

# The Florida Writer

April 2025 • Volume 19, Number 2

Are Writers Uniquely  
Vulnerable to Scams?

Reading in Your Own  
Genre

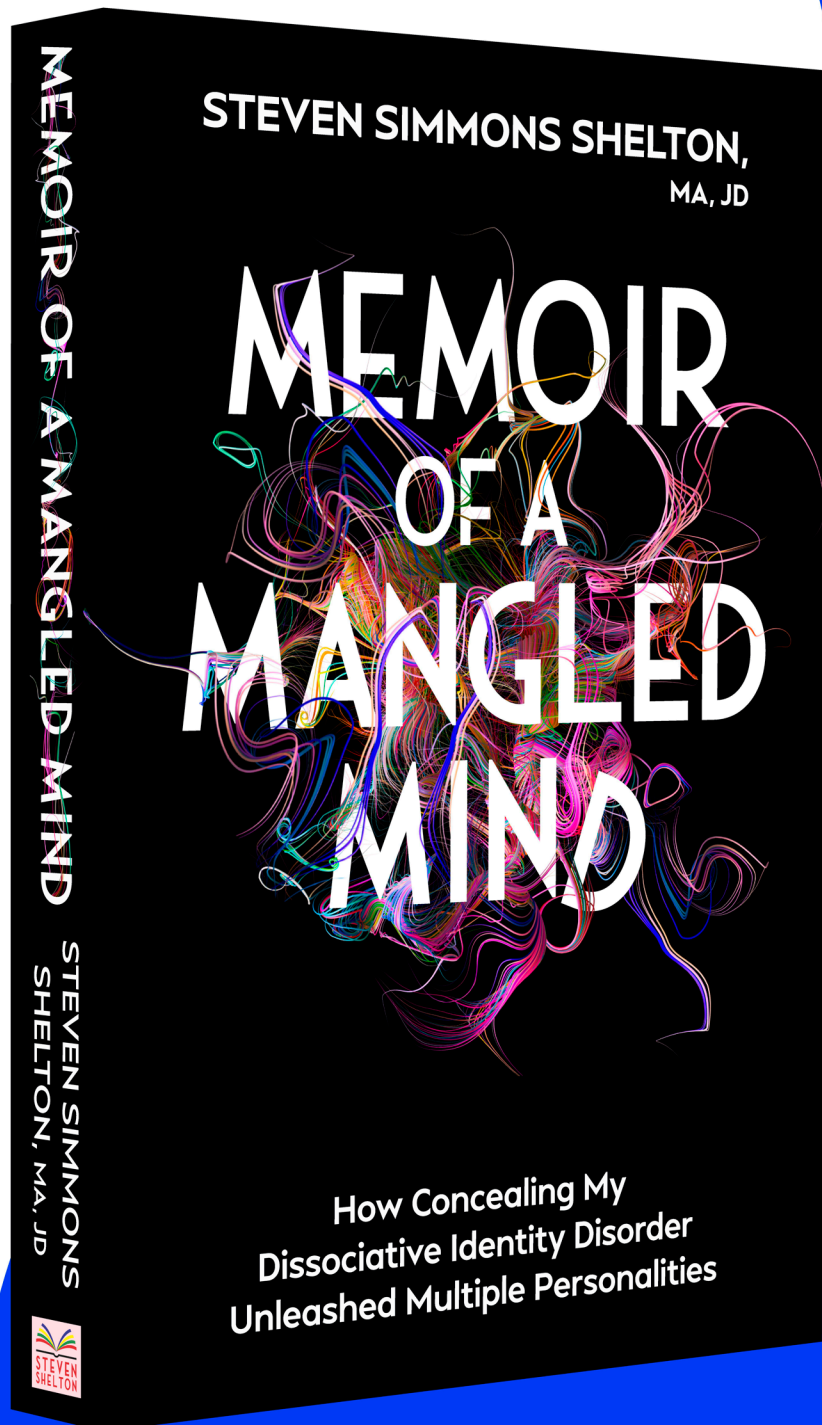
The Developmental Edit







**“an unputdownable memoir  
which never holds back” –  
A 'Wishing Shelf' Book Review**



**2024 Winner 2024 Winner**  
**LGBTQ Psychology  
& Mental Illness**



**2024 Bronze Award**  
**LGBT**



**2025 Runner-Up**  
**Memoir**

**Scan for retailers**





# The Florida Writer

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PUBLISHER  
Florida Writers Association  
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Winter Park FL 32789  
[floridawriters.org](http://floridawriters.org)

*The Florida Writer*, published six times a year, is the official magazine of Florida Writers Association, a 501(c)(6) nonprofit. FWA provides writers with knowledge, opportunities, and connections to support their goals.

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## IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 How to Submit to *The Florida Writer*
- 3 **The Thing That Happened**  
Mary Ann de Stefano, Editor
- 4 News in Brief
- 5 Announcing Florida WritersCon 2025 Keynote  
Speaker, Kristen Arnett, author of *Mostly Dead Things*
- 7 **Clearly Legal:  
Ghostwriting Tips**  
Anne Dalton, Esquire
- 8 **Notes from a Word Nerd:  
The Developmental Edit:  
Navigating the Waters of the Written Word**  
Paul Iasevoli
- 12 **Are Writers Uniquely Vulnerable to Scams?**  
Victoria Strauss
- 14 **Reading in Your Own Genre**  
Carol Saller
- 18 **How to Spot Toxic Feedback:  
7 Signs That the Writing Advice You're Getting  
May Do More Harm Than Good**  
Susan DeFreitas
- PARAGRAPHS & STANZAS
- 22 **The Fire** | Lynn Bechdolt
- 23 **Do I Know You?** | Ashley Laubinger
- 24 **Distant Voice** | Mary Ellen Orvis
- 25 **Mysterium Tremendum** | Robin Pullen
- 26 **Panic Attack** | Rob Rogers
- 27 **Do I Know You** | Ralf Thompson
- 28 Celebrations
- 29 Lifetime Members
- Cover photo: Worachat Sodsri. Adobe Stock.  
Key West pier



# The Florida Writer

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS • REQUIREMENTS

### Celebrations

We publish announcements for members who have good news to share.

1. Submit a one-paragraph announcement written in third person.
2. Maximum word count 100
3. You may include one headshot or a photo of the front cover of your book to accompany your announcement, but it is not required.
4. One entry per issue, per person
5. Type “Celebrations” and month of the issue you’re submitting to in the subject line of your submission email.
6. **Follow all “Additional Requirements” listed below.**

### Paragraphs & Stanzas

We publish selected creative writing by members who respond to the issue’s prompt.

1. Prose, poetry, and excerpts from longer works that can stand alone are welcome.
2. Maximum word count for prose, 700; maximum line count for poetry, 50. Title is included in word count.
3. You may include a headshot to accompany your entry, but it is not required.
4. One entry per issue, per person
5. Type “Paragraphs” and month of the issue you’re submitting to in the subject line of your submission email.
6. Include a one-line bio, no more than fifteen words including your name, within your attached submission document.
7. **Follow all “Additional Requirements” listed below.**

### Additional Requirements

1. To be eligible for publication, you must be a member of the Florida Writers Association
2. Send your entire text submission as an attached Word doc. Do not embed any of the text that is part of your submission in the email.
3. Include your name and contact information within the attachment.
4. Photo image files must be high resolution, 300 ppi, jpg or png format, and sent as an attachment, not embedded in a document.
5. Email your submission to [mdestefano@floridawriters.org](mailto:mdestefano@floridawriters.org)

### Prompts & Deadlines

- **June 2025 Issue** – Deadline: May 1, 2025  
Prompt: No prompt. Submit your best work and be sure to follow the submission requirements.
- **August 2025 Issue** – Deadline: July 1, 2025  
Prompt: Writing about facing an obstacle.







# The Thing That Happened

Mary Ann de Stefano  
Editor

In my years as a freelance editor and as editor of this magazine, I have read many works of nonfiction of a type I have come to label “the thing that happened.” While they recount events that are significant for the writer, these works leave something essential out.

What’s missing when the writing is just about “what happened?”

If you’re writing to record history for family or close friends, telling what happened may be enough, because your audience will likely have an intrinsic interest in and connection to who and what you’re writing about. But if you’re writing for a larger audience, recounting events is very likely not enough to engage the reader. In fact, a common outsider reader’s unspoken reaction to such writing may be, “So what?”

Family or personal history writing is definitely a worthwhile endeavor. So is writing for self-awareness. There is no doubt about that. But writing an event or history that only tells “what happened” stops short of engaging a larger audience because the circumstances alone do not provoke the emotional or psychological engagement needed to connect readers on a deeper level.

What ingredients get readers to invest in narrative nonfiction and memoir and make them care?

Good nonfiction tells a story. Strong narrative nonfiction or memoir enables the reader to connect emotionally or intellectually to the work. Readers want to know why something happened or how it affects them, not just what happened.

**Provide context.** Intriguing nonfiction provides context, showing not just what happened but why it matters. Why would readers care? What was the impact of events or what is to be gained from them?

