

Signature's

2017

Ultimate

Writing

Guide

**presented
with**



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Five Tools to Give You a Running Jump Over Writer's Block

by OLIVIA FOX CABANE & JUDAH POLLACK

There is nothing worse than the blank page, or screen. It stares back at you. Mocks you. It seems to laugh like it's ticklish at every attempt you make to write a word on it. In doing research for our book, *The Net and The Butterfly*, we learned how the brain achieves breakthroughs. Your brain's creative engine, what we call the genius lounge, and the tools we created to access it can help with writer's block. Here are five tools to help spark your insight and carry you over any bout of writer's block.

1. CHANGE ONE RULE IN THE WORLD OF YOUR GENRE

If you're writing science fiction or fantasy, change one rule of nature. Imagine gravity stops working at ten PM. Or imagine the continents move around the earth at 100 mph. How is the world, how is the culture different because of this one rule change? If gravity stops working at ten PM, how do you have

late-night parties? If the continents move so quickly, how do people prepare for such fast-changing seasons? Do the rich move from continent to continent to stay in the best weather?

If you're writing a character-driven piece, change one rule of biology. Imagine people lived to 130 years old in excellent health. How would this change the way people saw marriage, parenthood, careers?

These exercises don't have to lead to what you'll actually write about. But they will help spark your brain into new places.

2. DRAW THE SCENE YOU'RE STUCK ON

Don't worry, it doesn't have to be a good drawing. Stick figures work fine. But drawing accesses your genius lounge in a completely different way than words. When you're blocked on what to write you may

have an easy time drawing it. You can even use a series of square frames like a story board to draw out scenes and write the captions or dialogue underneath.

3. TOUCH DIFFERENT TEXTURES

While writing is undoubtedly a mental exercise, the genius lounge takes in amazing amounts of sensory information. And our hands have veritable superhighways up into our brains and our genius lounge. Running your hand along a brick wall, touching a silk scarf, the feel of a chain on a swing set – all of these will send igniting sparks into your genius lounge. They will also, chances are, spark memories.

4. MEMORY JUKEBOX

Memories are another way to spark your genius lounge to life. Sometimes we ignore our memories because we feel like we already know

them and they can't give birth to something new. But because our memories have neural connections to parts of our brains that think about the future and infer possibilities, our memories are keys to thinking creatively. So open up an old yearbook, look through your photos, and ask your parents what you were like as a child.

5. RESPONSIBILITY TRANSFER

We can often get blocked because of our own fear that we will not write well enough. With the responsibility transfer you take responsibility for the outcome and place it onto a higher being, thus relieving yourself of the pressure that can cause a block. Here's how it works.

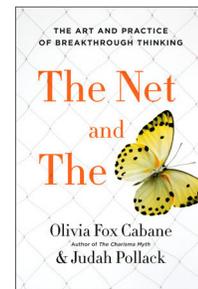
- Sit comfortably or lie down, re-

lax, and close your eyes.

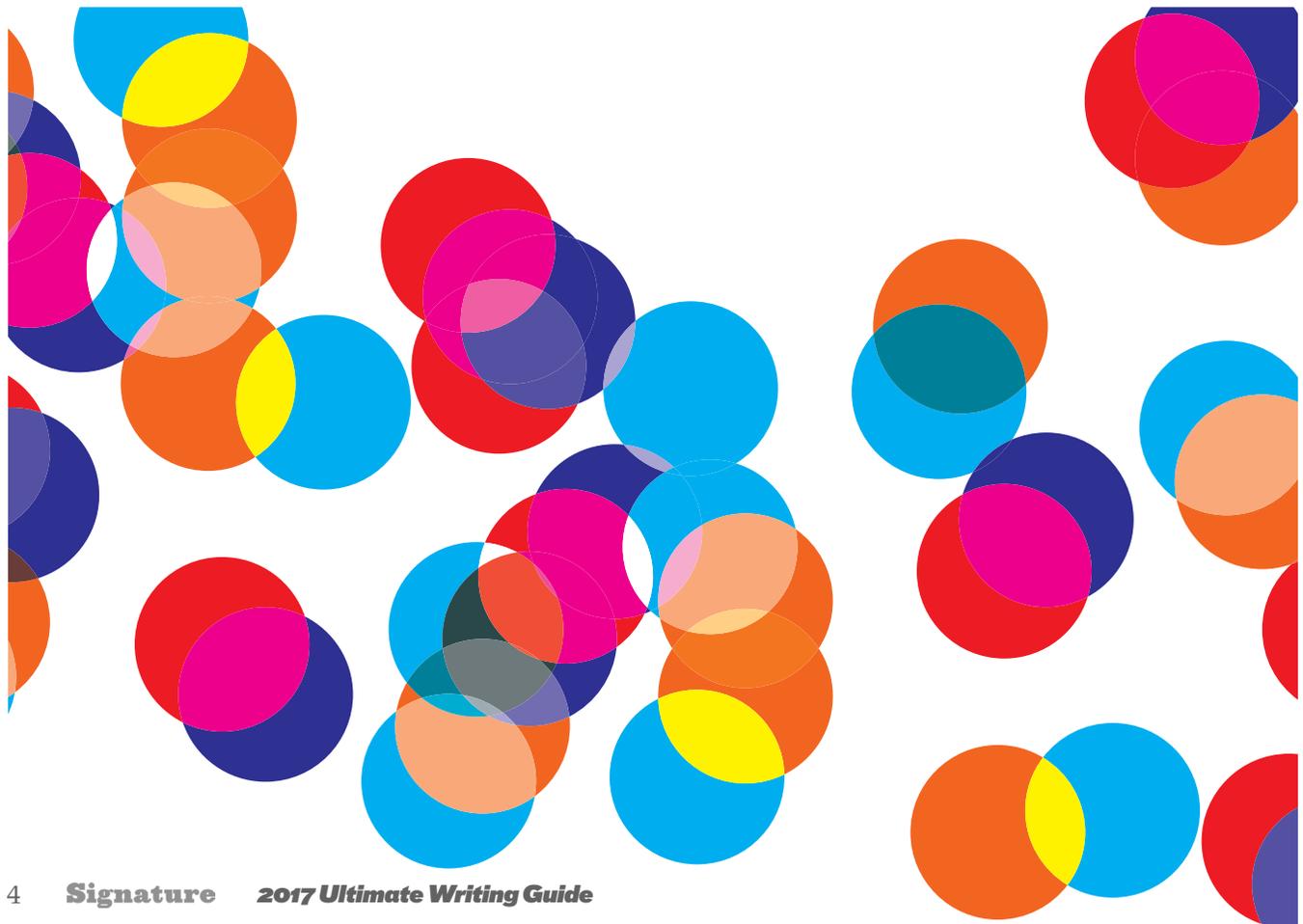
- Take two or three deep breaths. As you inhale, imagine drawing clean air toward the top of your head. As you exhale, let that air whoosh through you, washing away all worries and concerns.
- Pick an entity — God, fate, the universe, whatever may best suit your beliefs — you can think of as benevolent.
- Imagine lifting the weight of everything you're concerned about — this meeting, this interaction, this day — off your shoulders and placing it on the shoulders of the entity you've chosen. They're in charge now.
- Visually lift it off your shoulders and feel the difference as you are now no longer responsible for the outcome of any

of these things. Everything is taken care of. You can sit back, relax, and enjoy whatever good you can find along the way.

OLIVIA FOX CABANE AND JUDAH POLLACK are the authors of *The Net and the Butterfly*.



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It Is Okay to Change Paths

by TESS GERRITSEN

Long before I became a doctor, I was a writer. At the age of seven I wrote my first suspense novel, about a blue zebra named Mickey who was warned never to go into the jungle. Naturally, Mickey went into the jungle. I bound the pages together with needle and thread and proudly announced to my father that I had found my future career. I was going to write books!

My father said that was no way to make a living. And that's how I ended up in medical school instead.

Although it delayed my childhood dream of becoming a novelist, I never once regretted studying medicine. I'm fascinated by science. I enjoyed meeting people from all walks of life — doctors treat everyone, from bankers to the homeless. But my passion to write never left me, and when I went on maternity leave and finally had a chance to complete my first novel, I realized

that writing was what I was *really* meant to do. Even though I'd made an occupational detour, those eleven years of medical training turned out to be the best education a writer could hope for.

Those eleven years of medical training turned out to be the best education a writer could hope for.

I finally used my medical knowledge in my tenth novel, the medical thriller *Harvest*. To my surprise, *Harvest* hit the *New York Times* bestseller list. Up till then, I had

assumed that readers didn't care if medical scenes were realistic, but *Harvest* taught me that, yes, readers *are* interested in what doctors do and think. My literary agent told me: "Readers want to know secrets." They want to peek behind the O.R. and autopsy room doors. They want to know what doctors won't tell them. All the years I'd spent learning to be a doctor meant I could write with the level of authenticity readers are searching for.

Since then, I've tried to provide just those details. Have you ever wanted to know the physics behind why a plane or car crash kills you? I revealed that secret in *Gravity*. Ever wondered if you could buy your way to a higher spot on the organ transplant list? In *Harvest*, I revealed how it's possible. In *Bone Garden* I described how to amputate a limb without anesthesia; in *Ice Cold*, I described death by nerve gas; and in *Playing With*

Fire, I explored the baffling behavior of patients with partial complex seizures.

Over the years, as I've described autopsies, E.R.s, crime scenes, and even resuscitation in space, I've exhibited the doctor's point of view. I know how panicked a doctor feels as a life drains away beneath his hands, and the thrill of hearing a silent monitor suddenly start to beep with a renewed heartbeat. I also understand the logical manner in which doctors approach problems, how they must sift the subjective from the objective, and try to tease out the facts from the emotions.

In my Rizzoli and Isles crime series, medical examiner Dr. Maura Isles gives us the doctor's point of view. When she and Jane investigate a murder, no matter how disturbing the crime scene may be, Maura thinks like a doctor. Like a surgeon faced with an **exsanguinating**  patient, Maura must suppress her horror and get to work. Others may think she's cold-blooded or robotic, but that's how Maura stays in control: by staying focused and doing her job.

