

# The Florida Writer

AUGUST 2025 • VOLUME 19, NUMBER 4

3 Little Words That  
Will Unlock Your  
Revision

No Business Cards  
Required: Reimagining  
Networking Events

To Avoid Rejection,  
Take the Writer Out of  
the Story







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# The Florida Writer

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Florida spiny lobster in ocean



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# 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*

### Prompts & Deadlines

- **October 2025 Issue** – Deadline: September 1, 2025  
Prompt: No prompt. Submit your best work and be sure to follow the submission requirements.
- **December 2025 Issue** – Deadline: November 1, 2025  
Prompt: A message written by one person, answered years later by the recipient





# Who Should You Listen To?

Mary Ann de Stefano  
Editor

There is no shortage of advice for writers. Some of it is worth listening to, and some of it is not. Much of it conflicts. So who should you listen to?

Awhile back, I read a short story for a client. Within my evaluation, I told her I thought she had written past the true ending of the story.

"That's funny, she said, "my husband told me to he wanted 'more' at the end."

I braced myself for the frustrated reaction of a writer who had received conflicting advice.

But then she said, "That just tells me there's a problem with the ending."

Smart writer! She listened to both of us. She didn't automatically discard our advice, but she didn't automatically accept it, either. She didn't hear what was said as a negative or an order; she saw it as something to ponder. "That just tells me there's a problem with the ending."

She processed our advice thoughtfully and made her own decision about what to do while she worked on her revisions. Eventually, she developed the story into a novella.

Once, after a workshop group led by a well-published writer, I complained to him about how the group had told me I should delete part of my story because it was totally unrealistic. But the scene was taken from real life. How could it possibly be unbelievable if it had actually happened? He pointed to other parts of my story, an image here and there, things I had made up. They had surrounded the scene and undercut it, making it unbelievable.

From this mentor, I learned that often feedback on writing will be wrong about the fix, but right about where in the work the problem lies. It is not an easy lesson to put into practice, so sometimes I remind myself of another workshop session when he sat behind the other writers as they critiqued my work, silently mouthing "don't listen to them" as they offered their "solutions."

Some types of advice send up red flags for me. One is the pie-in-the-sky advice. This promises that if only you buy this workshop, book, software, or service you can have it all, quickly and easily. Five steps to sure success! The fact is, writing is a complex task. Writing may be easy, but writing well is difficult. Like learning to play a musical instrument, it takes practice to refine your skills. Listen to the pros, they will tell you this: the challenges inherent in the writing process never go away. You'll always be learning and raising the bar for success.

The other red flag for me is the "never" advice. In an online forum, I watched someone rail against comma splices and say we should "never" use them, even after others shared about how they can be used to create rhythm and even after being shown many examples of their use in great literature. Punctuation is a tool that serves the written word. We are not in service to punctuation. You are free to break the so-called rules. Great writers certainly have. Just do it consciously for effect, not out of ignorance, and do it well.

So, with all the advice out there, who should you listen to?

Be open to guidance from experienced writers and true professionals. Listen attentively, and don't immediately accept or automatically reject feedback. Filter it through your own experience. Be aware of your strengths, your talents, and where you need to improve.

There is no one right way of doing almost anything when it comes to writing. Don't be so meek that you believe anything you hear, but don't be so arrogant that you close yourself off from any feedback, trying something new, or learning.

Practice your craft. And, ultimately, listen to yourself.



**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 New Member May/June 2025

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|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
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| • Celeste Fenton    |                         | • Astrid Whidden     |
| • Serafina Finnegan |                         | • Allison K Williams |
| • Roseann Gargiulo  |                         | • Brandi Winans      |

## Florida WritersCon 2025

October 17 – 19, 2025

- Keynote address by bestselling author Kristen Arnett
- Presentations by industry professionals
- Networking opportunities
- Royal Palm Literary Awards Mixer & Banquet

Early bird pricing ends August 15. Space is limited. Secure your spot at Florida WritersCon 2025 and take the next step towards your writing success. [floridawriters.org/florida-writerscon](http://floridawriters.org/florida-writerscon)

## NextGen Writers Experience

Friday, October 17, 2025

An event filled with presentations designed exclusively for the next generation of writers. Open to middle and high school writers.

NextGen Writers Experience  
registration opens soon.







## Directly Speaking

# No Business Cards Required: Reimagining Networking Events

Ginnye Lynn Cubel

Executive Director

Over the last few years, I've started to dread networking events. Which is funny, because I'm an extrovert with a Midwest penchant for talking to anyone about anything. Even the art of making ice. (Hint: it has to do with the water type and quality.)

But I see networking advertised at conferences, events, co-working spaces, write-ins, and more, and I groan. The advertisements often emit a lot of enthusiasm—*Networking opportunities!* A chance to network! Or simply, *Network!*—but they usually fall flat in person.

That's because networking, in my experience, often feels like an afterthought in event planning. The impetus is on the attendees to foster connection and frankly, it's hard. You may not know if someone is interested or open to the same opportunities and topics you are. If you're an introvert, it can feel exhausting and inauthentic to be "on" the whole time. And often you leave the event with lots of business cards and few deep connections.

So when networking came up as a promotional bullet point for the annual conference, Florida WritersCon 2025, I felt resistance. There wasn't much structure or intention behind the word, other than gathering writers together and hoping they would talk to one another and come away with meaningful interactions.

And it felt like we *needed* to create a more meaningful experience. Creative camaraderie is one of the main reasons people join the Florida Writers Association and attend the annual conference. So how do we hold space for connection and community, while creating an intentional and thoughtful experience for writers to meet other writers?

The answer is Writers Connect.

Writers Connect is a 3-hour experience on Friday, October 17 that offers gently structured activities to help participants feel seen and find their people in a low-pressure and fun environment.

Here's an insider's look at how we're reimagining networking at Florida WritersCon 2025:

**Find your people.** It can be intimidating approaching someone new. Especially if you're unsure if they're open to the same types of opportunities or interests as you. We've removed the guesswork so you can feel confident striking up a conversation.

**Connection stickers.** These stickers can be placed on your shirt or top (like a name tag) and will help participants identify if someone is seeking a critique partner, collaborator, sprint partner, or conference buddy. Approaching someone can feel easy and natural!

**Introvert friendly.** We're removing the pressure to be "on" and talkative. Instead, participate at your comfort level, and show up as your authentic self.

**Fluid event.** The event is designed so that participants can jump in anytime. Need to take a break? No problem. You can join in at any point and have a great time!

**Guided conversations.** Don't worry about your elevator pitch or coming up with a list of questions beforehand. We'll guide participants through each activity so you can have authentic conversations.

**Create deep connections.** The goal is not quantity of connections, but quality of conversations.

**Games.** We'll play games that bring a sense of fun and camaraderie, while helping us get to know one another in a low-pressure environment.

**Deep conversations.** In small groups, you'll respond to questions that focus on you as a person and writer.

**No business cards required.** While you're welcome to exchange contact information with anyone you connect with, the real goal is to walk away with a smile and a new friend.

Florida WritersCon 2025 promises to be an event to remember. We hope you're able to join us in October for an amazing lineup of workshops, our keynote speaker, Kristen Arnett, and of course, Writers Connect. 🦋

**Ginnye Lynn Cubel** is a writer and Certified Digital Marketing Professional (CDMP) through the Digital Marketing Institute. She holds a BA in Creative Writing from Butler University and has over a decade of experience in marketing and business operations. As Executive Director of Florida Writers Association, she empowers writers through strategic leadership, community building, and creative programming. Fueled by coffee and a love of writing, she turns bold ideas into action.





