't give you a quote because she was busy actually hated your book. There lies madness! At least 99.9 percent of the time, an author who says she is too busy really is too busy, and that's all there is to it. Don't get caught up in author paranoia.

### **And when someone asks you to give a quote...**

How should you behave? First of all, be kind. Writers get enough abuse without giving it each other! But if you absolutely hate the very thought, then just reply that you never give quotes, nothing personal, or whatever excuse you think sounds best. But before you decide not to blurb, here's the reason I try to blurb as many books as I can: It's good PR for me. First of all, as I said, I've made new friends from blurbing their books, and later, when I had a new series, they returned the favor. You will also make a good impression on the editor (or agent) involved. Someday you may be looking for a new publisher or a new agent, and those good impressions may pay off. Secondly, your name is on someone else's book! I always assume that the person

giving the blurb is someone important, even if I never heard of them. I may not actually remember the name, but it made an impression, so when I see it again, it will seem more familiar. It's free publicity for you, and that's the very best kind. So blurbing is like giving a gift, and the giver even gets back more than just a sense of satisfaction.

That's about all I know about cover quotes. They're probably worthless for selling books, or maybe they're vitally important to the process. No one really knows. They do make writers feel better about themselves, though, and that's something.

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*Edgar®- and Agatha Award-nominated author [Victoria Thompson](#) writes the Gaslight Mystery Series, set in turn-of-the-century New York City and featuring midwife Sarah Brandt. Her latest, Murder on Union Square, is a May 2018 release. City of Secrets is the second book in her new Counterfeit Lady series and is a November 2018 release. She also contributed to the award-winning writing textbook Many Genres/One Craft. Victoria teaches in the Seton Hill University master's program in writing popular fiction. She lives in Illinois with her husband and a very spoiled little dog.*

# Unearthing Hidden Clues About Your Creativity: Answers, Part 3

By Denise A. Agnew



Since December, I've discussed the process of discovering hidden clues to what may impede your creativity. This month we look at comparing yourself with other writers and changing genres. In Part One of the series, I asked you to thoroughly answer several questions, so if you want to see the full list, check out the December 2018 issue of *Nink* in the members-only section.

The questions we're exploring this month are:

- *Do you compare yourself to other writers? When you do compare, what do you say to yourself?*
- *Is there a burning topic/genre you long to write but have fears around it? What are those fears? Again, go deep. Don't hold back. List them all, even the ones that feel/sound over the top.*

## Comparison

You've probably heard numerous times throughout your writing career that you shouldn't compare yourself to other writers. Easier said than done, right? People in general are bombarded daily with messages from society that say we must reach certain expectations. Writers are no different. While the writing community can be extremely supportive, there can also be an element of dog-eat-dog competition. Many new writers, and even ones who have been in this business a long time, don't recognize that comparing themselves to other writers is a recipe for writer's block. Look at your answers to the above questions and analyze them by asking yourself the following additional questions:

*Do you think you must write a certain amount of time a day, a certain amount of words per day, or produce a certain number of books a year? Do you believe these quotas are the only way to achieve success?*

Sometimes these beliefs come from relying on other writers' "musts" and "shoulds." Well-meaning authors will write how-to books and articles that tell you, "do this if you want to be successful" or "do this and watch the money rain down." Many of their tips are helpful, but it's good to remember to only take the advice that works for you instinctively. If it doesn't work for you, or doesn't feel right, then it isn't the best path to success for your situation.

*Have you defined what "success" is for you?*

Writers rarely start off their careers with a plan that relies on following their instincts and genuine desires. More often their careers are planned around perceptions of what they believe they should be doing, regardless if it is what they *want* to do with their writing. If you've been writing for some time and fall into writer's block, consider what has changed about your writing life. Write down your "beliefs" about the writing world and the genre you're creating. Ask yourself if these ideals are truly yours. If these were ideals at one point, analyze if this has changed, and if so, what has changed. Sometimes it can take serious self-exploration to understand the answers. If things have changed and you understand what these things are, you also need to assess if you are hesitant about making or embracing these changes. If you find your muse is leading you in a different direction or new direction, such as writing a new genre or writing screenplays, this could be a new and very productive direction. It could mean banishing your writer's block.