I no longer practice medicine, but when I sit down to write a novel I sometimes imagine I'm once again donning a doctor's gloves and white coat, this time as Maura Isles, my alter ego. Over the course of eleven books, I've grafted much of my own personality onto Maura. She and I are fascinated by science, we graduated from the same universities, and shared the same major. We both play the piano,

drive the same car, even favor the same wine. In a world that's far too chaotic and unpredictable, we both search for logical explanations.

In fiction, at least, Maura can find them.

TESS GERRITSEN is the author of *I Know a Secret*.



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Research, But Not Too Soon

by JULIA GLASS

When I teach, I like debunking the mythical dictates carved in the styrofoam pillars supporting the shrine built to deify the Real Writer. (Picture the Lincoln Memorial, but it's Ernest Hemingway up on that throne, fountain pen clenched in a fist as big as a Thanksgiving turkey.) There's a reason, I point out, that novelists do not have to pass exams to practice their trade. Architects and sea captains, sure. Surgeons, you bet. Why not novelists? Simple: Our form of malpractice won't kill anybody. The worst we can do is bore you silly, fail to suspend your disbelief, make you waste a little money. So we get to do this thing we do by whatever rules and rituals we devise.

Prominent among those dictates (close on the heels of *Write every day*) is *Write what you know*. Which holds true, admittedly, to the extent that every journey be-

gins at home. But I like Grace Paley's retort: "We don't write about what we know; we write about what we don't know about what we know." Write what you want to know, and start out pretending you know a lot more than you do. Surmise, invent, and bluff your way through it as far as you can. Flex your imagination. Why else are you here?

I won't deny that laziness factors into my method.

One of the ancillary pleasures in writing fiction, however, is finding out stuff; "real" stuff; stuff you never knew before; stuff you *need* to know if the story you're telling is to hold up as true. Curiosity is the apprentice to your imagina-

tion. Yet I have found that the longer I can put off my research, the stronger and tighter my stories are. This is personal, of course; maybe you, setting out to write the great modern Western, need to pack up and live as a Wyoming cowhand before you can write a single word. Herman Melville went on an honest-to-God whaling voyage — no luxury cruise — before sitting down to write *Moby-Dick*. I hasten to add that I am not writing historical fiction, so the broad context of my work is the world we live in now; nevertheless, I delve deeply into my characters' personal histories, which means I'm facing history with a capital H. I may need to find out about, for instance, the rationing of farm equipment during World War II. (Wars of the last century have influenced the lives of my fictional people as dramatically as they have the lives of actual people.)

I won't deny that laziness factors into my method. Years ago, I loved nothing more than a good excuse to roam the library stacks. Now, even heading down screen to Safari seems like a chore when all I want to do is hang around with my characters, eavesdrop on their secrets, and get them in trouble just to find out how they'll endure (or not).

In every story, I challenge myself to create characters outside my know-it-all zone, but never arbitrarily. Though I may not understand why, I will have felt a deep curiosity to inhabit the psyche of a wildlife biologist, a pastry chef, a Guatemalan gardener, an elderly widower, a music critic, the devout Catholic mother of two gay sons, a cancer patient, a cellist, a lonely film star, an insolent young man bent on what he sees as constructive anarchy.

To know their passions, preoccupations, and afflictions, I have researched the infrastructure of

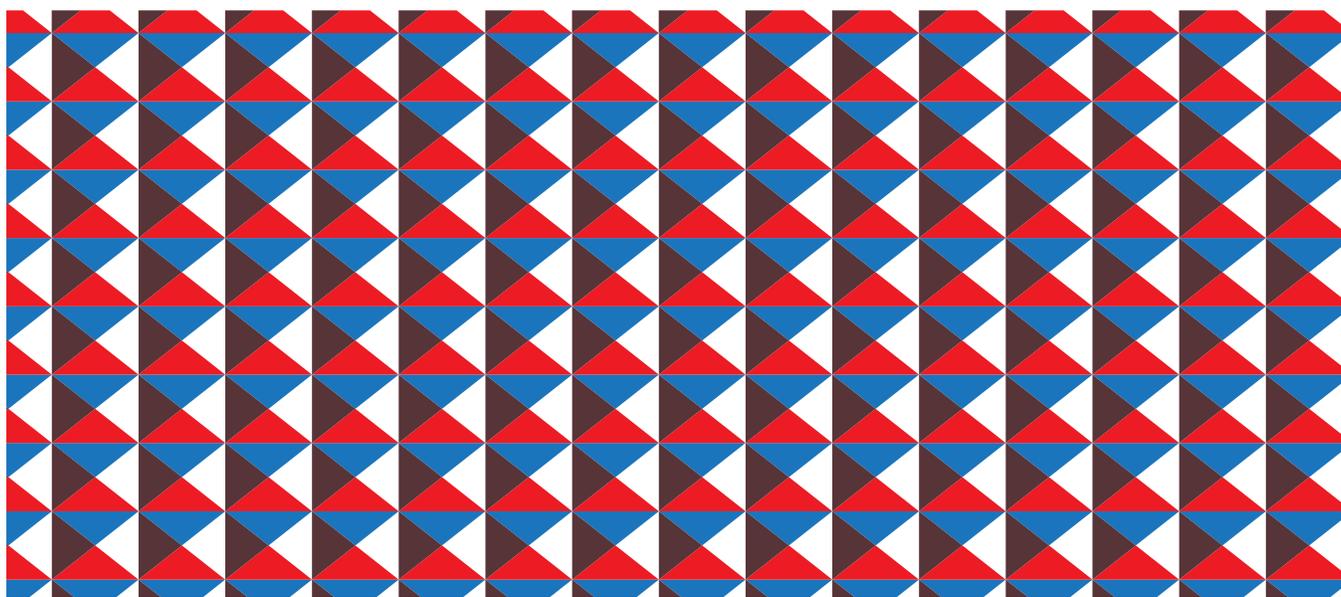
wedding cakes, the culture of a 1960s summer camp for teenage musicians, the pathology and treatment of AIDS in the 1980s, the training of Border collies, the politics of water rights in the Southwest, the conservation of grizzly bears — but I began by writing from instinct and hearsay. The

covered on the variously eccentric traditions surrounding wedding confections was hard to leave behind, but because I was working to authenticate an existing scene, the narrative had only so much give.) The story must be the boss of the research, not the other way around.

In every story, I challenge myself to create characters outside my know-it-all zone, but never arbitrarily.

problem with doing research too soon is this: If I uncover too much captivating knowledge in advance, I cannot resist including it, nor can I tell when it dilutes or distracts from the story I'm trying to tell. If, on the other hand, I must pack it into the brimming suitcase of an existing story, only the pertinent details will fit. (The vast lore I un-

I like doing my research live, using people as sources whenever I can. And sometimes those people find me. Years ago, while struggling to craft a character living with the after-effects of head trauma, after reading medical journals had left me more confused than informed, I was called for jury duty — where I happened to meet a stranger who



had gone through an experience parallel to that of my character. I conducted some enormously fruitful “research” over lunch breaks from the courthouse.

Inevitably, you miss things. If you’re lucky, people who read your work early on catch those gaffes before it’s too late: the clam sauce with onions, the cello seated behind the flute; an idiom or a gadget or a popular song deployed before its time. Sometimes, however, alternative facts wind up in print. In *Three Junes*, I began by using memory and guesswork to describe the surroundings of a Scottish country home, an essential setting, knowing I’d fine-tune the details later. Several drafts later, I consulted a guide to British birding, overwriting my placeholder blue jays, robins, and cardinals with yellowhammers, [chiffchaffs](#) , and collared doves. Botanically, however, it turns out I wasn’t so thorough.

There I was, out on tour, closing

my book after reading to a small audience, when a hand shot up, emphatically. “Excuse me,” said my questioner, “but please see page 117. It isn’t possible, you realize, for the women’s final at Wimbledon to fall within the month of June. And, on page 47, can you tell me what a dogwood tree is doing in Scotland? Dogwoods grow only in North America.” He was holding a copy of my book sprouting a thicket of Post-Its. He was my first of a certain kind of reader. I want to hug and slug these people at the very same time. They are, after all, devoted to the truth.

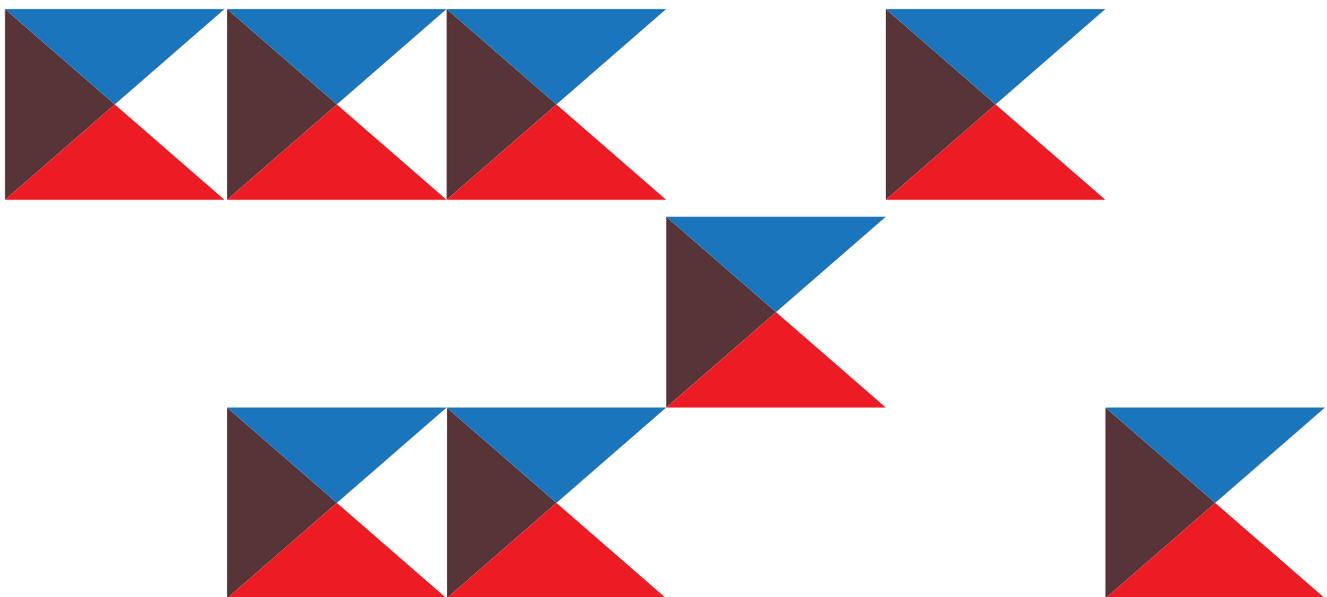
Okay, so he had me on Wimbledon — a necessary torqueing of reality that I had hoped no one would notice. “But as for the dogwood,” I said, keeping my cool, “there were these American houseguests who, wanting to make a memorable impression on their Scottish hosts, and knowing how much they cherished their garden, smuggled a dogwood sapling in their luggage as a

house present. The climate proved perfectly hospitable. The guests were invited back. Next time, they brought a pair of blue jays.”