I'm Vicki M Taylor, founding member of FWA and your new favorite indie author. Visit my website at [vickimtaylor.com](http://vickimtaylor.com)



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## Notes from a Word Nerd

# The Copyeditor: The Purser in Pursuit of Perfection

by Paul Iasevoli

In the previous installments of this column, I took readers on a voyage where the developmental editor acts as navigator for the author and the line editor as their yeoman; each help guide a ship to port or, in the case of editors, a book to publication.

In this fourth article of the series, our metaphorical ship has made it into its home port: an agent's desk. But before the ship's cargo, i.e., the text of the book, can be unloaded and distributed to the public, a careful accounting of the containers' contents must be made; for that, the captain will rely on their purser.

Just as it's the purser's job to ensure all cargo is accurately categorized and accounted for, so is it the copyeditor's task to ensure that a manuscript's spelling, punctuation, and usage adhere to a specific style—Chicago, AP, MLA—and that the style is consistent throughout the text. Often it is the agent or publisher who chooses the copyeditor to work on what used to be called a galley proof of a book—nowadays these are referred to as digital or PDF proofs. Self-published authors will more than likely send a Word version of their manuscript to a copyeditor of their choosing, then send the copyedited version to a formatter to ready it for pre-publication printing and a final proofreading.

No matter if it's through an agent, publisher, or an author, this third step in the editing process is essential to a quality and, hopefully, successful book. Unfortunately, the copyedit may be the most misunderstood level of editing. It is not simply proofreading, nor does it tackle formatting—those are two very different steps. This step after the line edit is the fine tuning of the manuscript. Just as the purser may have to count every single item in a ship's hold, the copy editor is responsible to ensure that punctuation is accurate, upper- or lower-case designations match the assigned style, and such mundane things as the placement of periods in abbreviations are considered. For example, the abbreviation for *Doctor of Philosophy* uses periods in AP style (Ph.D.), whereas Chicago style does not (PhD). This type of “mechanical” edit—as *Chicago Manual of Style* (CMOS, 2.53) calls it—

is something a line editor more than likely will not do. But the reverse of this is also true. While copyeditors may not recast entire sentences, they will often work with phrasing to improve clarity: move misplaced modifiers or suggest better word choices. CMOS refers to these as “substantive” edits for which the editor or agent must query the author. Finally, there are those tenuous commas used to slow down a scene or omitted to emphasize an otherwise nonrestrictive clause—none of which is substantially incorrect, but adding or removing commas can change the tone of a sentence and thereby the author's voice.

To illustrate just one of the copyeditor's tasks, I'll use an example of a recent conundrum I ran into editing a short piece of fantasy fiction. In the story, the author used a word that I'd never heard nor seen. I looked it up in my handy *Merriam-Webster 11th edition* and found nothing; I went to the *Oxford English Dictionary* online—nothing, at least not with the spelling that the author used. I then queried the author, and they directed me to the *World English Historical Dictionary*. And there it was with all its variant spellings, including the medieval spelling the author used. These are the sometimes-daunting tasks that copyeditors must undertake. Copyediting seems simply a logical process, but it takes finesse to perfect a sentence—a skill, dare I say, that AI has yet to prove it possesses.

Now that our cargo of text has been carefully analyzed: commas used effectively, modifiers in their proper places, and words chosen accurately, the purser can certify that the goods are ready to be unloaded.

Let the printing presses roll, and on to the galleys! ✨

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



## A Quiz to Help You Find Your Focus at Florida WritersCon 2025

### Which Workshop Track is Your Creative Match?

Whether you're sharpening your prose, building your author brand, or wondering what comes next for your manuscript, the curated tracks at Florida WritersCon are designed to meet you where you are. Take this short quiz to find out which track might be the best starting point for your journey.

#### 1. When you sit down to write, what excites you most?

- A. Playing with language, characters, and structure
- B. Imagining my book on a shelf—or in readers' hands
- C. Figuring out how to grow an audience and get seen
- D. Understanding the business and protecting my work

#### 2. Where are you in your publishing journey?

- A. I'm still drafting or revising—I'm focused on improving my writing.
- B. I'm exploring how to publish—or figuring out which path is right.
- C. I've published or am preparing to launch, and I want to connect with readers.
- D. I want to be smart and secure—contracts, copyright, and industry know-how matter to me.

#### 3. Which of these feels most like your current creative challenge?

- A. I want to deepen my craft and find my unique voice
- B. I'm overwhelmed by all the ways to publish and unsure where to start
- C. I don't know how to stand out or build my author platform
- D. I'm nervous about legal pitfalls or protecting my rights

#### 4. You're at a networking mixer. Someone asks, "What are you hoping to learn this weekend?" You say...

- A. "How to make my writing sing—and finish what I start."
- B. "How to get my book out into the world without losing my mind."
- C. "How to build buzz, reach readers, and sell more books."
- D. "How to protect my work and make smart business decisions."

#### 5. Pick the vibe that speaks to your writing season:

- A. A well-worn notebook, coffee stains, and 2 AM breakthroughs
- B. Query tracker spreadsheets, submission goals, and publisher research
- C. Book signings, podcast interviews, and newsletter subscribers
- D. Contracts, copyright symbols, and calm, confident boundaries

You want to write smart and protect your legacy. This track equips you with essential legal insights to safeguard your creative work and navigate the business side of writing.

#### Mostly D's: The Legal Track

You know that writing is just one part of the author's journey. You're ready to grow your audience, build your brand, and step boldly into your public author self.

#### Mostly C's: The Author Marketing Track

You're looking for the road from manuscript to marketplace. This track will demystify traditional, hybrid, and indie options so you can make confident, informed choices.

#### Mostly B's: The Paths to Publishing Track

Your heart beats for story. Whether you're refining your characters or unlocking your voice, this track will help you deepen your skills and rediscover the joy of creation.

#### Mostly A's: The Craft and Creativity Track

### YOUR RESULTS





# ersCon 2025

## What Are Workshop Tracks?

Think of them as guided pathways through the conference—each one spotlighting a key area of the writing life including craft, publishing, marketing, and legal.

While you're free to attend any session you choose as the conference, these tracks help you identify workshops that align with your current goals and creative interests. Learn more about the workshop tracks on our website: [floridawriters.org/curated-tracks](https://floridawriters.org/curated-tracks)

Ready to chart your (workshop) course?

Early bird pricing ends on Friday, August 15, 2025. Register today to save your spot at an advantageous price! More info here: [floridawriters.org/florida-writerscon](https://floridawriters.org/florida-writerscon)

## The Craft and Creativity Track: From Idea to Page

- Voice: Rarely Analyzed, But Critically Important – Shutta Crum
- Moods, Motifs and MacGuffins – Victor DiGenti
- What Writers Can Learn from Pixar – Victor DiGenti
- Start Small and Save that Novel for Later – Thomas Smith
- Inhabiting Your Character through their Eyes – David Poissant
- Flash Fiction: Writing Short! – David Poissant
- Journaling to Heal, Grow, and Create – Sylvia Whitman

## The Paths to Publishing Track: Navigating Your Options from Page to Platform

- Creating a Synopsis that Shines – C.I. Jerez
- The Power of the Premise: A Hook that Works – C.I. Jerez
- How NOT to be Published – Thomas Smith
- Get Published with Duotrope & Submittable – Shutta Crum
- Behind the Editor's Desk at a Literary Magazine – Sylvia Whitman
- Which Publication Pathway is Right for You? – Olivia Zugay

## The Author Marketing Track: Build Your Brand, Reach Your Readers

- How to Find and Hook Your Readers – Heidi McIntyre
- Crafting an Authentic Brand and Platform – Heidi McIntyre
- Mastering Book Marketing: Funnels & Promos – Olivia Zugay
- How Genre Impacts You and Your Plot – Valerie Willis
- Help! How Do I Land on the Bookshelf? – Valerie Willis
- Book Design: All the Front and Back Matters – Valerie Willis

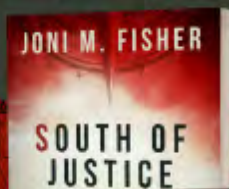
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## THE NOVELS OF WILLIAM SPEIR

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# The Rules of Fiction:

## What They Are and What They're Not

by K.M. Weiland

Writers tend to have a lot of questions about the rules of fiction—those elusive guidelines that shape our narratives and mold our creative endeavors. Are these rules rigid dictates that threaten creative autonomy? Or do they serve as an underlying structure, providing frameworks that nurture and enhance storytelling prowess? The answers are found in digging down to the true essence of fiction rules—exploring what they are, what they decidedly are not, and to what degree we should adhere to them in crafting stories that work.