### **Genre switch up**

Authors are brainwashed into thinking that staying in one lane is the only way to be a happy writer. It may be a way to make money, but staying in your lane isn't a surefire path to genuine happiness. It has to be the right decision for you. If staying on one path thrills you, the chance of you encountering writer's block is less likely. However, I've found most writers cannot stay in one genre doing the same thing for decades without encountering significant writer's block or a time of self-doubts. Look at those ideas you wrote in the answer to the second italicized question above and ask yourself the following follow-up questions:

*Do you feel you are bored and/or blocked because you've been writing in the same genre or sub-genre forever?*

Now may be a good time to bust out of the rut and explore. As a creativity coach, I've encountered many the writer who has written dozens of books in one series or genre and who now finds themselves unable to continue. This is often a sign it's time to write something different. This doesn't necessarily mean you will forever abandon your current genre. All it may mean is giving your burning passion a try, which may spark even more new ideas. Best of all, you may find writing fun again.

*Have you allowed yourself to fear stepping into a new genre because of what others may think? Do you fear you'll lose your current readers or be ostracized by readers, friends or maybe family? If so, ask yourself more questions. Are you looking for approval from others or creative satisfaction? Do you fear loss of income?*

Creative fulfillment and happiness must come first. If it means you want to write in a different genre or sub-genre, beware the negative Nancy in your mind that tries to sabotage you. Beware of other people's negativity. In the end, it is your career and your satisfaction that matter. Many writers freeze up at this point and decide to continue being miserable and/or blocked rather than venturing into new territory that could destroy the block and fulfill their creative needs. If you ignore your creative desires for years while you try to please others or cave solely for financial reasons, eventually you might stop writing all together. You may spend many a year writing stories you don't care about and hating every minute of it.

Next month we'll explore the questions about your audience, approval, control, and bad reviews.

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*Denise A. Agnew is the award-winning author of over 67 novels. Denise's novels Love From the Ashes and Blackout were optioned for film/TV by Where's Lucy? Productions. Denise is a writer/producer (Happy Catastrophe Productions/Bright Frontier Films/Where's Lucy? Productions), a paranormal investigator, Reiki Master, Certified Creativity Coach, and RT Academy Mentor. As a creativity coach, Denise assists anyone in the arts to maintain lifelong creativity. You can find her at [www.deniseagnew.com](http://www.deniseagnew.com) and [www.creativepencoaching.com](http://www.creativepencoaching.com).*

# The Mad Scribbler

## Our Bookshelves, Ourselves

By Laura Resnick



*“Where is human nature so weak as in the bookstore?”*

—Henry Ward Beecher, abolitionist (1813-1887)

Decluttering guru Marie Kondo’s first book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, was a bestseller when it was released in the United States in 2014. Sales have recently spiked again, thanks to the success of her new American TV show, *Tidying Up With Marie Kondo*. In this series, Kondo, a diminutive Japanese woman who mostly relies on an interpreter to communicate in English, spends each episode coaching overwhelmed people on how to turn their cluttered, chaotic households into well-organized spaces.

The now-famous core principle of her KonMari method is that you keep only those possessions which “spark joy” for you—you get rid of everything else. Obviously, her method isn’t for everyone. (Nor is tidying.) After reading Kondo’s book, writer Kaz Weida noted in her [review](#) on *Scary Mommy*, “The KonMari Method has many, many problems. Including the fact that if I employed it, all of my toilet paper and at least one of my children would end up curbside.”

(Kondo’s 2016 follow-up book, *Spark Joy*, explains how your toilet paper qualifies. But it doesn’t mention your children...)

I liked Kondo’s *Tidying* book much better than Weida did—she “gave a battle cry of rage and chucked the book across the room”—and I’m a fan of the TV show. And despite a lifetime of constantly encountering people who never read or buy books, I was pleased to discover that, in Kondo’s encounters, so many people must be book lovers that she routinely treats books as a complete category in her tidying method. (Using her method, clients tidy one category of objects at a time: clothes, papers, personal mementos, etc.) In every category, Kondo encourages you to keep only the items that spark joy, and this includes books.