JULIA GLASS is the author of *A House Among the Trees*.



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Write Commandments: Six Steps to Turn Off Your Internal Editor

by JILL SANTOPOLO

I'm an author. And an editor. But never at the same time.

I've traveled a lot — all over North America and to Europe as well — to talk to writers about the craft of writing. I've given talks about plot, about character, about voice, about emotion, and have had wonderful conversations about stories with tons of booklovers. But inevitably, at some point in the conversation, someone asks me how my editorial brain coexists with my writer brain — whether I'm always editing what I write. And the answer, of course, is yes, I do edit what I write, but I don't edit it — I couldn't possibly edit it — in the same way I edit someone else's work. And I never edit it until I've finished a complete first draft.

In the first book I wrote, *The Nina, The Pinta, and the Vanishing Treasure*, which is a mystery

for elementary schoolers, I edited and edited the first chapter until I felt like it was as close to perfect as I could make it before I moved on. And then I did the same with the second chapter. And the third. The book — which is only about 20,000 words — took me nearly a year to draft, and then when I got to the end, I realized that I'd constructed the plot all wrong, and all of that painstaking editing was, while perhaps not a waste of time, extraordinarily inefficient, because now I had to rewrite half of those chapters and revise the rest so that they made sense with the new plot structure. So over the next couple of years, I devised a plan, a way

to turn off my internal editor and write more efficiently. These are my writing commandments.

1. THOU SHALT OUTLINE

Before I start writing, I go through the entire story, chapter by chapter, and decide what important plot and emotional events will happen in each one. That way, I always know where the story's going and will feel compelled to move forward instead of working on the same chapter for months.

2. THOU SHALT NOT RE-READ EARLIER SECTIONS

With my first book, I would start every writing session by reread-

When I got to the end, I realized that I'd constructed the plot all wrong.

ing everything I'd already written, revising all of that, and only then start on new material. That meant that the longer the book got, the more time I needed to set aside each day to write. I realized afterward that this made no sense, so now I don't read over what I've written until I have a whole draft done.

3. THOU SHALT HAVE GOALS

I break down my writing goals into manageable tasks that I *must* complete. When I'm drafting, my goals are all quantity based: 1,000 words today, 1,500 words this weekend, etc. And then once I have a draft done, I give myself chapter goals: Revise four chapters this weekend, one chapter after dinner. When I have that target in my mind, I push through to get things done.

4. THOU SHALT NOT SHARE YOUR WORK UNTIL IT'S COMPLETE

I have an amazingly generous, perceptive writing group, but I try not to share pages with them while I'm mid-draft. I want their thoughts on the whole book at once, otherwise it's quite likely I'd begin inputting their edits into early pages and work so hard on those that it would take me forever to get through a complete draft.

5. THOU SHALT ACCEPT THAT SOME THINGS CAN BE FILLED IN LATER

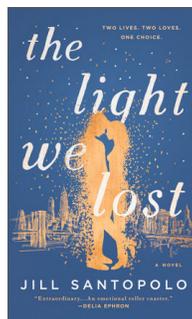
Sometimes I'll be going along and a thought will strike me about a section I've already written. Instead of going back and revising that scene right then, I scroll back to that scene and make myself a note that says something like [REMEMBER

TO ADD IN THE THING ABOUT THE PASTA POT]. And then when I'm up to the revising stage, I add that part in.

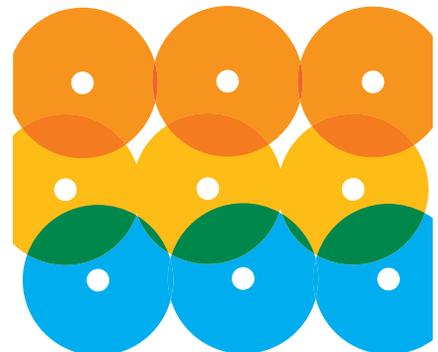
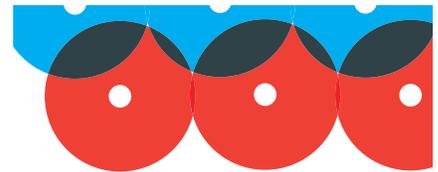
6. THOU SHALT REMEMBER THAT THIS MANUSCRIPT IS NOT WRITTEN IN STONE

I think the true key to turning off any internal editing is to remember that every book goes through multiple revisions in its lifetime. The words and phrases and sentences don't have to be perfect right away — I spent four years writing and revising *The Light We Lost*. Some lines are the same as they were in the first draft, but many are not. In the end, understanding that I'd eventually be letting go of so much that I'd written is what made it easiest for me to turn off that internal editor and enjoy the act of creation inherent in writing.

JILL SANTOPOLO is the author of *The Light We Lost*.



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The Secret to Feeling at Home as a Writer

by SWAN HUNTLEY

I move a lot. Every year or two, I get rid of almost everything, pack the rest, and head to a new city. I'm constantly getting emails from old friends asking me where I live now. Most of the time, my response is that I live in X but I plan to move to Y, because I've already decided I'm going to move again. It's not unusual for this response to be sent from another city, Z, because on top of moving, I also like to travel. I'm rarely in one place for long.

Yesterday, I was at one of my usual haunts, the airport. A woman asked me what I do. I told her I'm a writer. She said what I expected her to say. "You're so lucky. You can work anywhere." I hear this phrase a lot. I'm usually jetlagged and trying to get somewhere; I'm not paying hard attention. But when I really stop to consider it, "anywhere" is exactly where I live.

Two days ago, I was in Paris. I woke up, meditated, had coffee, wrote in my journal, worked on some edits, and then ate quiche and went to a museum because that's what you do in Paris.

The subtext is that rituals are potentially dangerous, and in the extreme, of course I agree.

Yesterday, I woke up in New York. I meditated, had coffee, wrote in my journal, got on a plane.

Today, I'm in Asheville. I meditated, had coffee, wrote in my journal, and now I'm writing this.

In all these places, I stayed with friends or family, and in each place, I found little pieces of myself — the coffee I bought last time, the book I left, my flip flops.

I went to an Ann Patchett reading in La Jolla a few years ago. When asked about her rituals, Ann Patchett told us she had none. She could work anywhere, at any time, as long as she had her computer. Give Ann Patchett fifteen minutes in a waiting room and she could write a paragraph or two.

Often, when writers talk about this kind of flexibility, the subtext is that rituals are potentially dangerous, and in the extreme, of course I agree. When we cling too desperately to external elements that can be taken away, the atmosphere

becomes too fragile, and the thing you're trying to write too precious.

When I first started writing, I was clinging hard. My talon marks were all over the place. It was stressful. I had to have the window cracked just enough, but not too much. The computer had to be at a certain angle. My note-taking pen had to be one that inspired me to take notes. Then the wind would blow too hard and my perfect assemblage of "writer at work" would crack and die, and it would take me a few minutes to get my ruffled feathers back in place.

Now, having written some books, I'm less scared. I'm no longer envious of Ann Patchett pounding it out in a waiting room because I finally understand what everyone's been telling me all along: We all do this differently.

The person who's constantly on the move can't help but long to feel grounded, and my simple routine does that for me. It provides a sense of home in the most obvious and sensory way — the smell of that coffee I like, the same journal every day.

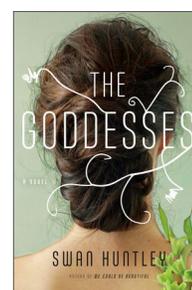
Unlike before, though, my entire existence is no longer delicately hinged on having these things.

Besides coffee, which is absolutely mandatory, my rituals don't have to be perfectly executed anymore, because it's not really about them anyway. They're just a vehicle to get me to the work.

Familiarity is nice and comforting, but more deeply, it's the act of writing that makes me feel at home — in myself and in the world. I know this because when I'm not writing, I feel directionless, antsy, and a

little undone. When I am writing, whichever city is out the window doesn't matter that much. I can be anywhere, because the truth is that I'm not really there anyway. I'm in another world — one that I'm making up as I go along.

SWAN HUNTLEY is the author of *The Goddesses*.



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Faulkner, Welty, and Goethe Said It Best

by JAN KARON

The Internet is smitten with rules, especially in the form of numbered lists. ‘Ten Rules for Getting Him to Call You the Next Day.’ ‘Five Rules for Making [Profiteroles](#)  To Die For.’

As a writer, I’m smitten with great quotes by writers, all of whom, of course, play by their own rules. If you’re serious (or even semi-serious) about writing, here are a few personal favorites.

On Reading: Faulkner said, “Read everything ... and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master, read! You’ll absorb it.”

Pat Conroy said his family had only two books in their house: the Bible and *Gone with the Wind*. He devoured both, no harm done.

In our farmhouse in the foothills of North Carolina, my first experience with great literature was when my

grandmother read the Old Testament to my sister and me. These stories had everything: Sin. Poetry. Plagues. Drought, floods, fleas, locusts, boils, dancing with tambourines, and the Almighty speaking directly to prophets. What more could you possibly need?

On Becoming Your Characters: Eudora Welty said, “...Enter into the mind, heart, and skin of a human being who is not [yourself]. Whether this happens to be a man or a woman, old or young, with skin black or white, the primary challenge lies in making the jump itself.”

There’s nothing more exhilarating, for me, than the jump. When I first started writing about a short, overweight, diabetic, balding small town priest named Father Tim, I was [gobsmacked](#) , as the Irish say. Could I get into the skin of this very ordinary man?

As I wrote on, I found that he wasn’t ordinary at all, of course. Like the rest of us, he was extraordinary. Fourteen novels flowed out of his many-layered persona.

On What You’ve Got to Be: “You’ve got to be a good date for the reader,” said William Styron.