Even just a cursory search into the rules of fiction brings up a dizzying array of opinions. Although many studious articles promise to share “the rules of fiction,” many titles are dismissive. As I scrolled through the results, I found a post I had written many years ago, the title of which fit right in: “Writing Rules? We Don’t Need No Rules!”

Is this really true? Most articles with titles like these will tell you why art cannot be contained by rules—and then tell you why you should follow the rules after all. This reflects the mixed relationship most writers, particularly those just starting out, have with the rules. Sometimes I get a comment or an email from writers declaring their creative genius is too great to be bound by convention and the rules are just for stupid hacks (notably, these emails often suffer from missing capitalization and punctuation). Other times, I hear from studious new writers who are consumed with worry about learning how to do absolutely everything by the rules.

Obviously, both approaches are extremes. The true value—and caution—of the rules lies somewhere in between.

### CAN CREATIVITY FOLLOW RULES OF FICTION?

So do writers have to follow “the rules”? Depends entirely on how you define *rules*.

Much of the debate about the value of the rules of fiction comes down to definition. The very idea that

something as inherently innovative and chaotic as creativity can or should be contained by rules often has writers panicking and rioting. For many writers, the discovery that there is such a thing as “rules of fiction” creates a feeling of claustrophobia. After all, much of the joy of writing is its pure freedom. Indeed, many people who *might* have been writers got scared off early on by such mind-numbing school exercises as the dreaded Roman numeral outline.

The word “rules” inevitably triggers our superego’s notion of a stern authoritarian (and perhaps even tyrannical) figure telling us what we are and are not allowed to do and threatening consequences if we don’t fall into line. Not exactly the stuff of inspiration, much less fun.

And creativity needs fun in order to thrive. It needs that attitude of play, of childlike curiosity and wonder. The idea of “rules” can seem antithetical to that.

However, if you stop to think about it, the idea that fiction—or any other art form—can exist without structure is clearly untrue. Even just at the level of spelling and grammar, agreed-upon conventions are necessary to foster communication. At root, that’s really all “the rules” are—conventions recognized for their efficacy in communicating within a common language.

As with any system, balance is necessary. We need a little dose of the newness of Chaos, but we also need Order. We need a liberality that embraces the evolution of innovation, but we also need the conservatism of the old guard passing down the literary legacy. We need Creativity, but we also need Logic. We need freedom, but we also need structure. The former is impossible to sustain without the latter.

The trouble comes either when writers want to throw all the rules out the window in the belief they need to reinvent the form—or when writers feel pressure to *conform for the sake of conformity*. Really, the whole trouble is that when we speak about the rules of fiction, we’re really not talking about rules at all. We’re not even, as the pirates would have it, talking about guidelines. We’re talking about deeper truths of both the art form





and its reflection of reality. Coming to an understanding of what the rules really are can help all writers deepen their comprehension of the art form and their ability to create freely within it.

Today, let's take a quick overview of what the rules of fiction *are* and *are not*.

## WHAT THE RULES OF FICTION ARE NOT

### Guidelines From Some Grim Writer in the Sky

Let's examine the most fundamental misconception first. The word "rules" tends to bring with it the subconscious idea that someone "out there" must be reinforcing those rules. Sometimes we might assume this is the gatekeepers—agents and editors—but the underlying belief is that the "right way" to create fiction was handed down to us from on high like some literary version of the Ten Commandments. Break the rules, and a lightning bolt is sure to strike your poor little novel and shrivel it into ash.

This belief can also evoke a feeling of resentment and jealousy in unpublished authors who can point out so many successful novels that clearly did not follow the rules. But although certain conventions and archetypes certainly do exist (as we'll explore in a minute), the idea that they have been passed down by any foundational authority is simply untrue.

### Peer-Enforced, Fiddly Little Dictates

Writers may also sometimes sense that the rules will be enforced from the outside-in by peers. After all, everybody's got an opinion about how to write a book. Especially in the beginning, most new writers will tout "the rules" to fellow writers, insisting on mutual observance. Often, this group accountability can be wonderfully helpful and educative. But writers must recognize that just because someone in their writing group or "everyone" online seems to be touting an unbreakable rule doesn't mean they a) know what they're talking about any more than you do or b) have any authority whatsoever over your choices for your story.

## Immutable

All writers can breathe a sigh of relief now. Writing rules are not immutable. As such, they clearly aren't even "rules." They can be broken. They will be broken. And thank God for that. Creativity *demand*s experimentation and innovation. As my pal Ian Malcolm always says, "Life will find a way." Any system that errs too heavily toward control (order, logic, etc.) will become tyrannical and destroy itself. This doesn't belittle the vital importance of Order, but we must remember that its entire function is to recognize and foster the fruits of Creativity.

## Arbitrary

With the above in mind, it is equally important to acknowledge that the rules of fiction are not arbitrary. They exist for good reasons, ones that contribute to the deep truths of the art form and of communication. Tongue in cheek, we often say that if there is one rule of writing, it is simply, "Know the rules before you break them." What this speaks to is the necessity of understanding the deeper meaning upon which any seemingly arbitrary rule is founded. Once you understand that, you can determine whether breaking it is truly the most functional choice for your story.

## Genre Tropes

Writers often confuse general rules of fiction with genre tropes. Although genre conventions do guide how particular types of stories are written as a sort of mutual contract between writer and reader, they are not rules. Genre offers archetypal guidelines for how to tell different stories of the human experience (as brilliantly explored in John Truby's book *Anatomy of Genres*), but despite what newbie writers sometimes think, the individual tropes (e.g., romance's "enemies to lovers" or fantasy's "chosen one" or mystery's "incompetent police") are *not* rules and do not have to be followed as such.

## Life or Death

THE RULES. They just sound so... serious. So many of us take the rules very seriously (to the point sometimes of a cultural trauma response). Mess up the

The rules of fiction  
can be seen as a  
contract between  
writer and reader.  
Readers (and  
viewers) enter  
your story as an  
act of faith.



rules and you're doomed. Not only will no one ever publish you or read you or take you seriously as a writer, but, actually, this is just proof you're a horrible person under it all.

Really, I think *this* is why so many writers experience knee-jerk hatred toward the idea of rules for art. And it just ain't so. This is the voice of the toxic inner critic, one *many* writers confront. The toxicity of this voice doesn't mean "the rules" themselves are toxic, but recognize if this is how you're interacting with them, so you can move into a more balanced and generative perspective

## WHAT THE RULES OF FICTION ARE

So far, we've basically established the rules of fiction are not rules. And yet, it seems they should still generally be observed? Let's examine what the rules of fiction really are.