**Include broader insights.** Instead of just reporting events, nonfiction writers can show broader themes, lessons, or ideas from “the thing that happened” that will resonate with readers’ experiences. Themes might include such concepts as identity, love, loss, or redemption. Reflection and broader insights are particularly key in memoir and can add intriguing layers to your writing.

**Tell, but show, also.** Apply techniques used in fiction to your nonfiction. Show the weight and meaning of events with vivid details, dialogue, and character development. This will help keep the reader engaged.

**Conflict, stakes, and tension.** In creative nonfiction and memoir there can be conflict. The tension might be internal or external or personal or social. Establishing what’s at stake helps readers to be curious about the outcome.

**Character development.** In narrative nonfiction, especially in memoirs, you can bring people (including yourself) to life with detailed descriptions and emotional depth, just like characters in a novel. Rather than just stating facts about a person, explore their motivations, quirks, fears, and longings.

**Structure.** Just because its nonfiction doesn’t mean it has to be structured in a linear way. Nonlinear timelines such as flashbacks can be used effectively to create suspense or provide context. Starting a chapter or a shorter piece in the middle of an event, then going back to show how events led to that point can hook readers and keep them engaged.

Suspense is critical in fiction, and it can be employed in nonfiction, too. You can withhold selected details or build tension toward a climactic moment to make the reader curious about what’s coming next in a true story, too. Similarly, pacing can be used—speeding up during action or emotion packed moments and slowing down during contemplative parts.

Narrative nonfiction and memoir should engage, not just inform. These techniques can take your work from just a collection of facts to a compelling story that engages readers.

Get your first draft down on paper. Write for yourself. But when you’re doing your revisions, be sure to think about your audience. What will they learn, feel, or take away from your nonfiction work? Take your writing beyond “the thing that happened” and onto a work that matters, not only to you, but also to your readers. ✍️

**Mary Ann de Stefano** is President of the Florida Writers Association and editor of *The Florida Writer*. An independent editor with 30+ years’ experience, she works one-to-one with writers who are developing books. Mary Ann is mad about nurturing creative and community spirit. [madaboutwords.com](http://madaboutwords.com)





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# News in Brief

## Welcome 70 New Members Jan/Feb 2025

Victor Acosta	Jasmine George	Vicky Pao
William Anderson	David Godin	Scott Parish
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Rose Deslyn	Kelly Manning-Baraban	Lynn Van Meter
Helen Dibble	Thurman McCay	Holly Walsh
Joseph Diorio	Marguerite Mooers	Kentrail Woodside
Diana Faherty	Larry Moran	Catherine Wu
Ruth Fishel	Montana Morris	Fred Yager
Mary Floyd	Victoria Nelson	Tanya Young
Sandra Furlong		Ralph Yourie

## Special Thank You to New Lifetime Members

Cameron Boozarjomehri  
Wesley Henson  
Scott McMillen  
Minda Stephens

## Closing to Submissions

**RPLA**  
**April 15, 2025**

**Collection**  
**April 30, 2025**

## Mark Your Calendar

**October 17-19, 2025**  
**Florida WritersCon 2025**

**October 17, 2025**  
**NextGen Writers Experience**







**Announcing  
Florida WritersCon  
2025 Keynote Speaker**

# Kristen Arnett

*The New York Times*  
bestselling author of  
*Mostly Dead Things*

Based in Florida, Kristen's work has appeared in *Guernica*, *The Guardian*, *McSweeney's*, and other publications. She was a finalist for the 2020 Lambda Literary award and won the Ninth Letter Literary and the Coil Book awards.

Her new book, *Stop Me if You've Heard This One*, has already garnered high praise.

More about Kristen:  
[kristenarnettwriter.com/about](http://kristenarnettwriter.com/about)

Join us at the Hilton Orlando/Altamonte Springs for this year's Florida WritersCon on October 17-19 to meet Kristen and hear her speak about her writing journey at our Saturday luncheon.

It will be another weekend to remember!

## Florida WritersCon 2025

October 17 - 19, 2025  
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## CLEARLY LEGAL

### Ghostwriting Tips

by Anne Dalton, Esquire

**G**hostwriting presents many challenges beyond the obvious ones of marketing yourself, keeping the client happy, and getting paid! Below are some tips to assist your ghostwriting trajectory.

First, be clear what services you agree to perform. Are you a researcher? A codifier of someone else's memories? A fiction writer? Nonfiction writer? Will you prepare an outline for the client's approval or plunge into the narrative? Will you do the index and chapter headers? Will you review and help decide on photographs and/or technical issues? In other words, at what stage will you enter into a professional relationship with the client?

Next, how will you interact with the client? Will you work in person (or via electronic platforms) or only communicate with them via email, digital recordings, or through a third person? If it's through a third person, who is your client? How will you ensure (to the best of your ability) that the "real" client finds your work satisfactory? Will you have set hours of work, to avoid being "on call" at night, weekends and/or holidays, or is such contact all right?

How will you charge the client? Hourly, or on a lump-sum basis, or a combination of both? Will you be able to structure your compensation so that you are paid as the work progresses, to avoid the possibility of being terminated at an awkward stage? Will you get reimbursement (or money up front) for your travel and other expenses?

Will you handle legalities such as copyright clearance of materials the client may want to use and what is your

responsibility here? If you are doing your own research, how will you handle your own clearance of copyright materials? Will you be indemnified by the client, or expected to indemnify that person?

How extensively can you utilize for marketing purposes the work you are doing, if at all? If the client terminates your service prior to completion, can you utilize the material you have aggregated in another arena, either for another client or for yourself? Will you want the client to act as a reference for you to obtain other gigs?

Will you sign an agreement transferring or licensing your work to the client? Despite what many contracts say, it is very unlikely that your work would qualify as "work for hire". For more information on this subject, see the free information contained within Circular 30, "Works Made for Hire", U.S. Copyright Office [[copyright.gov/circs/circ30.pdf](http://copyright.gov/circs/circ30.pdf)].

All of the above questions should be addressed in a short, clear contract. ✍️

*Comments contained in this article are informational only and do not constitute legal advice. Please seek the advice of an attorney of your choice regarding specific factual issues.*

**Anne Dalton, Esquire**, proudly serves as General Counsel and Special Advisor to the President of the Florida Writers Association and is an FWA Lifetime Member. She is licensed in Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania, and her credentials can be viewed at [www.daltonlegal.com](http://www.daltonlegal.com). Contact her at [adalton@daltonlegal.com](mailto:adalton@daltonlegal.com).



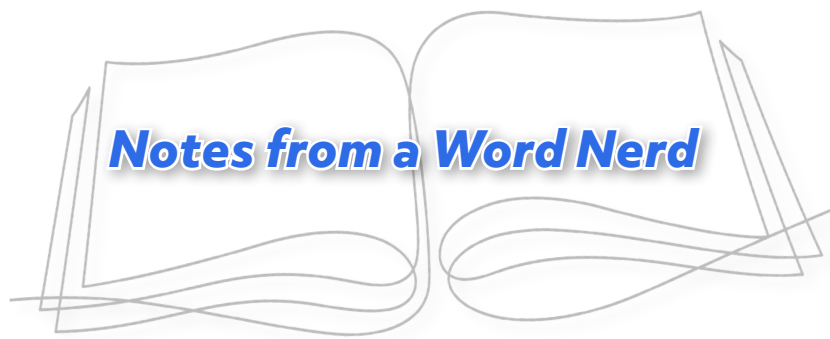
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"unputdownable"

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# The Developmental Edit: Navigating the Waters of the Written Word

by Paul Iasevoli

In my introductory article for this column, I briefly discussed the various levels of editing and stated that the first step in the process is the developmental edit. This installment will take a deeper dive into the role of the developmental editor and the steps an author should follow to move their work to the next editing level.

## The Editor as Navigator

In her 2024 book, *The Chicago Guide for Freelance Editors*, Erin Brenner compares developmental editing to “standing on the top of a mountain and viewing the trees below.” Since I sometimes have issues with seeing the forest for the trees, I’ll take a different approach and describe the role of the developmental editor as a ship pilot who helps a captain navigate their vessel from port to port through hazardous seas. In this image we can then view the book as the ship and the captain as the author. Diving deeper into the nautical metaphor, we can say that the developmental editor’s task is to assure that the author avoids any rocky shoals that may sink their book to the bottom of an agent’s slush pile or, worse than that, never make it across the sea to land on a prospective publisher’s desk.

## Build It or Launch It

Developmental editors work with writers at various stages of the creative process. An author may approach a developmental editor with only a premise or an outline. In ship building terms, the editor may work from the keel to piece together the ship’s frame. Or if the keel and frame are sturdy, the planks set in place, and the deck secured, the editor may suggest finishing touches of paint and perhaps a headpiece to the bow. The author’s task then is to add a more colorful setting and to round out the characters.

This type of bottom-up developmental editing from nothing more than an outline is most common in professional or business documents, but it’s not unheard of in prose and poetry. A poet, for example, may submit a group of poems to a developmental editor and ask their opinion as to whether the poems have a coherent throughline and/or style. If the answer is yes, the poet may then feel confident to continue with a collection in the same theme and style.