This may be my favorite writers’ rule of all time. Think about it. This is definitely what you must do if you want the reader to call the following day.

On Sticking to It: When writing my first novel, *At Home in Mitford*, the local newspaper editor asked if I would share the pages with his readers via a column a week. Without such a commitment, I may not have written much of anything at all. Two or three chapters, yes, but 140,000 words, no.

I find the writing of a book to be intensely rewarding and particu-

larly painful. I despair with Eudora that “these words are too weak, too many, and not enough.” I agree with the sportswriter, Red Smith, who said, “You simply sit down at the typewriter, open your veins, and bleed.”

In any case, it is a devouring process, as it should be. One goes at it with quiet terror, grave innocence, and no little faith. In short, we tremble with “Abraham as he held a knife over Isaac,” as Flannery O’Connor said.

In the end, I am forced to follow Nietzsche’s simple but challenging rule of “long obedience in the same direction.”

Highly recommended.

On What to Do If You Are Too Terrified to Begin: Follow Goethe’s rule, which I inscribed with Magic Marker on the wall above my desk when I stepped out on faith and began writing books:

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it; boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”

According to your inclinations, you may straighten pictures on the wall, fluff up sofa cushions and take long walks for your health — anything to avoid sitting down and writing.

But if you stick to it, you may surely find, as did Margaret Mitchell, that “in a weak moment, I have written a book.”

Bonus Rule: People often ask, *How do you write a book?* There is usually a very worried look on the face

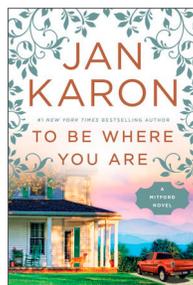
of someone asking this question.

The answer is so simple, it’s embarrassing: *Write the first line.*

What shall I say?, the person might respond.

The answer: *It doesn’t matter. If you must, write that it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Or, that you had a farm in Africa. Anything. And it will all resolve itself.*

JAN KARON is the author of *To Be Where You Are*.



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Four Things Every Writer Can Learn from Charlotte's Web

by BRAD PARKS

I have a bet for you.

You take whatever book you want. It can be the reddest red meat thriller ever devised, with one of those titles that sounds like it's out of breath (*Fast Hard*). It can have a guy on the cover desperately sprinting somewhere (seriously: Why does it seem like so many thriller protagonists are late for a bus?). It can have flap copy that hints of a radical terrorist plot, a species-threatening plague, or nuclear Armageddon — or, better yet, all three.

You take that book.

I'll take *Charlotte's Web*.

I'll bet my book — a children's book with a girl's name in the title and a lamb, a pig, a goose, and a spider on the cover — has a better thriller takeoff than your book.

Don't believe me? Let's go to the

evidence. Because here's how *Charlotte's Web* begins:

"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

"Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."

"I don't see why he needs an ax," continued Fern, who was only eight.

"Well," said her mother, "one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak, and it will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it."

See? You're already hooked. And here's why:

1. IT DOESN'T DILLY DALLY

Four paragraphs. Seventy-nine words. Three tweets-worth of characters (something E.B. White

surely considered in 1952). Yet that's all we need. White doesn't take the time to explain that Mrs. Arable suffered four miscarriages before she had Fern, or that Fern was feeling insecure over her inability to master multiplication tables at school. The characters have simply been set into action, with just enough information that we can appreciate what's happening.

2. YOU CARE ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

Let's look at the two figures who are pretty clearly going to dominate the drama. One is the ultimate underdog: the runt, very small and weak. The other is an eight-year-old girl named after a plant. Both are sympathetic, obviously flawed. And you inherently want to root for them. It doesn't matter if you come to the book as an unapologetic carnivore who has no particular moral qualms about a farmer doing what a farmer needs to do. In

this book there is no Team Bacon.

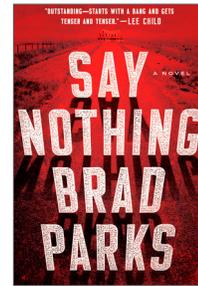
3. THE STAKES ARE CLEAR

You know this is going to be a story where a little girl attempts to save a pig from the burdens of becoming scrapple. Especially in this modern era — when attention spans have become so short — readers want to know this kind of information immediately. If it's a mystery, what murder are we solving? If it's a romance, who's getting together? Readers have a lot more patience for character development, scene-setting, and world building after they know what the book is basically about.

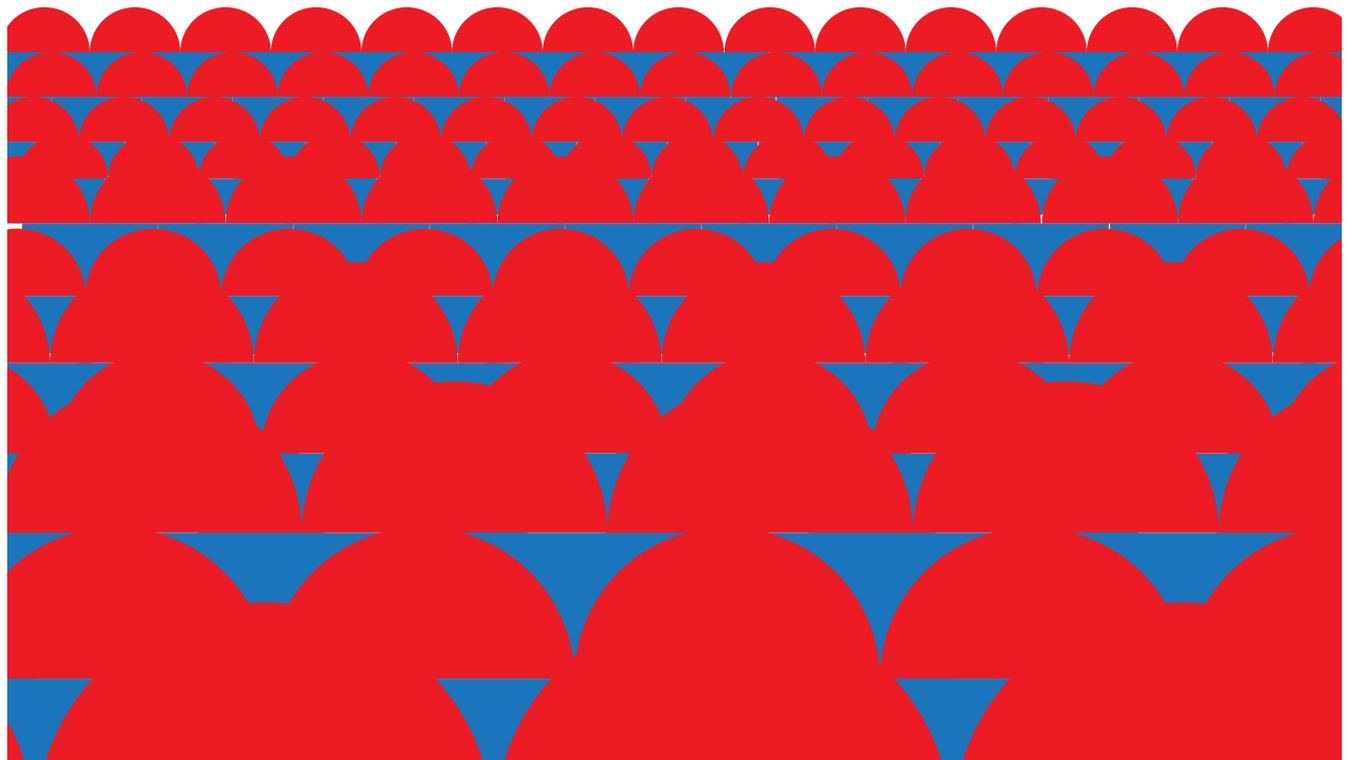
4. THE ODDS ARE STACKED AGAINST THE PROTAGONIST

The ink on the death sentence is already dry. It sucks for the pig, but for the reader, it's exhilarating. Especially during the first half to two-thirds of the book, you have to put as many obstacles in your protagonist's way as possible. Have readers thinking, *Okay, how the heck is she going to work her way out of this mess?* In the back of their head, they know the protagonist is going to win ... somehow. But they have no idea how. That's what keeps them turning pages. And that's why — fifty million copies sold later — my book wins.

BRAD PARKS is the author of *Say Nothing*.



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The Infinite Joys of Wasting Time with the Dictionary

by AMMON SHEA

Very few people think of the dictionary as a something you can read. Some don't even think of it as a book at all, but rather as a tool (just made with paper, or the Internet, rather than metal).

When you're not sure whether or not you've used *egregious* appropriately, or spelled *embarrass* with the amount of Rs it demands, the dictionary is the right tool for the job. However, it is also a mirror of the English language, and as such, it offers a reflection on the human condition, with all its foibles and joy, despair and absurdity.

If you think of the dictionary only as an aid to the mechanics of language, then you're missing the real benefit that the dictionary offers to writers: it is a remarkable aid to the shirking of responsibility, well suited to both wasting your time and teaching you things you do not need to know. All you have

to do is sit down with it (and the format, whether online or paper, is immaterial (sense 2 of *immaterial*, not sense 1)), and allow yourself to wander from word to word without any definite goal.

Hidden in any given part of the alphabet are words of such remarkable specificity that, once encountered, you will want to carry

Hidden in any given part of the alphabet are words of such remarkable specificity.

with you forever. Not necessarily to use, but just to hold and enjoy, so that when you do encounter the thing that they describe you might better notice it and be able to give it meaning.

Let's look at one small portion of our most recent dictionary. In just the words beginning with *ob-*, we

find such useless, thought-provoking gems as *objectee* ("one that is objected to"), *obfuscable* ("capable of being obfuscated"), and *oblivionize* ("to relegate to oblivion"). Browsing earlier editions would yield additional curiosities, such as *obdormition* ("the condition of a limb when asleep"), a word that, sadly, is now an *obsoletism* ("a

thing, especially a word or phrase, that is obsolete").

Side by side with these highly specific words are words that may seem everyday, but upon closer examination may cause you to reconsider how language works. For example, very few native English speakers have looked up the word

How to Strike the Right Balance of Fact and Fiction in Historical Fiction

by FIONA DAVIS

I love it when readers say to me, “After I finished your novel, I went straight to Google to figure out what was true and what was made up!” That’s exactly why historical fiction is my favorite genre: In a good story, I become immersed in a different time period with people I’d never meet otherwise, who are living through situations that are unimaginable today. After I’ve turned the last page, I’m eager to discover the nuggets of truth buried within the work of fiction.