### Theory

At root, the rules of fiction are simply theory—story theory. They are the collective and emergent theories writers and readers have collected over the past couple millennia about "what makes a good story." Because of the profound body of work available to us all to study—and because we learn story through osmosis even when we're not consciously studying—this huge context means these theories are now highly evolved.

However, they're still theories, and they are still evolving. With every new story added to the larger context, the information that creates these theories increases, allowing for infinite revision and refinement. Nevertheless, at any given point, they offer a tremendous amount of information about our predecessors' trial and error. From that, we can continuously extrapolate what seems most effective in communicating with readers.

### Patterns

At the root of theory is pattern recognition. Story theory is entirely based on examining the patterns that emerge from the large body of recorded storytelling. When we can examine thousands of years of story and recognize that certain plot beats are found consistently all the way back to Homer, we can confidently extrapolate that this is a pattern that has stood the test of time. From there, as story theorists, we get to explore *why* these patterns of plot structure are so enduring—and why we might do well to apply them in our own stories. [[helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/story-theory](http://helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/story-theory)]

## Archetypal Truths

Which came first: the Archetype or the Truth? Certainly, arguments can be made that the patterns of story point straight to the immutable truths of the human experience. But at the least, the patterns themselves have given rise to archetypes that have become truth, or at least representative of truth. As such, most of the rules of fiction point to deeper principles than simply effective communication. Everything from the underlying structure of character arc and theme to dictums such as "write what you know" and "leave out the parts readers tend to skip" point to deeper psychological reasons than may be immediately evident.

## Functional Forms

Why follow the rules of fiction? The most convincing argument is simply "because they work." If you want to write a good book, get published, and sell lots of copies, your best bet is to base that book upon the functional forms represented by the rules. This doesn't mean you have to (or should) follow every rule (and certainly, as I hope is clear by this point, not slavishly). It also doesn't mean that any bestseller that broke some obvious rule is somehow proof that all rules are bogus. But start with the rules of spelling, punctuation, and grammar, then work your way up to the rules of dialogue, POV, and narrative, and round out your journey with the rules of plot, character, and theme. Congrats. You've just created a functional storyform.

## Logic, Functioning as the Handmaiden of Creativity

Because of the false paradox that is often created between Logic and Creativity, writers may balk at the rules of fiction simply because they are logical. The very fact they are based on emergent patterns means they are a recognition of the logic inherent in story. More than that, we are then able to move beyond simply perceiving the patterns to proactively using logic to extrapolate and hypothesize about them. Much of this is in service to simply understanding the patterns/rules. But it is also in service to further innovation, aka creativity. If you understand the rules (the patterns) of good fiction, you have the possibility of getting ahead of the curve by creating the next big innovation in the cycle.

As ever, the caveat here is that Logic and Creativity must exist in balance on their two opposite ends of the polarity. The whole system falls apart if writers overvalue the "logic" of the rules (in fact, this overvaluation is actually *illogical*). Equally, however, a rejection of the





importance of logic is also destructive. At its simplest, to reject logic in storytelling is to reject a true aid. An understanding of the logic of story and the rules of fiction can only help you wrangle all that wild creativity. When you understand story theory and the rules of fiction, you have the opportunity to unburden your creativity and let it fly free with far more confidence and safety.

### A Contract Between Writer and Reader

Finally, the rules of fiction can be seen as a contract between writer and reader. Readers (and viewers) enter your story as an act of faith. They are opening their minds and their hearts to you, not to mention committing money and time. As such, they are entitled to expect a good experience. Whether or not that experience is good will depend in no small part upon how well the writer understands the rules of the game.

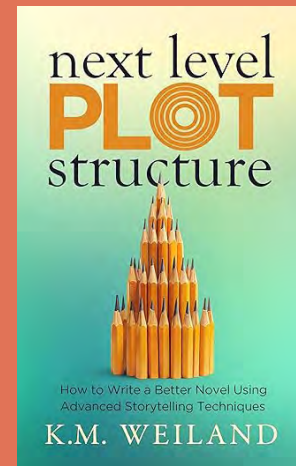
Note, however, I didn't say how well the writer follows the rules. You can dot all your i's and cross all your t's without having a clue what you're doing or why. But from the reservoirs of a deeper understanding of the principles that underlie the rules of fiction, you will create an experience that both holds and challenges readers in all the best ways.

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The debate over the rules of fiction unfolds because writers grapple with whether the rules are stifling constraints or foundational structures. The varied relationships writers have with these rules, from outright defiance to rigid adherence, underscores the need for balance. In essence, the rules of fiction offer a stalwart harmony between creativity and structure, enhancing story by respecting the principles of effective communication. ✍️

*This article was originally published on K.M. Weiland's website, [helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com](http://helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com) and is reprinted here with permission.*

**K.M. Weiland** is the award-winning and internationally published author of acclaimed writing guides, such as *Structuring Your Novel* and *Creating Character Arcs*. She writes historical and speculative fiction and mentors authors.



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# 3 Little Words That Will Unlock Your Revision

by Monica Cox

Whether it's describing your favorite book or pitching your own manuscript, chances are you're describing the plot or what happens in the story.

Hooks and pitches are all about plot. It's the easiest thing to latch on to when it comes to story. Plot is often the first thing that comes to us when we sit down to write and ponder the "what if this happens" question.

What keeps our people reading, however, is the emotional journey of the protagonist and how that character arc interacts with and affects the plot. The real magic of story happens when we dig beyond "what if this happens" and ask, "what if *this* happens to this person?"

Let's look at *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. The plot is what prompted me, and probably many other readers, to pick up the book—a life-or-death game where young people from each district in the nation are put in a dome together and only one can come out alive, all while the event is broadcast across the nation as entertainment.

What makes the story so resonant isn't the series of events that could happen in a situation like this. It is Katniss and her journey through the Games. No one wants to be the district's tribute—it's essentially a death sentence. But Katniss volunteers for the games. Why? Not for ego or to prove something to the corrupted government (yet...that comes in a later book), but to protect her younger sister whose name is drawn in the lottery.

From the beginning, the reader knows something about Katniss and her heart that will make her someone to root for: she is motivated by love for her sister. Not only does the reader care about Katniss because of that bond, but her love and desire to take care of her family influences how she plays the game, ultimately making the story about so much more than just the plot of personal survival. Talk about emotional resonance!

Donald Maass writes in *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*: "What shapes us and gives our lives meaning are not the things that happen to us, but their significance."

It's not just the plot that makes a good story. It's the meaning the plot has for the character. Like Katniss in *The Hunger Games*.

Maass goes on to say: "Plot happens outside, but story happens inside."

Understanding your character's emotional arc of change, how that arc plays with the plot, and how the character makes meaning of that plot are the keys to ensuring your story has a strong trajectory, propelling your reader through the book, hooked not only on plot but your protagonist's experience of it. Your story's trajectory is that emotional throughline that motivates your character to act and overcome obstacles in an attempt to reach their story goal. It's the magical third rail of your story that holds up the external machinations of your plot. Without a strong trajectory, the story may just fizzle out or the reader is left wondering why they care about what happens at all.

At some point, plot just isn't enough.

Ensuring your stories are imbued with meaning can be a gargantuan task. Luckily there are three magic words that will help you determine the strength of your story's trajectory.

## Because of That

At the end of each major scene or chapter, if you were to fill in connector words between them, would they be linked by the phrase AND THEN or BECAUSE OF THAT?

"And then" insinuates that something happened to your characters. More rocks being thrown up at your proverbial protagonist in a tree.

"Because of that," on the other hand, indicates that your protagonist has made a decision or taken some sort of action as a result of the scene propelling the reader into the next chapter where a consequence or obstacle will no doubt result from this choice.