In my personal experience, I once submitted a piece to an editor that I thought would make a good short story. The editor returned the story to me and asserted that I left the characters and plot unresolved. When I went back into the story to fix that issue, I found it took me several thousand words to resolve the plot and characters. The upshot of this anecdote is that what started as a short story turned out to be an award-nominated novella—all thanks to the advice of a developmental editor.

## Dry Dock

Before a ship sets out to sea the pilot and the captain may choose to inspect it on a hoist above the waterline. So too, the developmental editor and the author may choose to meet, either in person or virtually, to review the manuscript in whole or in part and to discuss the author’s desired outcomes. In essence this meeting is a kind of get-to-know-you that will help determine editor-author compatibility before any agreement is signed or money exchanged.

In all editing endeavors, but particularly at the developmental level when the work is in its formative stages, it’s paramount that the author trusts their editor’s judgement, and it’s equally important that the editor understands the needs and goals of the author.

After the pilot and the captain have deemed the ship seaworthy, it’s time to take the plunge.





## Setting Sail

When the editor and author have reached an agreement to work together, a contract is usually drawn up—sometimes with the aid of a lawyer, but more often an editor will use a template which includes the start and end dates of the developmental edit, the expected outcomes, such as what commentary will be returned to the author, and if any detailed work will be done on the text itself, i.e., sentence structure, word choice, etc. Lastly, pricing will be agreed upon. Usually, an editor asks for half the total fee at the start of work with final payment due for the second half at completion.

The time frame for completion of a developmental edit varies widely among editors since some work on several projects at once and their deadlines may be staggered. Again, my point of reference here is my personal experience with developmental editors which, by the way, has always been positive. My average wait time from when I handed over manuscripts of approximately 80,000 words has been between four to six weeks. However, I offer that time period only as a benchmark set from my experience. Every editor and edit is different.

## The Pilot Takes the Helm

Once the author has turned their manuscript over to the developmental editor, it becomes the editor's role to assure that the author has stayed the course in their story or, in the case of a collection of poems or short stories, held on to a consistent throughline in theme and style. As mentioned, the developmental editor surveys the big picture like a ship pilot plots a course through the deepest channels to avoid shoals that may sink the ship. Sometimes, a captain may allow their ship to drift into uncharted waters to explore new territory, but the pilot will make sure it doesn't run aground. In a novel, an editor may allow for literary devices such as an embedded tale but will advise the author if the chosen device drifts too far from the story's main plot or, worse yet, becomes a clichéd trope.

In a collection of poems or stories the developmental editor's guidance may be harder to discern, but if we examine a work such as Ted Hughes's 1971 poetry collection *Crow* we see the poems are unified by a crow that serves as the author's alter ego. More recently there's been debate among literary critics as to whether Jim Lewis's 2021 novel *Ghosts of New York* could be better classified as a collection of short stories since its only

unifying factors are the city itself and the reoccurring characters who appear at different times and places—I'd wager his editor debated that same question with Lewis.

Keeping the plot on course is one part of the developmental editor's jobs; another is character development. If an editor spots flat characters, they may ask that the author flesh them out, combine them with other minor characters, or eliminate them entirely. An author may get back a manuscript where they'll have to make the painful decision as to which of their "darlings" to throw overboard.

## The Port of Call

Once the manuscript has made it across the cyber sea and into the author's mailbox, they'll find fifteen to twenty pages—sometimes more, sometimes fewer—of commentary on suggested changes to improve the work. These changes may include combining or eliminating chapters or parts of chapters. As mentioned above, characters may have to be reimagined—a developmental editor may suggest that a minor character become a major player in the story or even the POV character. Or the editor may suggest a completely new setting. Returning to my own experience, I once submitted a rough draft to a developmental editor who suggested I change the time period of my novel from the American Civil War to the Reconstruction era "because there are already too many Civil War novels on the market." Five years later, that novel still languishes on my bookshelf in a three-ring binder.

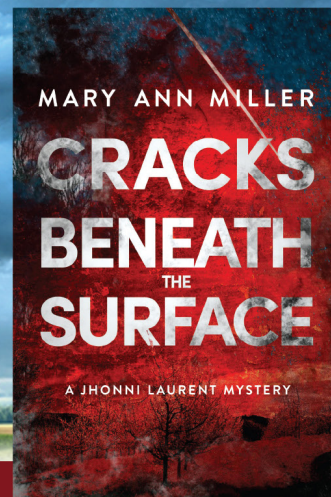
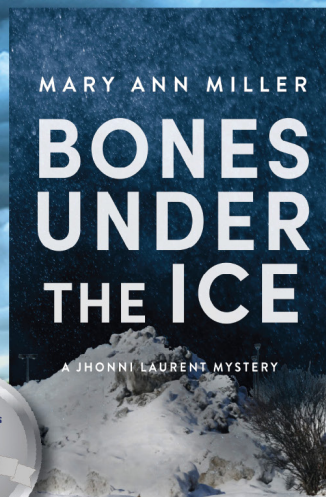
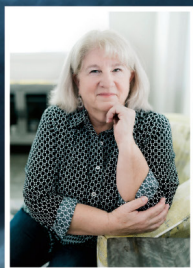
Although it may seem overwhelming when an author first reviews the extensive notes and suggestions provided by a developmental editor, they must be aware that what the editor has provided is a course through which the author can ride the waves to subsequent levels of editing and sail their work into its next port of call: an agent's desk where, hopefully, it won't sink to the bottom of the slush pile but dock on a publisher's desk and float to the top of the bestsellers list. 🌊

**Paul Iasevoli** is a writer, an editor, and a member of FWA's Board of Directors. [dashingediting.com](http://dashingediting.com)



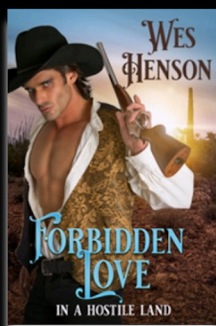
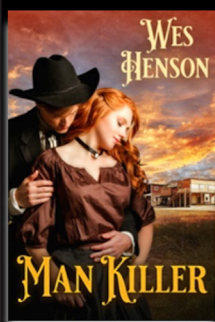
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MURDER IS RARE IN FARM COUNTRY



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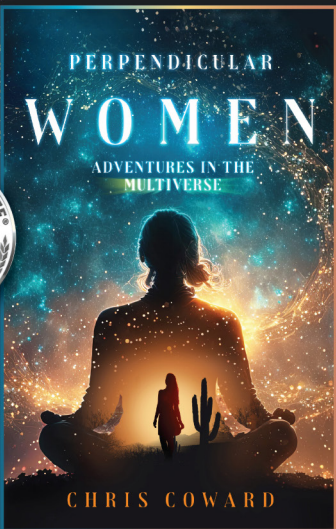


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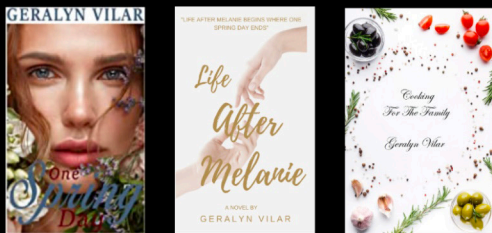




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—AJ Lewis, author of The Amalfi Mysteries

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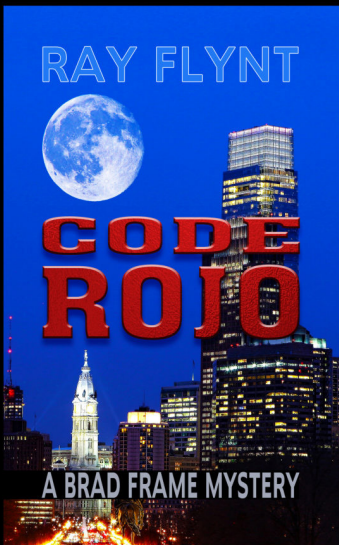



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# Are Writers Uniquely Vulnerable to Scams?

by Victoria Strauss

This is a question that sometimes comes up when I do interviews. Writer Beware has been in operation for more than 25 years, yet it's still so busy. There seem to be so many scams that target authors. Are writers somehow more vulnerable to fraud than other creatives?

In my opinion, no.

Writing scams aren't unique. There are similar frauds in every creative industry. Headshot scams for models. Talent agency scams for actors. Representation scams for illustrators. Pay-to-play venues for musicians and artists. They may not be as numerous as writing scams, but they are widespread, and they use the same tricks and techniques to lure and ensnare victims.

## WHY ARE THERE SO MANY WRITING SCAMS, THEN?

Because (again in my opinion) there are so many writers.

Other creative pursuits have boundaries and requirements that create bars to entry. Musicians need training, not to mention instruments. Actors and singers may have limited venues in which to practice their craft: there isn't a casting call around every corner. Painters and sculptors need often-costly materials. Models must conform to various standards of physical appearance—much broader these days than in the past, but still restrictive.