My fictional characters are built around the framework of historical fact. Once I have an idea for a setting for my book — *The Dollhouse* is set in the Barbizon Hotel for Women and *The Address* takes place in the Dakota apartment house — I do a deep dive into the research of the time period (1950s for *The Dollhouse* and 1880s for *The Address*, although they both feature contemporary plotlines

as well). I read everything I can from that era, including newspapers, magazines, fiction, and non-fiction. I also interview experts, like architectural historians who specialize in the Gilded Age, or women who lived in the Barbizon Hotel for Women in the ’50s and ’60s.

That’s when the ideas start to pop. While researching *The Dollhouse*, I learned that when the Barbizon Hotel for Women was turned into luxury condos, a dozen or so long-time residents were moved into rent-controlled apartments on the same floor. Great set-up for a book, I thought.

I read a harrowing newspaper article from the 1950s about the rising heroin epidemic, which was often blamed on bebop jazz musicians. What a great contrast to the rarified world of the hotel, with its guests in pearls and white gloves,

right? So in my plot, I sent one of my characters downtown, where she got mixed up with some seedy characters.

I used the same approach while working on *The Address*. I discovered that in the 1930s, a “lady managerette” ran the Dakota. That gave me the idea for one of my characters: a housekeeper named Sara Smythe who gets an unexpected promotion early in the novel.

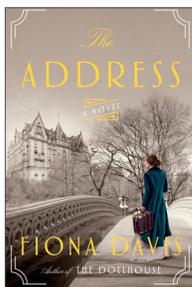
In general, the characters in my stories are all fictional. That gives me room to play around with them, get them into and out of trouble, and not feel constrained by a true historical figure. Exceptions do occur, though. Nelly Bly, a fabulous reporter from the 1880s, makes a quick appearance in *The Address*. As a former journalist, I couldn’t resist. And both buildings were touched by famous, tragic figures. Sylvia Plath stayed at the Barbizon

Hotel in 1953 and wrote about it in *The Bell Jar*, and John Lennon was murdered outside the Dakota in 1980.

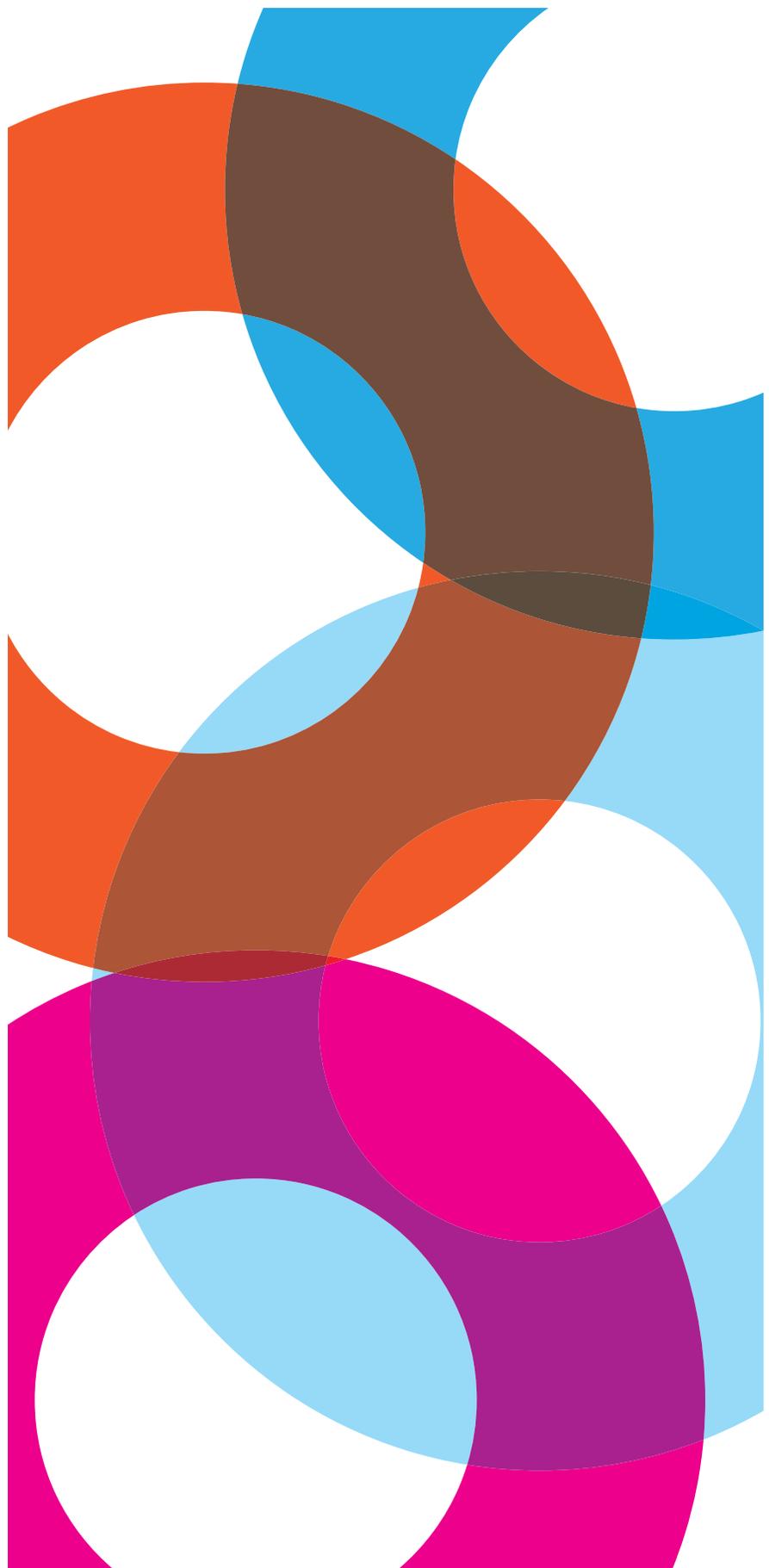
In both those cases, I felt it was important to mention the association, but not linger there. For example, I set the modern-day timeline of *The Address* in 1985, when Strawberry Fields first opened, as a way to respectfully touch upon the tragedy without making it a major part of the story.

A couple of times I've had to slightly fudge dates of real events in order to make the story work. When that happens, I mention it in the author's note at the end, where I also list many of the resources I relied upon. My hope is that readers will continue on in their journey to learn more about the past, and enjoy it as much as I did.

FIONA DAVIS is the author of *The Address*.



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Five Rules for Keeping Fantasy Fiction Realistic

by CHRISTINE FEEHAN

Consider vampires. You likely already have ideas or beliefs about the rules of writing vampires. They must drink blood to survive. They must stay out of the sunlight. They are immortal. We all have these parameters that we feel make up what vampires can or cannot do. But when you write fiction, you can make up any rules you like, right?

YES AND NO

You can certainly adjust the rules, ignore them, or make up new ones to fit your book. Some vampires burn in the sunlight, some sparkle. And if you can make it work, that's fantastic! But even when you write fiction it's good to ground yourself in enough reality that people feel they have a place in your world. They should be able to land in your universe and feel the things you hope you're making them feel when you write.

I have a few rules that I live by when I'm writing. Your rules may be different and that's fine. Here's what works for me.

GROUND YOURSELF IN THE FAMILIAR

Whether writing vampires, shapeshifters, witches, or military experiments gone wrong, make your world recognizable. Even if you write epic fantasy, people need to be able to relate and understand where you are taking them and what they are imagining. Have you ever read a book that had so many

made-up words you just gave up reading it? It can happen.

Your characters need to have strength, weaknesses, conflicts, and abilities, and the more people understand what those are, the more they can see themselves in your characters' shoes.

KNOW WHEN YOU'VE GONE TOO FAR

Some authors have an internal feel for when they've taken their story in a direction that's more fantastical than it should be, and some authors have friends who will cri-

Whether writing vampires, shapeshifters, witches, or military experiments gone wrong, make your world recognizable.

tique or review their stories and give them feedback on that kind of detail. Either way, it's important that you don't let the fantasy elements take the reader out of the story. It's important that you don't allow the fantastical to be more important than the characters and plot.

BALANCE YOURSELF

Readers of paranormal fiction love those special elements in your story. I write romance, but that romantic story has paranormal elements within. Some series demand more of the fantastical than others. Know how to balance fiction and reality proportionate to what the story needs and what readers will want, or what they expect from you.

For example, my Carpathian stories are about an ancient race of vampire hunters, vampires, [mages](#) , shapeshifters, and dragons. I can include more fantasy elements in this series than, say, my Ghostwalker series, which mixes real science with paranormal elements and military experiments gone wrong. I need people to feel as though my psychically enhanced heroes and heroines could actually be real. So ask yourself how much of the fantastical your story calls for.

KNOW YOUR READERS

There's a time and a place for adding more fantastical/paranormal elements to your series or story. If you feel your readers love the paranormal element and would love to see more of it, trust your gut. But be

thoughtful in how you add it in. Do you need one big catalyst to push you into more paranormal territory or is it better to make small steps and lead your readers into accepting where you want to go with your series or book?

It's important to write the book you want to write, but it's also important to consider your readers, who have invested time, money, and heart into your stories. Readers feel invested. Trust your relationship with your readers. Stay in touch with them on social media, your website, and perhaps via a newsletter. Mostly, trust yourself. If you can't enjoy the writing, it's tough to complete a book.

PARANORMAL AND SEX

Whether you're writing paranormal romance, supernatural suspense, fantasy, or any other genre that contains a fantastical element, it's likely sex will factor in along the way. For romance this is nearly a certainty. I'm not one to judge when it comes to the kind of sex people want to put in their book. That said, however, there are some books I don't read because I'm not into the kind of sex they incorporate. And you know what? That's fine.

Sometimes I'll pick up a book because it looks like it's sexy and appeals to me. For the most part, there's no right or wrong as long as it's consensual and the characters are age-appropriate. But like anything else, I try to keep the sex grounded in reality. Can characters float in the clouds as they have sex? Sure. Can they be ghosts? Yes.