Can you feel the difference? One reads like a litany of events while the other invites the reader to engage with the story, to deduce, suppose, and react to the actions the protagonist is taking on the page.





To check your manuscript for a strong “because of that” trajectory, start here:

1. **Make meaning.** Take a look at each scene or chapter. Summarize the plot of that scene in a sentence or two, then summarize the meaning of that plot point for the protagonist in a sentence or two. Do this for all the major scenes or chapters in your manuscript so you essentially create an outline of both the plot and emotional arc of your story.
2. **Look for connection.** Now, analyze the silence between scenes/chapters and see which phrase best connects them: “and then” or “because of that”?
3. **Work backwards.** If “and then” connects your scenes/chapters, ask yourself the following questions to find the problem in the previous scene:
4. **Is the problem plot or emotion?** There may be too much of one or the other throwing your trajectory out of balance. Too much plot without internal meaning-making leaves the action flat. Too much internal work without a little external plot means there may be too much backstory or info dumping on the page. Take a hard look at what’s out of balance and find a way to incorporate the missing link.
5. **Does your character have agency?** Are they making decisions in the scene, learning something new that will result in a new choice, taking action, making a decision, or are things simply happening to your character? The beauty in a novel length work is that our protagonists rarely get it right on the first try, so let them make some mistakes and learn some hard lessons. Just remember, that they need to be in charge, or at least think they are, by choosing to do—or not do—something in each scene.
6. **What is the scene goal?** What does the character want or need in the scene? Do they get it? All the macro story goals your protagonist has should be represented as micro scene goals as well. These goals not only need to advance the plot but also deepen the meaning for the protagonist forcing her to make scene-specific decisions that will keep readers turning the page to find out how they will impact the macro goal.

7. **Can you identify the scene stakes?** There are the larger story stakes at play, always, but each scene has something at stake for your character as well, whether it’s a big thing (escaping the bad guy) or a small thing (saving face during a business meeting) based on that scene’s goal. If you can’t identify clear stakes in the scene, focus on what your character stands to lose in this moment and make sure the reader is clear on what that is on the page.

Do this for every scene or chapter in your manuscript since there may be different things at play in each scene. For example, in one scene you may lack trajectory from a simple imbalance of plot and meaning, while in another, the stakes may be unclear. Working backward from the connector phrase, however, will point you to the scene or chapter prior to see where you may need to focus your revision work.

Then, as you move forward through your revision, you will be able to strengthen the ultimate trajectory leading to your inevitable and impactful story climax. Because of that, you will have a story that keeps your readers turning pages to see what happens next. ✍️

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



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# To Avoid Rejection, Take the Writer Out of the Story

by Joe Ponepinto

**A**n admission: As I read my way through the submission queue for our literary journal, I often decide to decline a story well before its end.

It's not that the stories are always bad. Many times the premise is interesting, and the characters as well. It may exhibit the opening tension and stakes that can pull a reader in. In fact, there may not be anything technically missing from the submission, and this proficiency is supported by the writers' cover letters—many submitters have been published in other journals; some are contest winners or Pushcart nominees.

But for me, the stories they've submitted just don't resonate.

So it's a matter of taste, then?

Sometimes, but more often it's something else. It's a quality that can't be measured or pinpointed, and I think that's why it's an aspect of good writing that is rarely taught in MFA programs, or writing classes, and almost never mentioned in blogs and articles on writing. Call it something ethereal. Call it alchemy. Or call it what it is, a story so advanced that it is no longer just a story, but something beyond a story—a virtual reality that transports a reader into a frame of mind vivid enough to replace actual reality. It's a story so engrossing the reader forgets that he's reading, a story in which the author's voice seems not to exist. A silent story, as a writer friend once noted.

So many times stories give me the impression of a writer writing about something. It's in the story's tone and flow. It's in the plot that's been done a few thousand times before or is based on something that's in the news. It's in characters filtered through the writer's personal experience, which limits their diversity and individuality. In short, the writer is present in every sentence, hunched over the reader's shoulder, which is why so much in these stories sounds like explanation, like the writer worrying that readers won't "get it" unless they lay out paragraphs of background info. As Elmore Leonard famously said, it sounds like writing.

As I read these submissions, I can visualize the writer thinking about aspects of writing as he writes. Does this scene have tension? Is it making my theme clear?

But a successful story exists independently from its author. It seems so real that readers don't have to be schooled in the facts of the story's world, but can, through the actions and dialogue of its characters, adapt and understand how it works. Kind of like the way we do it in real life.

Here's an example of what appears to be decent writing, but falls short of resonating with an experienced editor:

Like hundreds of times before, Barry Jacobs watched the signals on the subway wall as the train glided under his Brooklyn neighborhood. The car rocked in rhythm with the tracks below, but the gentle swaying did little to put him at ease, even after almost ten years of traveling the L line to his office in Manhattan. This time, Madeline, the new supervisor, would be waiting for him.

"We'll be making some changes. I've been working on them for a while," she'd said. "I want to restructure how projects are assigned."

He realized her position of newfound authority forced her to do this. She had to show the upper management she had a vision for the department's future in order to gain their respect. He knew it was going to cause trouble for him.

This opening establishes tension and stakes, plus a hint of intrigue in Madeline's statement about changes, which are still unspecified. Barry seems to be a sympathetic character. We are beginning to learn how he feels about his job. In terms of writing conventions this a good approach.

But here's how an editor can read it:

The first paragraph is good. The second is also fine, although an editor may notice that Madeline's statements





are factual and don't indicate subtext, which is the key to understanding character motivation. They are really there to provide grounding for the opening situation. It's not a major error on the writer's part, but this passage could do more.

In the third paragraph, though, note how the writer drops into the character's head to ostensibly reveal both Madeline's and Barry's motivation. On the surface it appears to deepen the reader's understanding of character. The character may even be thinking these things. But in fact it's an explanation planted by the writer to help ensure the reader "gets" who these people are. It also begins to break away from that opening tension.

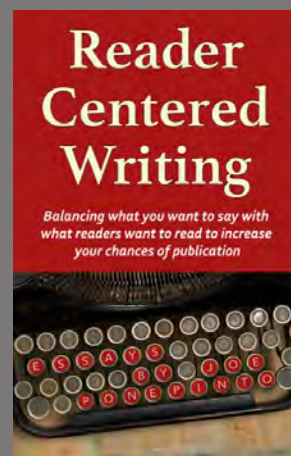
As an editor, I can see what's coming next. It's usually at this point that a less experienced writer will dive into backstory, relating how Barry came to work at his company, or how Madeline rose to lead her department, or both. And that's the road to decline.

Jorge Luis Borges, in his "Borges and I," broaches the idea of the writer and the person as different people. A good writer is like that; when writing she becomes someone other than the person. She becomes the writer, an alter ego who doesn't care whether the reader loves the story. The writer cares only about the story itself, and not the recognition it might bring. That's what editors are looking for when they read submissions—the story, not the writer. Also consider this interview with Elena Ferrante, the Italian writer whose true identity remains unknown. She not only talks about the separation of the writer and the author, she lives it.

How do you get to that place in your writing? It's not easy. You have to internalize the conventions of creative writing so that you know them without thinking about them. That might mean writing almost daily for about 10 to 15 years. It takes that long for your brain to synthesize the conventions and possibilities of writing into something relatable to others (and, by the way, to break the terrible writing habits most of us were taught in elementary school, high school, and college—the ones that forced us to explain ourselves in every sentence). That's when you get to stop worrying about them.

Then, every once in a while, ask yourself why you write. Is it to become well-known or make money? Or is it because you have stories that must be told? Editors are far more interested in submissions from the latter type of writer.