Recently, this guideline wound up being mistranslated into a persistent internet rumor that Marie Kondo advises owning only 30 books. The rumor then fed countless outraged public



statements and essays condemning Kondo (often using crude language) for exhorting people to shed from their homes all but a tiny, totally inadequate number of books. Before long, internet hysteria framed Ms. Kondo as a one-woman barbarian horde ruthlessly invading our homes to remove all our books. My fellow Americans, *defend your volumes!* Death to the tidier!

And so on.

In fact, what she actually said in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* is that *she* keeps only 30 books in her home. This was one of many examples she gives of her own lifestyle. She also acknowledges multiple times in her writing that not many people want to go to her extremes. Moreover, she wrote the book while living in Tokyo, where many of her clients lived. According to an [article](#) about Tokyo real estate, a new apartment in Tokyo is about 680 square feet. So it probably makes sense to own fewer books (and other stuff) there than if you live in a suburban American house.

Anyhow, internet hysteria aside, I have found Kondo's *actual* suggestions about books useful. Her writing goes into far more detail about decluttering books than just employing the "spark joy" advice, but it's like the pirate code: guidelines, not rules.

Like many writers, my books always exceed the space I have for them. Admittedly, not all book lovers mind clutter. Indeed, I can think of many people who enjoy their over-abundance of books, and I don't fault them for it. (Nor would Marie Kondo, as far as I know. Her clients are people who are *unhappy* with conditions in their physical space and apply to her for help. It's only in internet fever dreams that Kondo goes around prying books out of the arms of people who want to keep them.)

I also confess to pangs of envy when I saw a video on YouTube, "[Just a view in the private library of Umberto Eco](#)," in which the famous author walks past what seems like *miles* of well-stocked floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in his large home, until he finally arrives a shelf where he finds the volume he wants. Yes, if I had that much living space—and could hire someone else to dust—I'd be delighted to have that many books.

However, although my home is bigger than a Tokyo apartment, space is nonetheless limited, and I'm uncomfortable with clutter. I like to look at a bookcase and see exactly what I've got (no double-shelving), and the only books I want lying around in stacks are the ones I'm currently reading or using. I also don't like having books packed away in boxes.

On the other hand, I can't resist buying *more* books. This is a lifelong addiction. Even at times when I have been living out of a backpack and on the road for months, or when I've been dead broke, or moving, or too busy with graduate school to read for pleasure... I can't resist buying books.

Mercifully, the digital age has solved some of the clutter problem. You can buy 10,000 ebooks without having to clear even a millimeter of shelf space for them. In that sense, ebooks are the answer to a bibliophile's prayers.

Nonetheless, I acquire many books that are only available in print editions or which I prefer to read in print format: research books for my own writing, for example.

Hospitality must also be considered. When I threw my housewarming party several years ago, three different guests came out of the powder room with the same complaint: "There's nothing to read in your bathroom." Since then, I have remedied this shocking oversight by

putting a small book basket in both of my bathrooms. And, as a good hostess, I make sure to keep rotating an interesting supply of books through those baskets.

Moreover, when I walk into someone's house, or when they walk into mine, we can immediately find a mutual bond not only in the abundance of books on our shelves, but also in the titles we've both read, or in the subject matter that sparks conversation. Enter my living room, and you can see from the bookcase that I'm interested in Neolithic monuments, Bollywood movies, local history, and Africa. Go into my kitchen, and you can tell from the books I've shelved there that I love to cook and am learning to garden. Go upstairs to my office, and as people often remark, you can immediately see that I write fantasy novels (my research shelves are filled with volumes on the occult, witchcraft, magic, mythology, monsters, vampires, voodoo, alchemy, symbols, faeries, devils, demons, wizards, sorcerers, grimoires, mysticism, and ghosts).

When you go into the home of someone you scarcely know, surely the bookshelves eliminate a lot of random guesswork about whether you'll have much in common. (If I see a couple of hundred volumes about professional sports, hunting, and economics, it braces me for the possibility that we will struggle to find a topic of mutual interest.)