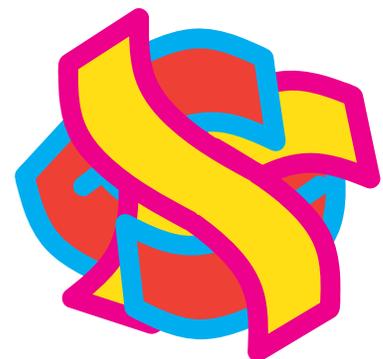
But you want to be sure your readers understand what's going on and that the sex fits the story. Sex should never take a reader out of the story, so whatever rules you have for your world, you need to extend that into the sex.

Your world, your book, your series, your rules. This is your story and you want to enjoy writing it. Rules give readers parameters so they understand and trust that they can feel they are part of the story unfolding. Rules help define your brand in a way. Readers know what to expect and that's why they keep coming back for more.

CHRISTINE FEEHAN is the author of *Power Game*.



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Writing a New Series: A Guide to Creating a World from Scratch

by MEG GARDINER

Every novel I write needs two things: a compelling main character, and a story that hooks the reader. The first novel in a series needs more than that. It calls for either a story that continues beyond “The End,” or a protagonist whose job calls for more stories. Ideally both.

My thriller *Unsub* is about a legendary killer and the young cop who hunts him.

The unsub — an unknown subject in a criminal investigation — starts killing again after twenty years, and Caitlin Hendrix must decipher his coded plan before he drags more innocents to the abyss.

I knew this novel would launch a series. That shaped how I wrote it. As in all my novels, I was creating a world from scratch — but this world requires room to grow. Fortunately, writing two other series (about journalist Evan Delaney

and forensic psychiatrist Jo Beckett) helped prepare me to cook up the world of Caitlin Hendrix.

Here are five things a new series needs:

1. A HERO OR HEROINE WHO CAN HANDLE THE JOB

An everyman, caught up in events beyond their control, can be a terrific hero in a stand alone novel. But a series protagonist needs characteristics that will carry them through multiple novels:

Skills to do the job that will drive the series, book after book (cop, spy, thief ...);

Secrets that readers will thirst to uncover;

Fears that hold them back, and they work to overcome;

An Achilles’ heel 📖 because invincibility is boring.

A heroine must shine. She must be multifaceted and intriguing. But characters must be more than a collection of quirks. (She plays the banjo! Eats popsicles at crime scenes! Trains racing badgers!) And while every hero needs a past, they shouldn’t come laden with so much baggage that they’d sink a cruise ship. Amnesia, triple identities, psychic abilities, a secret addiction to SPAM ... add that up and it’s too much.

Mannerisms and eccentricities don’t make a character. A burning desire for justice does.

How the character defines justice — and seeks it — create distinctive, exciting stories.

2. A CAST OF CHARACTERS WHO CREATE A MATRIX OF “REAL” LIFE

Every character in a novel should illuminate the protagonist in a unique way. Relationships with

recurring characters — friends, family, colleagues — bring to light different aspects of a protagonist’s personality. They also create a nexus that connects the hero to “regular” life outside the central conflict in the story.

Difficult or disruptive characters in the hero’s life can fuel subplots. And they can generate plots for future novels.

3. A WORLD WITH ROOTS THAT CAN DEEPEN AND FLOURISH

The setting of a series becomes a living part of its ecosystem. Where does the hero live and work? Louisiana, Westeros, Future New York City? Do they have a neighborhood hangout where they can unwind? Even in fast-paced thrillers, people should have a chance to catch their breath. They need somewhere to enjoy a few minutes of down time.

In thrillers, you’re going to send your characters through hell. Give them a place to get a good cup of coffee.

4. FORCES OF ANTAGONISM

A story, it’s often said, is only as strong as its antagonist. Every novel must provide the heroine with an adversary. But a series heroine needs a nemesis — an inescapable foe. A Big Bad, a lifelong rival, or personal demons. And a series needs more than the bad guy of the day. It needs an overarching institutional, psychological, or moral antagonist. The System. Corruption. Hypocrisy. These are forces that mass against the heroine and can never be completely vanquished, but against which

she’ll fight, refusing to surrender.

5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

People have histories. And futures. Parcel them out judiciously.

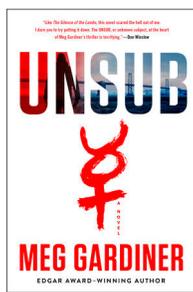
Be stingy. Give your characters a history — but in the first book, only hint at parts of it. Don’t pour out every secret. That way, you can draw it out in future books.

And create unresolved conflicts. Set up battles yet to come.

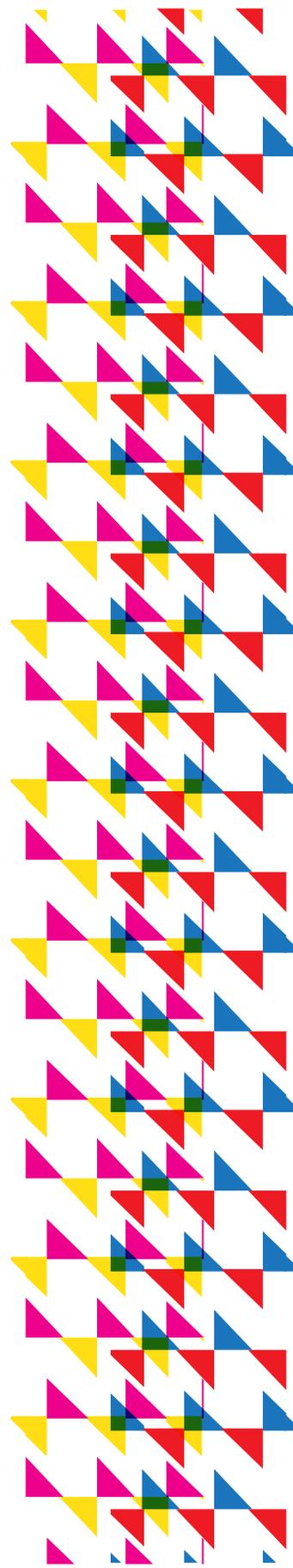
Every novel must work on its own — it should have a beginning, middle, and a satisfying end. But in a series, every book must also plant seeds that don’t pay off yet. A series novel is like a song that ends before the final chord. The melody leads toward the final note ... but leaves us hanging. The music doesn’t resolve. In a series novel, as in a song, when a chord doesn’t resolve, we listen in anticipation, hoping, needing that resolution.

That’s suspense. And that keeps readers coming back for more.

MEG GARDINER is the author of *Unsub*.



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Using Narrative Voice in Speculative Fiction

by SCOTT REINTGEN

Dragons. Spaceships. Dragons *on* spaceships?

One of the reasons we love speculative fiction is that it takes us beyond the reach of our own experiences. Our adrenaline kicks in when we see the ice dragon for the first time, or when a mysterious new planet appears through the portside window.

The challenge with writing a brand new encounter is that the reader often finds themselves in completely unknown territory. If you've ever tried to navigate through a new city without the right directions, you know just how disorienting that experience can be. It's crucial that we give our readers familiar touchstones to keep the experience from being too dizzying.

A successful narrative voice can do just that. Let's define that term first: **narrative voice** is the chosen character lens the author uses

to tell the story. This choice will dictate how the reader experiences your world. Let's examine a few methods for using narrative voice to create familiar feelings and ex-

Hogwarts is great, but one reason we were swept off our feet was because Harry was swept off of his.

periences that allow the rest of your story to be more spectacular:

1. CREATE WONDER

Hogwarts is great, but one reason we were swept off our feet was because *Harry* was swept off of his. Rowling's decision to center the story on someone completely unfamiliar with her world created a narrative voice that's delightfully explorative. Notice, too, how she adjusts this as the series progresses. The narration grows up *with* Harry in each book.

2. CREATE ENEMIES

Katniss doesn't paint a flattering picture of Panem. There are no pulled punches in her narration. She's snarky and bitter and more than willing to call a spade a spade. Collins uses this to keep our relationship with the Capitol straightforward. We know we're supposed to dislike them, because Katniss paints them as a clear enemy.

3. CREATE DEEPER CONFLICTS

One really great tool is looking at the world you've built and creating characters who are clearly at odds with it. Eddard Stark is a great example. He is a man of honor — someone who always chooses the high road. As those novels progress, however, it's clear that Westeros is too cruel and lawless for a man like him.

4. CREATE CLARITY

Orson Scott Card's prose in *Ender's Game* comes to mind. Ender is a deeply analytical character, and Card chooses a straightforward, observant prose to match that. Since the sentence-level writing contains so few bells and whistles, Card is able to funnel the flashier stuff into his world building. It's a great balance.

5. CREATE DRAMATIC IRONY

One of my favorite recent books

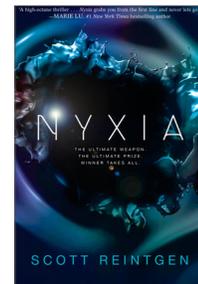
is *Red Rising*. Darrow's narrative voice is dynamic. He is born to poverty and hardship, seeking revenge, and still a confident, competent character. But one of the main drivers in this story is that Darrow has a secret — several secrets — that he's constantly hiding. We're invited into the suspense because we're seeing the threatening world through his eyes.