But writing: writing is just words. Everyone has those. If you can speak, you can write, and all you need to follow your impulse is an idea and a computer, or pen and paper if you prefer.

Whether you should or not is a different question. But the accessibility of writing, along with the universal human desire for self-expression, inspires vast numbers of people to create a story or a poem or a book. And what good is a story or a poem or a book without readers?

As recently as two decades ago, the difficulty of getting published presented the kind of limiting factor that exists in other creative pursuits. But while there are still considerable barriers for traditional publishing,

the digital revolution has created multiple publishing options that bypass the gatekeepers and make it possible for pretty much anyone to get their work out into the world.

The readers, though. That's the challenge. In an ocean of other authors, a sea of books and stories, how does your reader find you? With so many writers asking that same question, it's a ripe opportunity for scammers.

## ALL CREATIVES ARE VULNERABLE TO SCAMS

If the bar to the *practice* of writing is lower than for many other creative pursuits, the barriers to success and recognition are just as high. Anyone can write and publish a book, but far, far fewer manage to make a career of it. Where desire is strong and success is an outlier, scammers cluster at the gates—and that's true of all creative industries, not just writing.

Creatives' vulnerabilities aren't unique, but they are acute. Scammers set traps accordingly.

The lure of the shortcut.

Climbing the ladder of success is hard work. Scammers and opportunists purport to offer a way to succeed without putting in the labor, claiming they can cut through red tape, skip the middlemen, get you and your work directly to decisionmakers without the necessity of all the tedious steps and tasks you'd have to undertake on your own. Of course, such shortcuts don't exist (or if they do, very few have access to them). But creatives want them to, especially if they've been hitting walls on their own...which makes them vulnerable to false promises.

### *The lure of the giant payday.*

The creative industries are not, by and large, very lucrative (at least for the average creative). Most, even those with active careers, don't earn a lot of money. But media coverage of the big bucks outliers creates a distorted picture of the odds of financial success. Predators take full advantage, spinning tales of big money: We can make your book a bestseller! Enormous advances await! All you have to do is pay this fee/buy this service!





### *The lure of flattery.*

All creatives struggle at some point for acknowledgment and recognition. Trying to break in can be an especially lonely business. Scammers exploit these vulnerabilities: offering fulsome praise, claiming you're one of a select few, promising unique opportunities and incredible outcomes just for you. The validation is fake, but the need is real. If you've been banging your head against walls of indifference and rejection for a long time, just having someone pay attention can make your good sense fly out the window.

### *The lure of hidden knowledge.*

Creative industries are opaque: they don't like to expose their inner workings. This is less true than in the past—especially in publishing, where Very Online agents and editors freely offer all kinds of information and advice.

But it's still a problem, and scammers leverage that by purporting to possess "inside knowledge" that will dispel the mysteries and open a secret back door to success. Relatedly, they take advantage of many creatives' lack of experience to paint a false picture of how business is done, so that they can portray whatever scam they're selling as the way things really work.

## DEFENDING YOURSELF

It's tremendously important for creatives to fortify themselves with knowledge of their chosen field before diving into it.

For writers, that means taking the time to build some knowledge of publishing and self-publishing before trying to get published. Writer Beware hears from a lot of authors who figured they could just jump in and learn on the fly, and who got into trouble as a result. The more you know about how things should work, the more alert you'll be to bad or nonstandard practice when you encounter it. (This is especially important if you self-publish, because that's where the majority of scams are concentrated these days.)

But awareness is also key.

### *Be aware that scams exist.*

Yes, that's a truism (thank you, Captain Obvious). But if you don't know what threatens you, you don't know that you need to be on guard. Many of the first-time writers who contact me to report a scam fell into it because they didn't realize they had to be wary.

You don't have to acquire an encyclopedic knowledge of every possible variation of writer-focused fraud. Just

know that fraud is out there. This may help you to ask that one question, or listen to that one inner doubt, that could save you from being defrauded.

### *Be aware that you're vulnerable.*

As with all creative fields, building a writing career can include a lot of difficult, disappointing, and bruising experiences. Rejection, low sales, the struggle for access and exposure...these things take a toll. That's something scammers can exploit, no matter how smart you are, and no matter how prepared.

It isn't just creatives, either. Anyone can be vulnerable to a clever scam. If you're mindful of that, and acknowledge the ways in which you may be susceptible, you'll be better prepared to resist.

## LAST BUT DEFINITELY NOT LEAST: DON'T DESPAIR!

Writer Beware's mission is to track and report on writing scams, with the goal of educating writers on how to avoid them. The largest part of what I write for my blog, and share here on Writer Unboxed, comes from that viewpoint. I'm aware that this kind of advice can come across not as empowering, but as scary and overwhelming: scams are inevitable! There is no escape!

That isn't true, of course. Yes, the writing world is haunted by scams, but that doesn't mean you can't evade them. I'd urge you to read this essay not as a proclamation of unavoidable doom, but as the kind of warning you get before doing something that may be a little dangerous, and requires some reasonable caution, but is also intended to be fun. Common sense advice to keep in mind that shouldn't discourage you from doing, and enjoying, the fun thing. ✎

*This article originally appeared on [writerunboxed.com/](http://writerunboxed.com/) and is reprinted here with permission.*

**[writerbeware.blog](http://writerbeware.blog)**  
**[victoriastrauss.com](http://victoriastrauss.com)**

**Victoria Strauss** is the author of nine novels for adults and young adults, including the Way of Arata epic fantasy duology (*The Burning Land* and *The Awakened City*) and *Passion Blue* and *Color Song*, a historical duology for teens. She's also co-founder, with Ann Crispin, of Writer Beware, a publishing industry watchdog group sponsored by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association (SFWA) that provides information and warnings about the many scams, schemes, and pitfalls that threaten writers.







# Reading in Your Own Genre

by Carol Saller

Somehow I managed to get myself into judging another literary contest. I think I was seduced by the chance to receive several dozen middle-grade novels in the mail and see what kind of books are new to the market this year. All for free! If you don't count about 100 unpaid hours of my time.

I'm a harsh critic. I dislike most books. And I didn't know in advance that the authors will receive an unedited copy of my comments. That means I have to be nice. I have to say something encouraging to every writer. I must wrap my criticisms in gentle phrases. I don't get to say "This might be the dumbest book I ever read," or "This writer is seriously disturbed."

This makes my task nearly unbearable. When it comes to criticism, I myself have abnormally thick skin, but many writers can't take it. They cry.

**Thankfully**, so far, there has been something good about almost all of the books. Some are hilarious, even if nothing happens. Others have exciting action scenes, even if the characters are shallow. In one, I groaned when I saw that the narrator was a talking animal—often a bad sign—but that book has been one of my favorites.

**The main problem** with most of the books, the reason they aren't top-tier, is that they were published without enough developmental editing. I'm not referring to typos and errors in grammar and punctuation. Almost all are reasonably clean. But they suffer from structural issues. The most common.\*

- Too long a delay getting off the ground. If readers don't care within the first pages, they'll stop reading.

- Not enough character development and emotional engagement. Instead, such books (usually fantasy) feature one escapade after another until it's time for the book to end. The worst ones end with "To be continued."
- Extremely unlikely motivations that could have been improved with more thought.
- Lazy use of middle-grade tropes without a fresh twist: waking up on one's birthday, starting in a new town and school, a new house that might be haunted, being shy or weird and not having any friends, suffering a bully.
- Too much granular description. "He walked to the door, turned the knob, and swung it open." That's fine if someone's entering a haunted house, but maddening if they're just getting ready for bed.
- Stilted dialogue for the purpose of informing the reader. "You know we go to Arizona every year to be with Aunt Julie for Christmas."
- Books with a heavy-handed moral lesson. "Gosh, Mom! I guess it really is OK to be different."
- Feeble attempts to add heart or poignancy by asserting a deep personal relationship instead of thoughtfully developing it. It's a form of "telling instead of showing."

I'm sure there are more, but those are the ones I see most in the books I'm reading now.

Here's the kicker: Searching for specks in other people's books causes me to notice logs in my own.\*\* I'm guilty of some of these sins myself! Reading middle-grade novels helps me identify them.





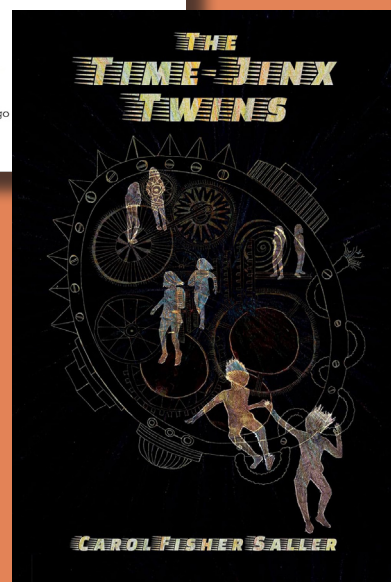
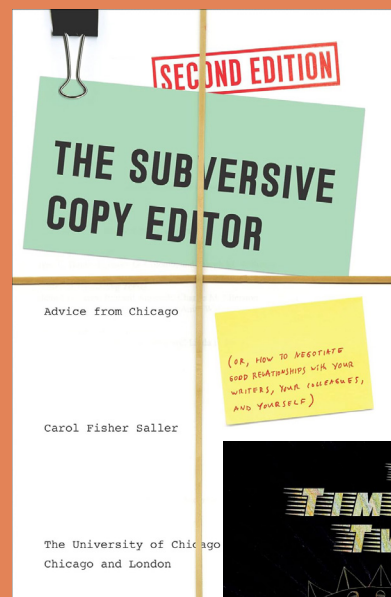
**And finally,** I get to the point. I always say that my best advice to writers is to read 100 books in your chosen genre before you try to write one yourself. Ideally, it will be a mix of classics, award winners, and the latest popular titles.