Every story you write is a step toward better writing. Every publication you achieve is encouragement to keep going. This I know—I've had dozens of stories published in literary journals, and each one was an ego boost. But looking back on most of them now, I realize they were



Writer and editor **Joe Ponepinto's** series of essays are designed to help emerging writers balance their unique voices with the demands of the marketplace.

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—Ai Jiang, Nebula Award finalist,  
and author of *Linghun* and *I Am Ai*.

not that good. Many don't illustrate the qualities I'm talking about here. But some do, and I take that as a sign of progress, the promise that my writing is going to keep getting better as long as I continue to work at it. Yours is too. But you have to know where you're trying to get to before you can go there. 🌿

*This article appears in Joe Ponepinto's collection of essays: **Reader Center Writing**. It is reprinted here with permission.*

**Joe Ponepinto** is a Seattle area writer and editor. He was the co-founder of *Orca*, *A Literary Journal*, and *Tahoma Literary Review*, and is the author of the novels *Mr. Neutron* and *Curtain Calls*. His latest book is *Reader Centered Writing*, a collection of essays on writing. His new venture is *Beyond Craft*, a Substack that takes an in-depth look at the writing industry. [beyondcraft.substack.com](https://beyondcraft.substack.com)



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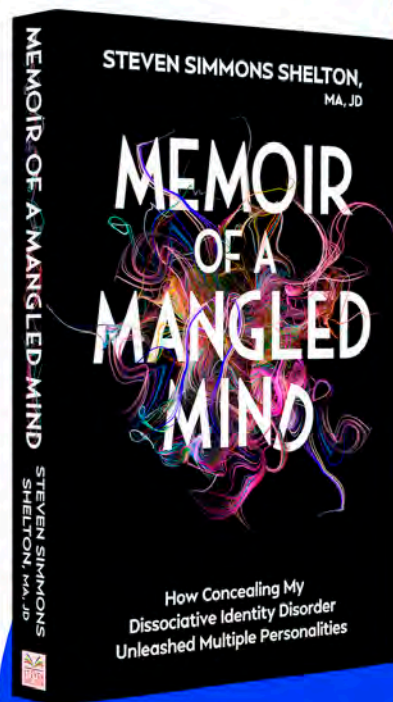
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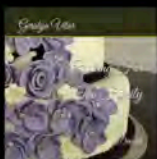
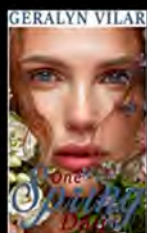


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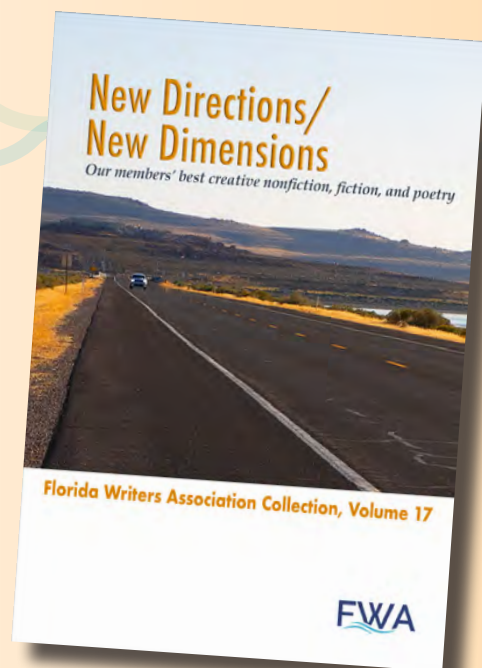


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Scott Corey, Maisie  
L.H. Davis, Moon Dreams  
Nanette Davis, An Unlikely Superhero  
Diana Faherty, Ordenado Park  
Cristina Farinas, The Midnight Gardener  
Jim R. Garrison, The Bridge  
Lorrie Gault, Getting Aweigh  
Bill Griffith, Synchronicity  
Ellen P. Holder, Serendipity  
Henry James Kaye, Your Turn  
KE Manning, Beyond the Gates  
Chris Marek, Bugs 'n' Bubba  
Meredith S. Martin, The Path to Happiness

### Fiction (continued)

Robert E. Marvin, Stop Reading—Now!  
Mark H. Newhouse, Finding My Direction  
Donna Parrey, The Recliner  
William R. Platt, The Commitment  
Barbara Ryan, Rocking High  
H.G. Silvia, Terms  
K.L. Small, A New Game for Travis  
Lona A. Smith, Grand Opening  
Bobbie Thiessen, Grandma's Wisdom

### Poetry

Angela Adde Andriesse, Upon the Loss of  
an Old Friend  
Ann Favreau, A Measure of Love  
Gail Ghai, Maroon Moccasins  
Sylvia Whitman, Fledging  
Kathleen Willoughby, The Atoms Align at Last

### NextGen Poetry

Finn Anderson, The New Way  
Perla Anderson, Dreams  
Reed Barnwell, Shifting Horizons  
Genevieve Blich, The Synthetic Frontier  
Conner Brown, Fish•ing

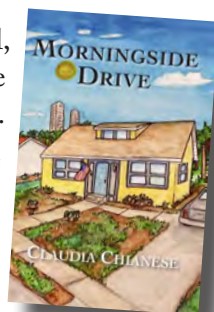




# Celebrations!

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

**Claudia Chianese's** debut novel, *Morningside Drive*, is a finalist in the 2025 FAPA President's Book Awards. The novel explores love, loss, and second chances. Missing for thirty years and following the death of her husband, a grieving Joy Webb Gardner leaves her Fifth Avenue apartment to go home to Daytona Beach. Joy finds resentment and slammed doors when she accuses her father of murder. *Morningside Drive* is a page-turner that lingers well beyond the final chapter. It is available on Amazon and everywhere online. Three of Chianese's short stories have been published in FWA anthologies. She blogs at [claudiajustsaying.com](http://claudiajustsaying.com).



**Nancy Christie** has released her tenth book and latest novel, *Moving Maggie* (BookBaby). The third in her Midlife Moxie Novel Series, *Moving Maggie* details the challenges faced by 60-year-old Maggie Cartwright, who has lost her job, marriage, and home and now must start over. Her move to a rural community sparks a series of unexpected opportunities and an awareness of what her single-minded focus on her career cost her in other areas of her life. The Midlife Moxie Novel Series features middle-aged women as they navigate this new stage of life. For more information, visit her website: [nancychristie.com](http://nancychristie.com).



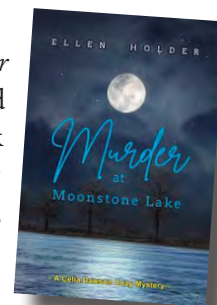
**Nancy J. Cohen** announces the September release of *Murder Pays a Call*. When personal concierge Keri Armstrong swings by her favorite client's house to drop off groceries, she expects a heartfelt chat along with a cup of tea—not Fiona Sullivan dead in bed and her room ransacked. Though police chalk it up to a botched robbery, Keri isn't so sure. Whispers around town suggest Fiona wasn't as adored as Keri had believed. Armed with a keen eye, insider access, and a fully charged tablet, Keri sets out to uncover the truth. Available in print and ebook. [books2read.com/murderpaysacall](http://books2read.com/murderpaysacall)



**John Doriot's** latest book of poetry, *Spiritual Roots*, was named a finalist in the poetry category for the 2025 Georgia Independent Author of the Year Award. John has now won seven Georgia Independent Author of the Year Awards from 2022 to 2025. *Spiritual Roots* captures moments that reflect his faith and how it influences his perspective on the world. Within these poems, he hopes you discover the beauty in the images he aimed to create, words of encouragement, and a kindred spirit. You can find this book and all his other books on his website, [doriotbooks.com](http://doriotbooks.com), and via Amazon.