I hope you'll notice that each of these five tools makes a reader more comfortable, because they're all familiar to our lived experiences. We love being in on a secret (dramatic irony) as much as we love truly grasping a concept (clarity). We've experienced distrust and wonder and conflict — so often, in fact, that they're like old friends we can recognize even at a distance. The key is to offer the reader these familiar touchstones — using the narrative voice — to allow us to set our feet

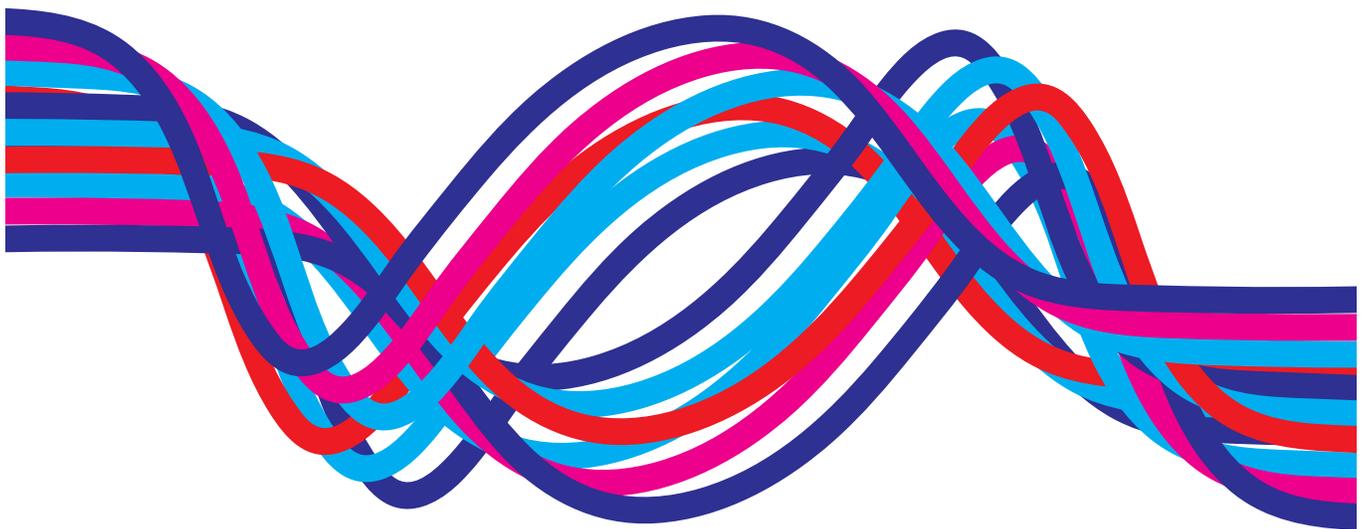
down firmly in the story.

Once you're certain we're locked in and comfortable, go ahead and hit the ignition button. Take us to that alien planet. Reveal that new and deadly magic. We'll be ready to launch into the unknown because you've given us something to hold tight to as we go.

SCOTT REINTGEN is the author of *Nyxia*.



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Four Tips to Transport Your Reader

by BIANCA MARAIS

If books are portals through which readers can step to visit worlds they've never been, then authors are tour guides of the imagination. As a writer, it's your job to transport your readers from this world to the one you've created and then to bring them back safely, though hopefully a little bruised and scuffed, and subtly transformed by their journey. Travelers return from the best kinds of adventures with fond memories, scars that tell their own stories, respect for the people they've encountered, a keenness to return, and a sense of having their horizons expanded in ways that will forever change them. You want the same for your literary explorers.

So how do you achieve that?

If you want to immerse your reader in the world of your novel, you need to be more than a travel agent who just plans their trip and de-

scribes all the amazing stuff they're going to see and experience. You need to be a tour guide who journeys with them, taking them into the heart of your story, and you can make their trip unforgettable by being mindful of the following:

1. MAKE YOUR READER FEEL LIKE A LOCAL

It isn't enough to show a traveler a place they've never been before; you need to make them feel like a local in it. Take them to the secret hangouts only the locals know about, teach them the slang and dialect that makes a place unique. A true traveler doesn't want to feel like an outsider or a tourist who stands on the periphery watching; they want to be a part of the culture and the lifestyle. So immerse them in it. Describe your world so that it becomes a sensory experience that they can smell and taste and touch. Leave them bewildered when the phone rings and they're

forced to return to their apartment or their armchair in the local coffee shop.

2. LET YOUR READER DISCOVER SOMETHING FOR THEMSELVES

Travelers don't want to just see the sights. They want to be given the opportunity to walk off the beaten track and discover things for themselves. Spoon-feeding readers or holding their hands every step of the way is suffocating; let them interpret the experience in their own way and reach their own conclusions. The more they think about your world and try to assign meaning, the more you've engaged them.

3. GIVE YOUR READER A VARIETY OF EXPERIENCES

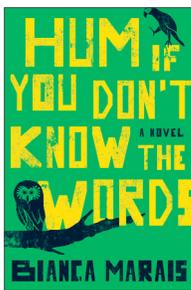
The best journeys are ones that are varied. Travelers may enjoy thrill seeking one moment, but require fun and relaxation in order to recover afterward. Get their pulse racing and synapses firing, but

also give them opportunities to laugh or kick back. The more varied the emotions you evoke in your reader, the more they'll enjoy the experience. Give them characters they can love and hate; give them people they can root for or whose downfall they can desperately desire. Surprise them, make them laugh, and then make them cry.

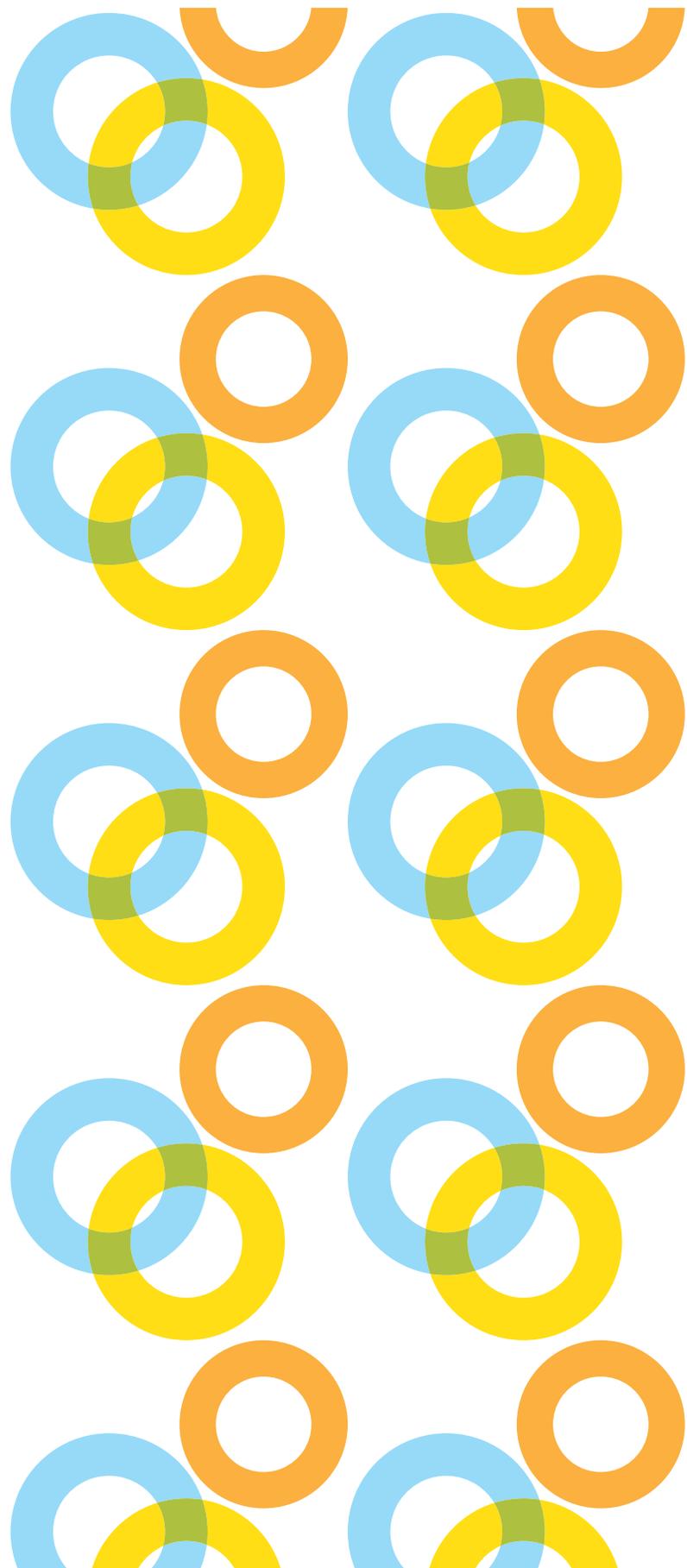
4. TEACH YOUR READER SOMETHING OR EXPAND THEIR WORLD VIEW

Travelers leave the comfort of their homes so that they can become students of the world. If they didn't want to be challenged and learn about different cultures and ways of life, they would never leave the safety of their neighborhoods. Expand your readers' world view so that they come away from your world having grown. Leave them saying, "I never knew that before," because now they do, and they will share that knowledge with others. A reader who talks about a book is a reader who has been transported and will never return to the limited world they knew before.

BIANCA MARAIS is the author of *Hum If You Don't Know the Words*.



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Two People and a Thing: On Writing Climactic Moments

by ALICE MATTISON

You're ready to write the big emotional scene at the end of your book. You're writing memoir or fiction, and it's about, maybe, family life, love (or love gone bad), work. You've arrived at the pages in which the lovers will decide to stay together or break up, the narrator will tell her mother at last that she's lost her faith, the worker will confront the unjust boss — whatever matters most. A big scene, that is, but one that's primarily talk: an argument, the revelation of a secret, a confession. In many books the big scene near the end involves violence, destruction, capture, escape: dramatic action. But in others, talk does the job, and maybe yours is one of those. You write the scene, and the characters look at each other and speak — but the more you reread it the sillier it gets. Now what?

When I was learning to write, I didn't know how to make that

scene happen at all. My stories often ended with a woman alone in a room arguing with herself, then realizing or deciding something, and it took me years to understand that to make a reader feel the intensity of my character's experience, I needed more of the visible, tangible world. I needed another person — a lover, a parent, a boss, a friend — who would argue, scorn, or forbid. The resolution would emerge out of conflict, a conflict using words, not guns, but a conflict nonetheless.

So I put two people into the big scene, not just one. But then what? Two unhappy people looked at each other. They recited arguments, or blurted out painful truths. Maybe they cried. But the scenes felt artificial, as if they came from the kind of instructive film in which a teenager says, "What's wrong with drinking and driving, Dad?" and the father says, "Billy,

let me tell you about a mistake I made when I was your age."

Two people at the climactic mo-

Two people at the climactic moment instead of one was important, but not quite enough.

ment instead of one was important, but not quite enough. What worked, I discovered, was two people and a thing: a gesture, an object, or an action — not an ac-

tion that would *be* the main event, but an action that could precipitate the main event: the intense, definitive talk.