With that effort, you can hardly avoid absorbing the themes and tropes and rhythms that appeal to your readers. Even if you can't articulate them, they get into your bones. And assuming you're writing the kind of book you love to read, it's not even work.

- \* Don't worry: I made up the examples.
- \*\* Do biblical allusions work in mixed metaphors these days?

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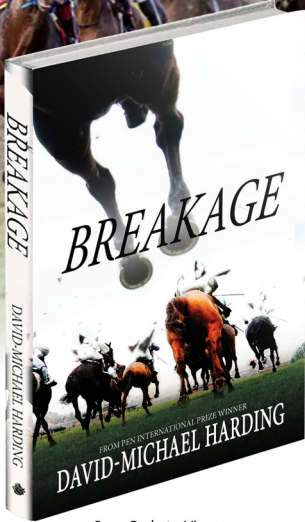
**Carol Saller** is an author and a contributing editor to *The Chicago Manual of Style* and author of *The Subversive Copy Editor*. Find her past blog posts online at [Writer, Editor, Helper.subversivecopyeditor.com/blog/](http://Writer, Editor, Helper.subversivecopyeditor.com/blog/)



Carol Saller's new middle-grade novel is *The Time-Jinx Twins* (April 2025), which *Publishers Weekly Booklife* calls a "clever, captivating time-travel adventure." [carolsaller.com/the-time-jinx-twins.html](http://carolsaller.com/the-time-jinx-twins.html)

Honors for her children's books include Kirkus Reviews Best, Horn Book Recommended Verse, and the Carl Sandburg Award for Children's Literature (for *The Bridge Dancers*). In 2024, Saller received the Midland Authors Award for Children's Fiction for her middle-grade mystery *Maddie's Ghost*.





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Donnie Chariot is the most gifted thoroughbred horse racing handicapper in the country. He single-handedly sets the morning betting lines across the country.

But when early onset Alzheimer's causes his unique gift to fail him, mobsters from Manhattan to Las Vegas aren't happy. Chariot needs his estranged daughter to help him, but their rocky past keeps them apart.


When Donnie's granddaughter is kidnapped to force his daughter into the game, he controls everyone. Until he doesn't. His mind failing, his daughter getting wise, and wiseguys wiser still, it's a race to save a family before the momentum of the past destroys their future.

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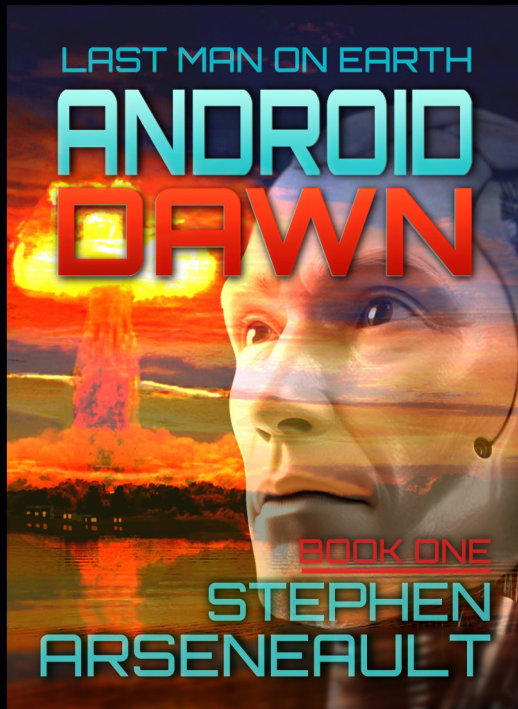
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# How to Spot Toxic Feedback: 7 Signs That the Writing Advice You're Getting May Do More Harm Than Good

by Susan DeFreitas

The path to publication with your debut novel is seldom straightforward, but in my case, it was especially fraught—in part because I received a lot of feedback that wasn't all that helpful, from people who didn't understand what I was trying to achieve.

If you suspect you've been subject to this sort of feedback, first let me say this: you are not crazy, and the people who have given you this advice are not necessarily malicious.

But if you recognize the following characteristics in the critiques offered to you by peers, mentors, editors, or book coaches, it may not just be inept—it may, in fact, be toxic.

## 1. Failure to Understand Your Intent

My debut novel is about three college roommates, all of whom are involved in the fight to save a local river, and all of whom are seduced by the same young man, who may or may not be an undercover agent.

Based in part on real events, *Hot Season* tackles themes like drought, wildfire, and water in the West, and as such, it is an inherently political book.

But some of my peers in graduate school seemed to consider these themes a big risk—one that might keep me from getting published. One actually wondered aloud if political fiction could be good.

These people did not read the sort of books I read, so they lacked a sense of the sort of authors I was in conversation with—authors like Barbara Kingsolver, Lydia Millet, and Ed Abbey. Simply put, these people were not the right readers for my book.

I've seen the same thing in critique groups: A literary writer unfamiliar with the conventions of genre will advocate for geeky details to be cut. A reader who enjoys thrillers will encourage the author to play up a cloak-

and-dagger angle, when what that author intended was something more along the lines of existential dread.

This is not to say you should only share your work with people who share your tastes—only that you should not share your work with people who are unaware of their own biases.

## 2. Projection of Personal Issues

Have a critique group partner who's always advocating for the first-person POV? Chances are, he struggles with the third person.

Notice that someone in your workshop always wants to know more about a secondary character? You may have noticed that those sorts of characters in her work are often more interesting than her protagonists.

Even mentors are not immune. In grad school, one of my instructors questioned whether a section of my novel set in Portland, Oregon, should be moved to another city. I mean, punks in Portland—so cliché! Why not Cincinnati?

Never mind the fact that I have never been to Cincinnati. Or that—see above—my novel is based on real events, which did not occur there.

In this case, I have to assume that this mentor, as an author, sometimes selects settings for her stories at random, based on ideas she has about them—ideas that she has, in the past, found it useful to interrogate.

Which is fine, but again, that's not my issue, nor did her feedback honor the intent of my work.

## 3. Inappropriately Personal Feedback

In the creative writing workshop, we critique the work, not the author. But unhealthy personal dynamics can lead to feedback that is useless at best and toxic at worst.





I'm talking about the couple that is ostensibly critiquing either other's work but is, in reality, having a very public argument—the member of the workshop who's constantly deriding your work as derivative, though this isn't an opinion that seems to be shared by anyone else.

One particularly pernicious example, to my mind, occurs when a male workshop mentor uses his feedback to pursue a female student—or to psychoanalyze her. (I'm stating this in gendered terms because I have never seen its reverse, though no doubt that occurs as well.)

#### 4. Unprofessional Tone

One freelance editor I hired used multiple exclamation points to let me know that my story was boring and my characters dumb (he referred to one as a “complete airhead”). He also stated that my novel would have to abandon its multiple points of view in favor of that of a single character (apparently, the only one he could stand).

This man is a professional instructor at the graduate level, in addition to being a professional editor. Honestly, I have no idea how he's still employed.

This is not to say that my plot or my characters didn't need work (that was why I had hired an editor). But when I sent him my book, I was not consenting to have it disparaged or degraded, and when you share your work, neither should you—no matter how many publishing credits a mentor or publishing professional may have to his name.

With an early draft, more often than not, the truth hurts. But there's absolutely no reason it can't be related in a professional and courteous manner.

#### 5. By the Book

The next editor I worked with took a different approach. In response to the next draft of my book, she wrote, “It would be helpful to draw a simple outline: Conflict; Plot point 1; Plot point 2; Plot point 3; Resolution of initial conflict.”

Wow, this whole writing thing was so much easier than I had imagined! (Now, why was I still paying off

those student loans?)

Alexander Pope said, “a little learning is a dangerous thing,” and the study of creative writing is no exception. Study screenwriting and you'll look at every novel through the lens of the three-act structure; get turned on to *The Hero's Journey* and you'll see every story as a descent to subconscious depths; figure out how broadly applicable Freitag's Pyramid is, and for a while, you'll think you've got this thing called fiction figured.

Years later, as a freelance editor myself, I see this editor for what she was, despite her position with a respected agency: a rookie.

Because as any experienced editor knows, the novel is far too interesting an art form to completely conform to any one system (especially one that's taught in freshman comp).