**Ellen Holder's** debut novel, *Murder at Moonstone Lake*, is now published and available in paperback and ebook at Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Set in central Florida in a fictional town, the murder takes place in a retirement community on Moonstone Lake. Retired schoolteacher, Celia, finds the body of Marge, the retirement-village manager, and calls for help. Although police officers arrive, Celia is determined to have a hand in solving this crime. The story moves rapidly with suspense, humor, and touching romance. (Publisher: Howling Wolf Press)



**Skye Taylor** announces the release of the first book in her new series, *Unspoken Promises*—A Bailey Island Romance. Two women, a cottage by the sea, and three generations of love and loss ... Kenzie Ross is rebuilding her life in the present day and Eleanor Murray was left waiting during WWII. It's about the promises they made to themselves and about the unspoken ones they made to others about love, loyalty and starting over. Anna is still waiting on the widow's walk for Captain Murray, lost at sea over a hundred years ago.





## Power

Chris Coward

**T**hink of that moment when your project isn't quite ready. Oh, it's close. One more step, and your dream will come true. You've devoted years to that dream. Given it your heart.

Maybe it was a college degree or a house you were fixing up. Maybe a patent for an invention. Whatever it was, that dream inspired—maybe even defined—you.

### And then—

You or someone you love became blind, lost a limb, got cancer, developed PTSD. Life can be derailed in many ways, but whatever the form, you say goodbye to the degree, the home repairs, the invention.

My dream was to publish a novel, and I was on my last edit. This, after sixteen years of research, writing, and editing. Sixteen years voraciously studying the craft through workshops, critique groups, and conferences. Sixteen intense years. And the last edit was make or break.

What happened literally floored me. My legs buckled. My vision blurred. My chest constricted. Sometimes I couldn't even walk across the room. I had seizures—hundreds of them—that lasted for hours.

Not to mention brain fog. I'd sense the edge of an idea, only for it to turn to vapor, then, cruelly, tease back into my consciousness and dissipate again. Chasing it ... chasing ... Gone. No way to finish my book, not when words as simple as *traffic* or *kitten* eluded me.

*Was I peering into the tunnel of dementia?*

Turned out, I had long covid, an autoimmune disorder where the immune system consumes the very body it serves—heart, lungs, and brain. Some 65 million people worldwide have known this affliction. Many, like me, were previously healthy; many, like me, had only a mild case of covid. Long covid is different than covid and distinct for each sufferer. Some victims die; some recover in months; some, well, the jury's still out. Where did I fit in?

Long covid has no cure, but after hospitalization, I tried a slew of treatments: hyperbaric oxygen, vagus nerve stimulation, inhalers, anti-inflammatories, blood-clot medications, acupuncture, physical therapy, on and on, to no avail.

### But then—

I'd have moments of clarity. Moments when I could amble from one side of the room to the other. Moments when traffic and kitten rolled off my tongue. There was one particular light-bulb moment when I recalled how the protagonist in my own book prevailed against impossible odds. Could I, like the character I'd invented, reach deep inside and do the impossible? Not using my old processes, maybe, but what if I did things differently?

*If the old way doesn't work, find a new one.*

### So then—

I worked. Thirty seconds here, five minutes there. Over time, periods of concentration lengthened. Sometimes. But stuff got done. I worked and crashed and worked and crashed, over and over, until finally, the book was ready. The artistic process proved exhilarating, even as I chased those damned thought-ghosts. Even when all I could do was edit a single line. *Just one more line.*

Think of your dream. Maybe it gets derailed, maybe not. As I found out the hard way, every moment is a chance for enrichment through art. Whether you're a creator or a connoisseur; whether your joy comes from writing, painting, cinematography, or building a dollhouse; whether you're facing challenges or at the top of your game—*art is power.*

My long covid is in its fourth year. Maybe I'll recover. Maybe I won't. But I will focus on growing as a writer and a human.

My closing thoughts: Revel in music you love. Take in a museum. Buy a painting. Do that craft. And curl up with a book—maybe even mine. 📖

Chris Coward is a lifetime member  
of Florida Writers and past president.  
Visit [chrisoward.net](http://chrisoward.net).







## A Lobster Tale

Deb Crutcher

It was a beautiful Sunday morning. Lobster season had opened in late August. My husband, his twenty-two-year-old son, and I were going hunting. We loaded our gear in our eighteen-foot boat and headed toward the Boca Inlet.

The Gulf Stream runs close to the shores of South Florida, typically less than three miles, resulting in a swift current. Drift diving, where the boat's captain follows the divers' bubbles, is recommended over anchor diving. However, we wanted to dive together that Sunday, so we anchored the boat. A hundred-foot line was tethered to the anchor for safety, allowing us to move in a circle under the boat. We were diving sixty to seventy feet under the surface with fifty feet of visibility.

At times, the current was so strong it felt like you were flying. It was exciting and liberating as I moved to the rhythm of the sea, in sync with this beautiful dance that surrounded me. But not during the serious business of lobstering. Our focus was on scanning the reefs and crevices for dangling antennae of the Florida spiny lobster.

I held the attached safety line, moving along, trying to stay close to the others. The first lobster was spotted, and my husband and Jon motioned for me to go for it. I had been diving since 1979 and logged more diving hours than either of them. The fact that I usually got my catch hadn't gone unnoticed, and we all wanted grilled lobsters for dinner.

In front of a small reef, I settled to the bottom, tied off my line, and got my net and tickle stick in position. With patience and slow movements, I urged the lobster out of his hole right into my net. The carapace was the legal size, and there were no eggs. *Great, this one is a keeper.*

Spiny lobsters were escape artists, so I turned to get help placing the bug into my catch bag. My dive buddies were gone, and instead, there was an eerie murkiness. After securing my lobster, I quickly grabbed the safety line and started my slow ascent, constantly checking for my family. The closer I moved to the surface, the stronger the current. When I turned my head, my dive mask slid sideways. *They must have run out of air and gone back to the boat.*

As I popped above the surface, the empty boat was one hundred feet ahead. *Where are they?* I had to get to the boat and search for them. My hands were aching after trying

to pull myself along the safety line. I would make a little progress, then the line would slip through my hands. I was scared. I descended a few feet where the current wasn't as strong, but soon my air ran low, and I had to resurface. I had gained a bit of distance, but I was exhausted.

With a firm hold on the line, I replaced my regulator with a snorkel and floated a few minutes on my back to gain some strength. I felt my heart beating through my wetsuit as I struggled to catch my breath. This was serious. What a hopeless feeling, knowing they were somewhere out there. If I didn't hold on tight, I'd be out there too. *No time to panic, Deb. It's up to you now.*

I heard a boat approaching. I waved my tickle stick and shouted. Divers onboard confirmed the strange current that day. After they helped me back to my boat, I started the engine, raised the anchor, and headed North.

After a few minutes, another boat approached, and I saw my husband and Jon sitting on the floor. They were shaken up and drained but not harmed. While I was squirming around on the bottom focusing on capturing the lobster, the tides changed, and the powerful Gulf Stream swept them up and away, from me, the boat, and each other.

That day, we learned a valuable lesson. We vowed never to dive without someone at the helm while divers were in the water. Ultimately, no one was hurt except the lobster, which ended up on my grill that night, covered in butter. 🦞

Deb Crutcher, from Winter Haven, writes poetry and creative nonfiction.





## Fahrenheit 421

Bob Ellis

We crept into the long-vacant waterfront home to plan our capitulation, the last remaining cell of FreeLibs at large in Southwest Florida. After rehashing our limited options, we crossed onto the beach and started a driftwood fire with an old boat flare.