In addition to buying books to satisfy my guests, fill my research needs, and cater to my new and existing interests, I also have a terrible weakness for oddball works and novelty tomes. Luckily for me, such volumes can readily be found in clearance bins and remainder sections, since the demand for them is often less than their publishers hoped. And it is beyond me to resist a delightful book for \$2. My latest such purchase, for example, is *Shoestrolgy*, a beautifully illustrated little picture book that assigns a shoe to each day of the year. (The astrological footwear for my birthday is a highly-polished red-and-gold Marc Jacobs lace-up shoe with a stacked heel.)

Making room for the perpetual flow of new books entering my home means that, as a person who's uncomfortable with clutter, I need to let go of other books that are here. The KonMari method has helped me get better at that. In fact, after reading her book, I culled, packed, and donated 10 boxes of books. Last week, I took two more bags of books to the local library.

As silly as it sounds to some people, one of the things that helps me let go of a book is, as per Kondo's advice, to *thank* the book—for the pleasure I had in reading it, or for teaching me that I didn't need to read it, after all.

Finally, by practicing this method, I find I've also come closer to following the advice of writer and book-lover Winston Churchill: "If you cannot read all your books... fondle them—peer into them, let them fall open where they will, read from the first sentence that arrests the eye, set them back on the shelves with your own hands, arrange them on your own plan so that you at least know where they are. Let them be your friends; let them, at any rate, be your acquaintances."

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*Laura Resnick writes fantasy novels, short stories, and articles, and she reads omnivoraciously.*

# Membership Benefits

Need industry intel, software, or legal help? We've got you covered.

Are you taking advantage of all your member benefits?

As a NINC member, your benefits include industry discounts, newsletter and website articles, professional services directory, networking opportunities, and more.

We've compiled all of these—which you can also find on our website—into this list as a helpful reminder.

## Networking

The email list for Novelists, Inc. Members: <https://groups.io/g/NINCLINK>

Join our Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NovelistsInc/>

We offer a critique/brainstorming group: <https://groups.io/g/NINKcritique>

Follow NINC on Twitter: [https://twitter.com/Novelists\\_Inc](https://twitter.com/Novelists_Inc)

## Conference 2019: Planning For Success

Conference information: <https://ninc.com/conferences/about-the-ninc-conference/>

Conference Registration: <https://ninc.com/conferences/registration/2019-member-registration/>

Conference e-loop: <https://groups.io/g/BeachNINC2019>

## Newsletter

Propose an article: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/propose-an-article/>

Submit a letter to the editor: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/submit-letter-to-editor/>

Newsletter archives: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/news-archive/>

*Best of Nink* in paperback: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/best-of-nink/>

## Website (you must be logged in to access these services)

Legal Fund: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/legal-fund/>

Pro Services Directory: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/pro-services-directory/>

Sample Letters: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/sample-letters/>

Articles & Links: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/articles-and-links/>

Welcome Packet: [http://ninc.com/system/assets/uploads/2017/01/2017\\_New\\_Member\\_Welcome\\_Packet-public.pdf](http://ninc.com/system/assets/uploads/2017/01/2017_New_Member_Welcome_Packet-public.pdf)

## **Member discounts**

NINC members are eligible for certain professional discounts. A complete listing of these can be found at <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/member-freebies-discounts/> along with other member discounts.

## **Volunteer**

One of the greatest benefits of NINC is the opportunity to volunteer your talents to benefit other members—which pays incredible and unexpected dividends in networking and knowledge. Learn more about volunteer opportunities here: <https://ninc.com/members-only/open-positions/>

Open positions include:

- Social Media Committee
- Tweet Team
- Recruiting New Members
- 2019 Conference Promoter
- Anything!



*Founded in 1989*

### **NINC Statement of Principle**

Novelists, Inc., in acknowledgment of the crucial creative contributions novelists make to society, asserts the right of novelists to be treated with dignity and in good faith; to be recognized as the sole owners of their literary creations; to be fairly compensated for their creations when other entities are profiting from those creations; and to be accorded the respect and support of the society they serve.

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- Rebecca Brandewyne
- Janice Young Brooks
- Jasmine Cresswell
- Maggie Osborne
- Marianne Shock

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*If you have questions regarding Novelists, Inc., please contact a member of the Board of Directors.*

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## 2019 Committees

- *Complete committee member listings are available on the website. Many committee positions are open and looking for new volunteers.*
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## **Central Coordinator**

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*Address changes may be made on the website.*

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