#### 6. Not Thinking It Through

To her credit, the same editor pointed out that the resolution of my novel's main conflict came too early, which was something I'd suspected. But her suggested fix? Just switch the chapters around. Like that wouldn't pose any problems for the story whatsoever.

The point of hiring an editor or book coach is not just to have someone tell you your manuscript is a mess—it's to have someone to help you think through the fixes and come up with one (or more) that's viable. This entails thinking through the multitude of ripple effects that any major change would entail and squaring them with the perceived intent of the book.

Which (as the book coach Lisa Cron points out) is hard work, on a purely cognitive level. But anyone who cannot do it has no business offering professional developmental feedback.

#### 7. Conflating the Problem with the Fix

The bestselling fantasy author Neil Gaiman once said, “Remember: when people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong.”

This is not to say you should only share your work with people who share your tastes—only that you should not share your work with people who are unaware of their own biases.





As a freelance editor, I'd like to think that my recommended fixes are right more often than nos. But as an author, I know that the problems and the fixes can't be so conflated in my feedback that my client (or critique group partner) can't tell one from the other.

Ultimately, only the author can know what's right for her work.

Holding true to my own internal compass is what led me to persevere with my novel in the face of the toxic feedback I received—to hold true to a vision that, ultimately, my readers embraced.

Consider: If I had taken out the descriptions of the high-desert landscape that bored fans of domestic dramas, would I have won an award for Best Fiction of the Mountain-West? If I had scaled back the political themes in my work, would readers have compared my work to that of Barbara Kingsolver and Margaret Atwood?

If I had written a traditional novel, with one central point of view—rather than the POVs of multiple female characters—would that novel have been hailed for its complexity as a work of feminist fiction?

Take your knocks as a writer, but don't lose sight of your vision. Keep writing for the person who loves what you love, who sees what you see, feels what you feel. Keep reaching for the specificity that makes you who you are as an author, even as you improve your craft.

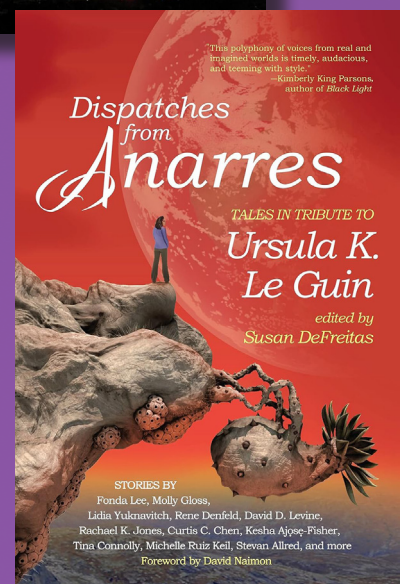
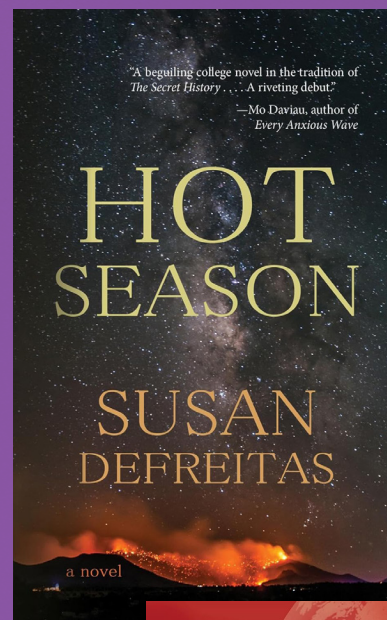
Because, ultimately, that's what will distinguish you in an overcrowded market.

Moreover, remember that you're on an extraordinary journey, of a very personal type. You owe it to yourself (and to your work) to find companions who are worthy of your trust. ✨

*This article originally appeared on [janefriedman.com/blog](http://janefriedman.com/blog) and is reprinted here with permission.*

**Susan DeFreitas** is the author of the novel *Hot Season*, which won a Gold IPPY Award, and the editor of *Dispatches from Anarres*, an anthology of short fiction in tribute to Ursula K. Le Guin. Her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have been featured in the *Writer's Chronicle*, *Huffington Post*, *Utne Reader*, *Story magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Portland Monthly*, and *High Desert Journal*, along with many other journals and anthologies.

An American of Indo-Guyanese descent, she divided her time between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Portland, Oregon, and served as an independent editor and book coach since 2009.



Shortly before publication we learned that Susan DeFreitas recently died from cancer. She will be remembered by many as a generous and valued contributor to the writing community.





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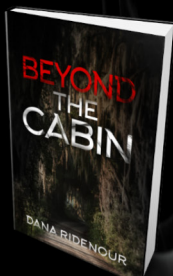


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# PARAGRAPHS & STANZAS



## The Fire

Lynn Bechdolt

On a brisk, dark southern Virginia evening in November, I sat down to supper when my pup begged to go out. We stepped out the door and were startled by a ten-foot blaze lighting up the bottom of my neighbor's yard. Even the dog barked. Was anybody tending it?

All of us on our street had backyards that sloped down to a steep ravine of trees, tinder-dry leaves, and brush, the perfect mix for a wildfire. The lights were on at my new neighbor's house. When I knocked on her front door, there was no answer—none at the back door either. From there, I could see that no one was tending the fire that was greedily devouring anything around it.

For the first time in my life, I called 911. "So, it's a brush fire," the operator said.

"Yes, but it's a couple of *acres* full of wild woods. The whole thing could go!"

My neighbor Doug, who had heard the call go out, rushed outside.

I pointed. "There's a fire down there, and nobody's home here. A firetruck is coming."

Doug's mouth dropped open when he saw the flames. "Those boys was down there a little while ago. They musta done it," he said.

A mother with two teenage boys lived on the other side of Doug. Frequently, the boys did thoughtless things while their mother was working. Once, they broke a neighbor's car window playing baseball.

Another neighbor, Mike, joined us. The burn was twice as big, lighting up the houses on either side. Mike found a garden hose and turned on the water, but a fifty-foot hose was too short. The blaze, stretching thirty feet wide, now extended down into the gully.

A small firetruck rolled up. The driver looked at the flames and said, "I'll go around and come up from below." He meant two blocks down.

"You can't," I replied. "It's just dense woods in a steep area. There's no path, this is it."

My neighbors guided the firetruck driver between the houses into the backyard. The hose from that truck wasn't long enough, either. But now, volunteer firemen were arriving, striding down the slope into the heat. One pulled an extra-long hose down to the flames, and two more carried leaf blowers. Another pulled rakes off the truck, took one, and descended into the inferno.

I met my new neighbor while we stood in her backyard. She didn't answer her door, she said, because she had been visiting Doug and his wife. We stood there helplessly watching the blaze consume half of the ravine. I wondered about the huge tree that fell a year ago. Was it dry enough to burn?

Then, I noticed sparks and burning leaves fly up from the fire and drift gently downhill above the wild area behind my house. Underneath lay summer's dead weeds, calf-deep leaf piles, and another oak tree that fell two years ago. The flaming bits died out before they drifted far. Still, the firemen worked under them to be sure.

My neighbors and I were mesmerized as the volunteers raked, cleared a fire line, and directed the hose. Within an hour, the men had extinguished the blaze, and we shivering watchers went home relieved.

At last, I sat down to eat my reheated meal. How lucky we were that the dog wanted out when she did. Another five or ten unattended minutes could have made a big difference.

Afterward, the story spread through the neighborhood that the black, teenage boys were responsible. But I noticed before the fire started that my new neighbor's father had taken some flattened boxes to the bottom of the yard where the blaze originated. Days later, he was again carrying cut-up cardboard boxes down the hill when his daughter called him to bring them up and burn them in the brick barbecue pit. Ah, it was likely not the teens who had set the fire, but everybody blamed the boys who weren't even home that evening. ❧

Lynn Bechdolt is a retired pastor whose red Boston terrier barked at the fire.





## Do I Know You?

Ashley Laubinger

Her barren eyes were wide and dry, and her frozen expression emotionless. A growing, high-pitched ringing grew in her ears as life began the process of blowing the world out.

Rose is a timid, cynical girl. Her curly, dark, auburn hair engulfs her frame of pale skin and jade eyes. She lives in a small village alongside her parents and cat named Mew. Once a hopeful and creative child, she grew less curious as she got older. With age, she discovered life's unsettling and unnatural tone and how once special things can slowly lose their spark, or end. Between lifeless buildings, disloyal relationships, and the endless routine of schoolwork, she craved more. Constantly observing and interpreting her dull surroundings, she volleyed between resisting and accepting the truth that the hollowness of life cannot be filled alone.

Always dreaming of finding love, Rose found herself alone most of the time. Since middle school, her love interests have been frequent, but no matter how hard she tries or who it is, things never work out. No explanation: the flame of her relationships just blows out from erratic, unpredictable winds. After years of poor luck, she wondered if she simply was not cut out for love and the possibility that she alone was enough.