The December breeze blew cool off the water. We'd run out of places to flee, trapped at the edge of the Gulf of America. No-one lived off the grid anymore, drones and cameras tracked citizoids everywhere.

Florida's Governor-General, now in his sixth term, enthusiastically pursued people battling Dear Leader's decade-old executive order requiring implanted monitoring chips come citizoids' fifteenth birthday. Most young people submitted resignedly, as had their great-grandparents facing the draft seventy years previously. Resisters were tranqed and forcibly tagged by the "Chippies," the paramilitary enforcement organization. Chippies also monitored the exabytes of data uploaded daily to TruthSocialCloud.

Once chipped, the authorities knew where you were, who you'd talked to, what you read and heard on your communicators, even if you contracted Green COVID-31. No vaccines anymore: if you got the bug, Chippies in biohazard suits snatched you up to die at Camp Everglade. Outside, citizoids nervously scanned the sky for chopcopters and the tranq dart drones that pounced without warning.

"Ray Bradbury wrote books burn at 451 degrees Fahrenheit. I'm telling you, I heated a tester ID chip in the lab, and the chips melt at 421 degrees." The others grimaced, contemplating our final act of rebellion.

Standing in the sand, by the light of the fire, Regina operated, removing the chips buried deep in our forearms. Prior to a FLOGE purge, Regina had been an operating room nurse. She did her best with only a single scalpel, sewing needles, and thread.

"You're first, Buzz," she said, as she held the heated blade over my arm. The fire flickered along the honed edge.

"Going out as an un-chipped man," I said, working up my confidence.

Regina nodded. "Hold still." I couldn't help squirming. In political matters, I'm fearless, but physical pain leaves me wobbly.

Following our crude operations, we applied rags torn from our shirts to staunch the bleeding. We swallowed

the perco-codeine Regina had scored through forged prescriptions.

In an act reminiscent of a holy rite, we tossed our chips into the flames. The chips arced into the fire and melted into black globs on the coals below. We savored the rush of freedom, our ceremony buying additional time before the Chippies found us.

Far in the eastern sky, we could see the flashing lights of hunting chopcopters. We swallowed the large red capsules Regina had stolen from a hospice Pharmavend and plunged into the chilly water. The cold penetrated my flesh but eased the pain from the deep cut on my arm.

I recited the cell-members' names while clumsily swimming from shore. "I'll never forget you, Richard, nor you, Catherine. You're a true human, Dave." Being a 'human' was our highest compliment; few warranted the title anymore.

I heard the others call but couldn't make out what they were saying. Elvis was silent as he stroked toward the Mexican democracy he'd never reach.

"Regina, I'll miss you so much," I called. Lovers, we didn't qualify for official sanction by an ordained priest of the Church of American Exceptionalism, the only legal church. Regina had been married previously.

The Gulf currents started separating us as the "whoop, whoop" of the chopcopters, accompanied by the whine from dozens of drones, arrived above the beach. A bolt of flame flew from one chopcopter; our bonfire blew apart and was extinguished in a rush of air. The rotorcraft circled the last reported location of our chips, sounding like an angry swarm of deadly Asian hornets.

The Chippies couldn't see us in the dark, drifting apart, several hundred yards offshore, but when they turned on their heat detectors, they'd quickly locate us. The capsules began to take effect. My arms and legs felt as heavy as logs, my eyelids dropped, and I slid beneath the water.

"I love you, Regina," I cried as the surface closed over me. If her response made it across the water, I never heard it. 🐙

Bob Ellis, retired exec, has lived on three continents  
and swum in all the oceans!





## // Steering the Bed

Tanya Young

They are three cousins  
In a big king bed  
Resting on castors  
Taking up the whole room

Mary Martha is reading  
Katherine is sleeping  
And Victoria is steering  
The big contraption

Wind parts the gauze curtains  
Out they go  
Tumbling into wonder  
A big backyard full of sky

And a northeaster flinging it's hair  
The line of oaks are plunging and tossing  
As a rising chorus of music  
Swells from the sea

Victoria is reading the sky  
Salt spray in their faces  
The earth below is sacred and wild  
The moon white as a new shirt

Looking down at the narrow road  
She spots hitch-hiker Henry  
Standing at the edge of the ocean  
High tide at his feet

Victoria swoops down  
To gather him up  
Shouting and gesturing  
to grab the contraptions front brass leg

Up they go  
Wobbling in the strong wind  
Hearts climbing into the sky  
Feeling the angels hover

Victoria rides the new light  
Down through the trees  
As the day kicks in  
And the spell is broken

She leaves Henry  
In Aunt Beulah's old hammock  
Where he can rest  
To wait for the day-lilies to open

Nudging the curtains open  
Victoria softly guides the contraption  
Back through the bedroom window  
As the night waves goodbye

Squares of coming light  
Are shuffling into corners  
Young whispers are heard from the bed  
Ordinary words of morning are spoken

**Tanya Young** is a poet of memory,  
place, nature and spirituality.



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Books written by Wes Henson

Available in eBook and paperback  
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WesleyHenson1960@gmail.com

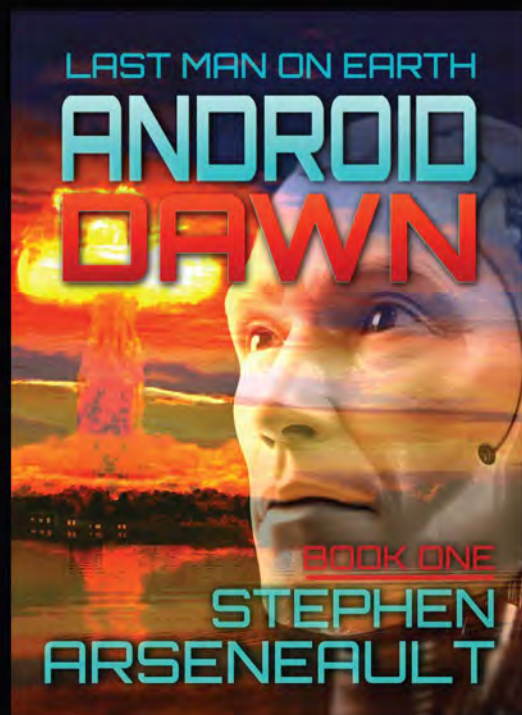
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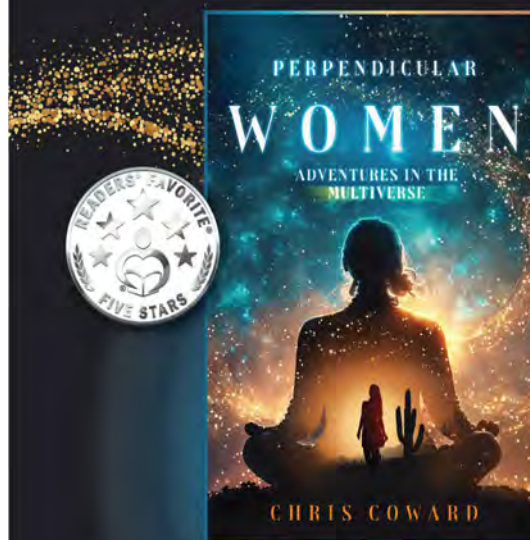


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"Technology and humanity, gadgets and kindness, inventions, inventors, and inventiveness characterize this novel. If there is a question about how to classify it, I'd ask how Vonnegut was classified. Praise Allah and pass the tabouli, minutes remain before we must shake out the prayer mats and perform our Zuhur prayers!"

—AJ Lewis, author of The Amalfi Mysteries

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