A romantic, intrigued by antiques, old-fashioned movies and music, Rose's style is nostalgic and heartfelt. Some may call her "an old soul". Her rare fascinations cause her to feel disconnected from the modern world, also pushing her to find happiness alone. Thinking back on once was, her record muffles, and her eyes grow heavy from reading. Once drifted, Rose waltzes into a private world of her own, one that no one else can find.

While she tunes out her surroundings, Rose finds herself floating onto a luscious patch of emerald grass. Regardless of moonbeams or sparkles from the sun, a golden hand-held candle illuminates alongside her. Delicate and lively; each flicker like a heartbeat she would do anything to protect. Her eyes fluttered closed bring a sense of great peace, yet she rises to whimsically glide toward what awaits her. Passing enchanted wildflowers and innocent critters, she soon reaches a moss-veiled stone footbridge. Below her, the stream gracefully glides against smooth stones and singing toads. Through the warm haze ahead, her destiny

welcomes her. A warm, cobblestone cottage where she can defrost and hibernate, safe from the bitter world.

Adorned with a marble bird bath, flower gardens, fruit trees, and fairytale white and red mushrooms, the cottage is imperfect bliss, clearly aged and constructed with intent. Mesmerized, she reaches for the golden doorknob to explore her pending dream with the candle in her contrary hand. As she turns the knob, a slight sense of unease captures her spirit, and she looks over her shoulder. A thick, bustling wind drapes over her, and then she smells a charred, heavy odor of ash. Looking at the candle, a creeping, swirling smog mocks her. Her heart pounds, then stops. Her warmth begins to slip away. She curses herself for again believing the joy would last for eternity. She feels painfully unable to control her hope or reality. As the candle vanished, she felt her vibrancy drain again and her reluctant return to a soulless and desolate world.

After experiencing this same tragedy countless times, Rose felt hopeless and unable to change the outcome no matter how hard or how much she tried. Her magical world where she found happiness kept slipping away and sadly it became more and more difficult to find it again.

Suddenly, with the light from a firefly, Rose's eyes were opened amidst the darkness. She learned she had been trying so hard to preserve her independence she couldn't see that what she actually needed was help from others. Together, keeping the candle aflame and relentless winds calmed. You see, for Rose, learning the lesson that protecting the fragile flame alone would fail time and time again, taught her patience. Something she's always lacked and needed to find true love, friendship and happiness. 🦋



**Ashley Laubinger,**  
a high school junior,  
writes short stories and  
is an award-winning poet.





## // Distant Voice Mary Ellen Orvis

Do I know you?  
Your fragile voice, now frail,  
fades as you fall asleep  
midsentence on the phone.  
Your echoing words remind me  
I fell in love with your elusive smile,  
strong spirit, wild ways.

Now I hear a melody of mistakes,  
a chorus of poor choices  
made many years ago,  
ending in cacophonous  
fragmentary fugues  
wearing out my old ears and heart,  
from a voice I once knew, but lost.

**Mary Ellen Orvis** lives in Ponte Vedra,  
where she enjoys reading and writing.

“

Poetry might be defined as the  
clear expression of mixed feelings.

**W.H. AUDEN**





## Mysterium Tremendum

Robin Pullen

Do I know you?

I saw her before I saw her, peppered colored dots between the wipers' backforth beat. A Toyota's B-flat blare punctuates the crimson brake light inertia. Black marker sliced onto torn cardboard. Made a Poor Choice.

I wait eleven cars behind her. Ten. A puddle's splash lightly soaks my ankle, brake pedal, car mat. Owned by a schoolteacher. Next to me a wearywise driver pounds her fist at ten and two. Six cars in front of her now. Her sign flops slightly, letters smeared, flyaway auburn strands whip unprotected under her cardboard makeshift shelter. A Honda splatters past her beseeching hollow stare. Blue jeans. Gnarled beige sweater. Reeboks. She could be anyone. She could be me. I look at her through my glary rolled up window. She mouths "please."

She's just a girl. I'm just twenty-seven inside. I wonder if her twenty-year-old self is already cynical, has dismissed having a child, finding true love, reconciling who she is with who she wants to be. I can't help but think what her mother would say if she saw her now. No one to turn to—doesn't have anyone. But herself. Maybe she doesn't even have her. Flamingo. One legged. Hiding behind her sign.

I motion for her to get in. A commercial pause. Nubile tan peeks above her belt-looped waistband. Bunchy left pocket. A bomb revolver firearm, maybe a comb. She's long. Her stickly matchstick legs crunch up under her. I press the leather-look seat lever back to give her more room. She looks behind her uneasily. Scrunches in.

"Faster. Please."

Her words are flat, even, devoid of AngerRagePassion, or PolitenessReliefPain. I'm not here for her wishes. Does she expect me to whisk her away, solve her problems, make it go away. She probably watched SnowWhiteCinderellaSleepingBeauty. The story ends with the prince's kiss. I am not her happily ever after.

"He saw us."

A high speed chase. A crash. A battalion of thugs circular saw the lock right off the door. Maybe I can just push her back into traffic. I can press redial and tell my nine o'clock that I'm not going to make it, that she will not expound upon Art while I passively take notes as if what she says has any meaning.

"Do you believe in God?"

She asks if there could be a Deity, a Being, a Plan that will answer why I took the chance, why she made her choice, why she makes her poor choice again.

"No," I calmly tell her. "There is no God."

"When I ran from him, I didn't call anyone. He didn't like me talking to all those people, so there was no one to call now. All my tips. Billy found my folded tens and it wasn't fair that he thinks he could just take what is mine. Just 'cause you make poor choices doesn't mean you're stupid."

"The important thing is you have a plan." That's what I said last year when I salvaged the Impressionist print from my marriage, that I carefully wrapped in our mortgaged garage that never knew tricycles but housed shiny power tools that he shoved me into once, but it's not like it's going to happen again.

"But he didn't hit you."

"No. Not in that way."

"I'm not going to make poor choices anymore," She intently twists a thin silver band from off her fourth finger and throws that, too, out the streaked front window. "Take care of yourself, Billy," she whispers.

Why, because ... because he'll change ... because this time it'll be different...

She lights a cigarette and offers it to me. I shake my head. I don't smoke. I reach for it anyway.

"I'm not really sure I believe in a Higher Power, but I sure as hell believe in myself."

"You can't move back. Can you?"

"I won't."

Though I couldn't be certain of anything that was to follow, I felt surer and safer than I had in perhaps all of my adult life.

The rain pounded down again unexpectedly. And though neither one of us had thought to take an umbrella, neither of us minded in the least getting wet. ☔

Playwright/author **Robin Pullen's** *Caro's Comet* is at the MOSH, Cummer, and England's Herschel Museum.







## Panic Attack

Rob Rogers

“Do I know you?” I mumble in terror, turning to face the shadow lying beside me, my mind warped with paranoia.

“I should hope so, this is my bed.”

In fairness, I don’t usually sleep in my wife’s bed. Decades of insomnia and apnea have afforded me the king-sized bed in the master; she prefers the guest room anyway. But this was not an ordinary night. For the fourth time in our marriage—but the fourth time in as many months—I’ve lost my mind. Hours of raving at break-neck speed about not being loved and never getting better have driven our daughter to the safety of a friend’s house on a school night. And apparently the nightmare isn’t over.

Shit, this wasn’t all a bad dream.

The worst of it began twelve hours ago. A stark realization that I had misunderstood anger toward a friend spared me from dispatching a destructive email moments before I hit “Send.” Proud of my epiphany, I composed a new email with an alternative ending and presented both drafts to a wife distracted by work and family responsibilities when she arrived home, asking rhetorically which one worked better. Her split second of hesitation, surely aggravated by my weeks of melancholy and depleted sleep, triggered an explosion of despair, racing thoughts, and uninterruptable ranting. Being misunderstood has apparently become the spark to my gas leak.

Several hours of desperation ensued. The highlight was an impulsive escape to a neighborhood park, punctuated after her pursuit by suicidal insinuations and sobs of, “If you don’t understand me, no one ever will.” I was eventually persuaded to bring the spectacle back home, where the inferno continued through the evening on our back patio. Depression is diabolical in its deception. I just could not be convinced that hope was buried somewhere beneath my despondency.

After several more hours, exhaustion began sedating the hysteria. By then my daughter had been discretely evacuated to higher ground. But paralyzed by a burning desire to find a way to make it end, my mind kept returning to memories of an ineffective and irreversible solution that had failed before. She does not need to hear any more about that. We would table that notion for another day, comforting as it may be.

When fatigue finally unshackled the long-awaited flood of tears, the hope of sleep seemed within reach. A bottle of

wine was administered to tranquilize the nerves, and my caretaker coaxed me to sleep in her bed, realizing she would be sacrificing her own rest. Hours later I finally succumbed. Perhaps an hour later I awoke. The bedside clock flashes 4:30.

This time it’s different. In recent weeks, my pre-dawn stirrings have been cursed by restless boredom and an inability to stop dwelling on negative thoughts. Now I am frightened. Within the week I would learn that this was an adverse reaction to otherwise helpful medication, what my books have described as a switch to fight-or-flight mode. My brain is deactivating all systems other than those needed for primitive survival, including the ability to experience pleasure. And the ability to calm myself. I’m hyper attentive, my pulse racing and my muscles contracting. Sensitive to sound, I’m startled by every creak in the bed. Within the week this would be rectified by mood-stabilizing medication, but I don’t know that yet.

Worst of all, my wife of nearly eighteen years seems strange, and not to be trusted. What will she tell my therapist tomorrow morning? Will I be taken from my daughter and sent to residential treatment? Before the year’s end, I would learn during partial hospitalization that these were cognitive distortions, to be challenged with facts. The medications would be supplemented with box breathing and other techniques to slow the racing thoughts and regain control. I would improve slowly and return to a happy life. But for now, I’m stuck in the dark, crippled by fear, and guilt-ridden about the torment I’ve inflicted on the woman lying beside me. The seconds pass like hours. But there’s nothing to do but bear it.

So, we both roll toward opposite walls, exhale deeply, and resume the charade of feigning sleep. ❀



Rob Rogers is an author and attorney from Winter Garden, Florida.



## // Do I Know You

Ralf Thompson

Do I know you?  
Do I see you?  
Do I hear you?  
Only if I must.  
You exist apart from me,  
And I don't care.

A face in shadow,  
Hungry, lonely,  
Craving something  
Just to know  
That you're alive.  
And I don't care.

Night encroaches,  
Cold, embracing.  
Darkness takes you.  
Disintegration,  
You cease to be.  
And I don't care.

No more anguish.  
No more anger.  
No more sorrow.  
Now there's nothing  
Left of you.  
And I don't care.

**Ralf Thompson** is a Florida native  
who lives in Sun City Center.

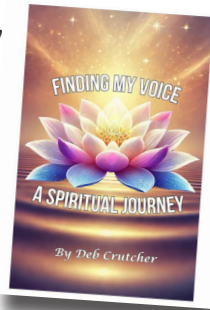




# Celebrations!

Where we shine a spotlight on our members & cheer their accomplishments!

*Finding My Voice—A Spiritual Journey* by **Deb Crutcher** blends her memoir and self-help. Deb ran through life, rushing ahead and jumping off cliffs without looking. She ignored her needs in her effort to please everyone, pushing resentment, fear, and regrets deep inside. But nothing stays hidden forever. Deb's story tells how she found the courage and determination to peel back the layers of spirituality and finally capture her fleeting authentic voice. This book is a valuable resource filled with detailed techniques, wisdom, and guidance for anyone new or experienced on the path of a spiritual lifestyle. Available on Amazon.



**Monica Fernandes** has released her highly anticipated memoir, *Catching the One: The Misadventures of Online Dating*, a humorous and heartfelt journey through the world of online dating post-divorce. With a mix of wit and wisdom, Monica shares her personal experiences of heartbreak, resilience, and the unexpected life lessons that arise from dating in today's world. Early reviews have been overwhelmingly positive, with readers calling it "unputdownable." *Catching the One* is available for purchase on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and [walmart.com](http://walmart.com). For updates and more information, visit [monicawriter.com](http://monicawriter.com).



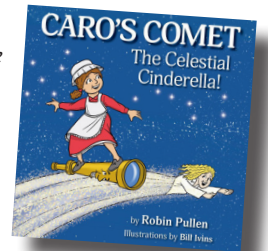
**Cathy Fyock** announces her new writing podcast and challenge! Are you looking for a new way to jumpstart your writing for 2025? Join Cathy Fyock for her new podcast airing each weekday January 13 - April 4. In this super-short podcast, she offers a writing tip and a writing prompt and gives you time to write a short post. She invites you to post your writing on LinkedIn with the hashtag #CCCCoachCathy to provide accountability. The person with the most posts will win a prize! Check out the trailer here: Apple Podcast, Spotify, iHeartRadio, Amazon Music, and [feeds](https://www.feedspot.com). [resonaterecordings.com/creating-content-with-cathy-fyock](https://resonaterecordings.com/creating-content-with-cathy-fyock)



**Richard Gartee** announces that his publisher has just released audio book editions of his humorous, RPLA-winning Ragtime Dudes trilogy. These are the first of Gartee's eight paperback novels to be produced as audio books. The audio books are now available from the Google Play Store, with other platforms to follow. The titles are: *Ragtime Dudes at the World's Fair*, *Ragtime Dudes in a Thin Place*, and *Ragtime Dudes Meet a Paris Flapper*. Links to the audio books can be found on his website, [gartee.com](http://gartee.com) or searched for on Google Play.

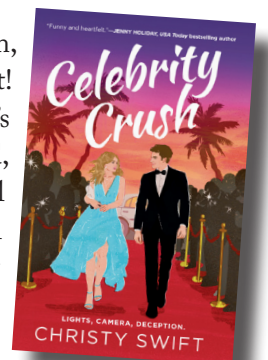


**Robin Pullen's** *Caro's Comet, The Celestial Cinderella* was at The London Book Fair, March 11-13. The musical, which earned semifinalist in 2024's Eugene O'Neill national musical competition, is now published by Plays for New Audiences.



Next up, families can learn more about Caroline Herschel, the first female to discover a comet, at the MOSH Museum's "Kids in Space" program! *Caro's Comet*, the illustrated picture book, is available at the Mosh Planetarium, Cummer Museum, and Herschel Museum in England. Read more at: [pullenplaywright.com](http://pullenplaywright.com), [linktr.ee/robinpullen](https://linktr.ee/robinpullen), and [playsfornewaudiences.org](http://playsfornewaudiences.org).

**Christy Swift's** debut romcom, *Celebrity Crush*, is now out! Thirteen years after Emmy Ellison's Hollywood dreams were crushed, she skyrockets to fame when a viral poll reveals her debut romance novel was inspired by her real celebrity crush. As a film adaptation is fast-tracked with her crush cast as the lead, Emmy finds herself living her ultimate fantasy. Meanwhile, her crush hopes the project will nullify some bad press. As romance blooms, Emmy struggles with a secret—she included a deeply painful moment from his past in her novel. When he finds out, it's bound to ruin their Hollywood ending.



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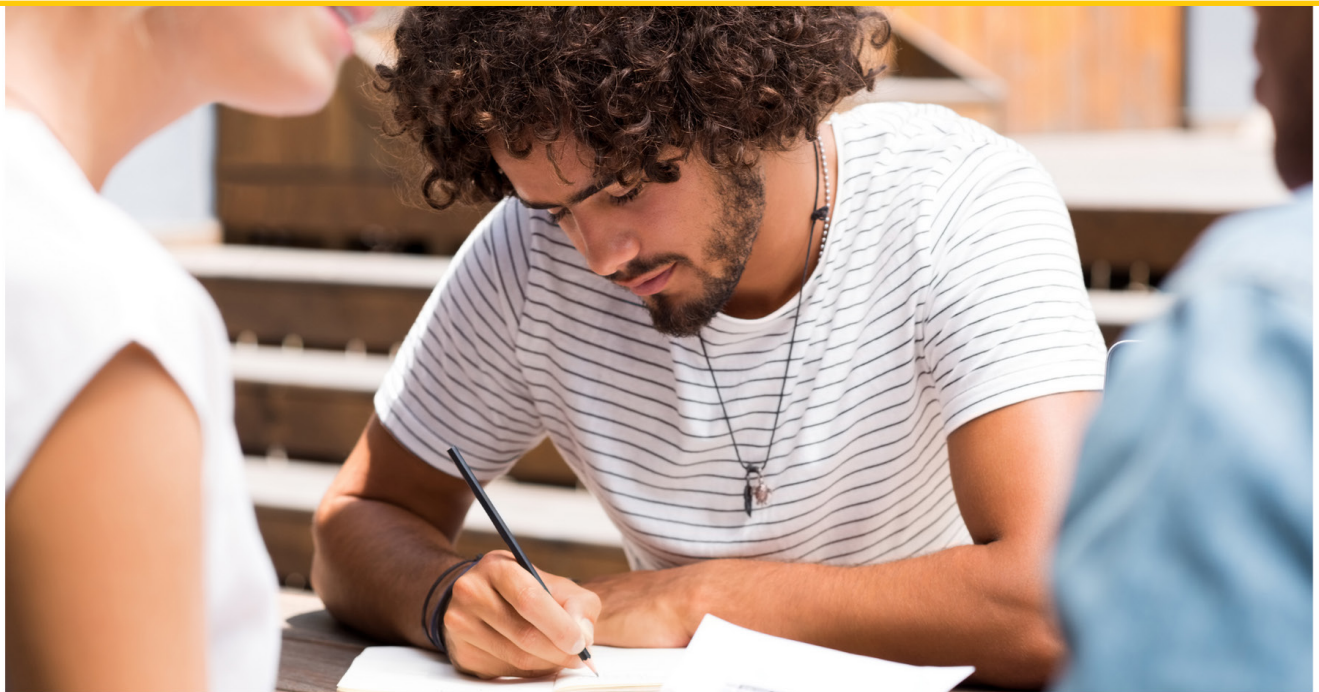


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