Watching strangers in a public place, you can tell how they feel by their gestures — what their hands do as they speak, how they turn their bodies or step back. The way they hold themselves shows whether they know each other well or have just met, whether they're getting along. Let your characters' bodies show the reader how the characters feel. Let them gesture, handle objects, and move in a way that's revelatory, and I don't mean making them shudder or feel their hearts pound. You don't need to prove that an upsetting remark is upsetting. If one character says, "I don't love you," the reader knows how the other character feels — you don't need to make that character get a stomachache. But what does the rejected person *do*? What does he reach for or handle? Does he sink back in a chair or jump up?

Bodies reveal more than words do. A character says she wants something — but what she does next may suggest that she has mixed feelings. Let tangible objects into your big scene — furniture, kitchen

utensils, tools, articles of clothing. Choose things that aren't already dripping with meaning — not a photograph of the place where the lovers met, not grandmother's wedding ring, not the trophy the team won before they cheated. Something that starts out neutral.

Or, instead of making two people do nothing but talk, let the confron-

Bodies reveal more than words do.

tation come slantwise, while they do something else, something that lets intense feelings emerge. Relatives cooking a dinner may find themselves facing their religious or political differences; a boss and employee, in the stress of a crisis — a deadline, a mistake, someone's racism or dishonesty — may voice hard feelings that haven't come out before. Lovers who are out in public may have to deal with a rejected credit card, an angry stranger, a crime. Maybe one of them makes a mistake while driving and gets a ticket. Any of these events may release feelings that have been wait-

ing to break out. Hasn't a minor mishap in your own life ever led to someone blurting out an important secret, or expressing feelings that hadn't been acknowledged before?

So when it's time to write the big scene, bring two people together, and then look around to see what else is there, or what might happen peripherally. Finally, wait. This is a hard moment; the people in your book need to gather their courage, and so do you. Then let the frightening, life-changing, inevitable confrontation happen.

ALICE MATTISON is the author of *The Kite and the String*.



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The Three Mistakes Thriller Writers Most Often Make

by HESTER YOUNG

Writing a thriller requires the skills of an architect. You need creativity, vision, and a mind for detail. You need to understand how all the parts work in combination to form a whole. It's a lot to balance, and it's easy to take a wrong turn.

Here are three common mistakes writers make when constructing a thriller.

FOCUSING ON PLOT RATHER THAN CHARACTER

The defining elements of a thriller are, without a doubt, plot-related. Anticipation, suspense, and surprise all come from twists and turns in plot. For this reason, many would-be authors spend all their time worrying about action.

That is a mistake.

Even the tensest of plots needs a strong cast of characters. Your readers won't care what happens next if they are not invested in the

people it happens to. That doesn't mean your characters must be likeable. Some of the most enduring characters are probably not people you'd want to spend a weekend with — think Hannibal Lecter, Lisbeth Salander, Tyler Durden, Amy Dunne. Nevertheless, they are complex and mesmerizing creations.

True thrills come from a reader's relationship with the characters, so craft your thriller accordingly. Your protagonist must have flaws. Your villains should have qualities your readers can't help but admire

or empathize with. Supporting characters matter, too. Pepper your novel with individuals who are colorful, honest, funny, recognizable, or just plain excruciating.

There will always be some savvy readers who can spot the plot you're laying down, but if you build a story made of people and not just events, that won't matter. In the best thrillers, we read for the *who*, not just the *what*.

WEAK CHAPTER BREAKS

The most common thing I hear from my readers is, "Oh my gosh, I read *The Gates of Evangeline*

Most of us like to make it to the end of a chapter before setting our book aside. We want a clean break, a feeling of completion.

in two days!” Given that my first novel is four hundred pages long, that’s quite a compliment. So how do you write a book that people won’t want to put down?

It’s all in the chapter breaks.

Most of us like to make it to the end of a chapter before setting our book aside. We want a clean break, a feeling of completion. As a writer, you must exploit this! End each chapter with a burning question the reader wants answered.

Early on, your book should pose a single, high-stakes question that will form the backbone of your novel. Each chapter that follows should:

- a) take a step toward answering that question,
- b) pose new questions, and/or
- c) complicate what readers already know (or think they know) about its answer.

To that end, be mindful of the length of your chapters. If your chapters are too long, readers are more likely to give up in the middle. If they’re very short, you will have a hard time sustaining sus-

pense. My personal sweet spot is about eight to twelve pages. Find your own rhythm.

POORLY DEFINING THEIR SETTING

Setting, in my opinion, is the single most underrated element of fiction. We tend to view descriptive passages as something reserved for literary writers, but a few well-crafted sentences can establish an environment that exponentially enhances the tension.

The where and when of your book also suggests certain cultural norms that your protagonist may or may not be in step with. Remember the Mississippi town in *A Time to Kill* or the dystopian world of *The Hunger Games*? Setting can be an integral part of conflict.

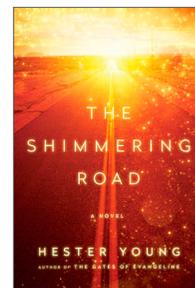
My second book, *The Shimmering Road*, is set in the oppressive August heat of Tucson, Arizona. The book touches upon several hot-button issues particular to life on the Mexican border. Ultimately, the setting becomes a major presence in the novel, offering its own set of dangers and challenges to the protagonist.

Some of the most memorable thrillers use closed settings — a place cut off from society — to great effect. Consider Andy Weir’s *The Martian*, Stephen King’s *The Shining*, and Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None*. The isolated setting immediately ratchets up suspense.

If you’re struggling to get started, finding the right setting just might be the inspiration you need.

Avoid these three pitfalls, and your thriller is off to a solid start. Good luck, and happy writing!

HESTER YOUNG is the author of *The Shimmering Road*.



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You Weren't There? So What: Four Tips on Writing Historical Fiction

by GEORGIA HUNTER

In 2008, I set off on a mission to unearth the story of how my grandfather and his siblings, a family of Polish Jews, managed to survive the Holocaust. After years of collecting oral histories and digging up archival records, I pieced together a cohesive, bare bones narrative, which took shape at first in the form of a massive timeline.

Next came the daunting task of turning that timeline into something readable. I thought hard about penning my book as nonfiction — I'd done all of the research; the facts were there — but in the end I decided I wanted the story to feel immersive, visceral. I wanted it to read like a novel, not a history book.

Whether you're creating your own work of historical fiction or simply curious about what it takes to do so, here are a few things I learned

along the way about blending fact with fiction.

FIRST, SET THE STAGE

Historical fiction, by definition, is a narrative that takes place in the

time. Were the streets paved or cobblestoned? Did the men wear bowler hats or fedoras? What were the social norms?

For me, creating a believable back-

Creating a believable backdrop meant doubling down on my research so I could describe in detail each setting.

past but that allows for an “imaginative reconstruction” of people and events. You can't start to reconstruct someone (or an event), however, without first setting the scene: the geographical, cultural, political, and social climate of the

drop meant doubling down on my research so I could describe in detail each setting, whether a jazz club in pre-war Paris, a prison cell in Krakow, or the barracks of a Siberian gulag 📖. I used as many sensory-rich details as possible in

my descriptions in order to help readers conjure an image of what life was like at the time.

FORGET YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

As you write, remember that your characters weren't privy to the historical perspective we have today. There was no looking back for them — our history is their *now*. In order to convey what it meant to be a Jew on the run during WWII, I had to force myself to forget what I know about the outcome of the Holocaust, and to try to experience the events that were unfolding as my relatives might have. I asked myself constantly: What did they know? What didn't they know?

WRITE IN COLOR VS. IN BLACK AND WHITE

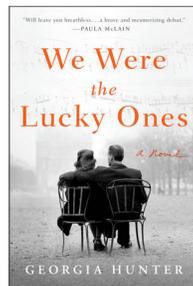
When we look back at a particular time and place in history, often what we see is black and white: the written word, old records, and sepia-toned photographs. The characters whose lives unfold in a historical novel, however, experienced their world in color. So whether describing what it felt like for my grandfather to fall in love or for a great-aunt to attempt a harrowing escape from the Polish ghetto, it helped for me to step back in time and into the shoes of each of my relatives — imagining, to the best of my ability, what the world would have looked like through their eyes.

CHOOSE A LENS AND STICK WITH IT

It was very important to me to tell my story in as truthful a way as possible. But in early drafts, I found

myself adhering almost too strictly to the literal truth: “If I didn't read it or hear it, I can't include it.” This sometimes led to prose that lacked the dimension and color of human experience. In order to add that depth and richness to my story, I found that a better practice was to ask myself over and over again as I wrote: *Could this have actually happened? Would he have said it this way? Could this thought have been running through her mind?* If I felt sure that the answer was yes, I was comfortable including it.

GEORGIA HUNTER is the author of *We Were the Lucky Ones*.



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Ten Non-Negotiable Rules for Hollywood Reporting

by STEPHEN GALLOWAY

In January 2016, a producer friend of mine slipped an odd tidbit into our dinner conversation. “Did you know there’s this writer who made \$100 million, and now he’s lost everything to gambling?” he asked.

It took me a moment to register what he was saying, the number was so vast; it took me even longer to realize who he was talking about — not a financier, an investor, a mogul, but a pugnacious and erudite former professor who had “ankled” the ivory tower and become one of the most brilliant television auteurs  alive. The writer had never made a secret of the darker aspects of his past, involving various addictions that included cocaine; still, this seemed too awful to believe.

I swirled my wine in its glass, stared at the dregs and weighed what I was being told. Addiction was nothing new to the Holly-

wood biosphere; nor was debt a stranger to its workers — even the top ones could earn big and spend big in almost equal measure. Few Hollywood heavyweights, I’ve ob-

The surface camaraderie of Hollywood masks a deep-seated schadenfreude that pervades even its closest relationships.

served, live within their means; even fewer hold onto the wealth they gain at their peak. But making and losing millions! The numbers were unfathomable, especially to this modest-living journalist, sitting there licking my last drop of wine, hoping my friend would pick up the bill.

What followed was a long process of investigation that led to an award-winning story — about which, I must confess, I still have mixed feelings. The story was not

vastly different from many of the investigative pieces other reporters write, except for this: The world of entertainment operates in a bubble where everyone knows everyone else, where alienating one of the kingdom’s subjects runs the risk of alienating all.

This meant I had to go about my

work surreptitiously, before others found out and it blew up in my face, while still following the rules I've always adhered to.

RULE NO. 1: KNOW YOUR SOURCE'S MOTIVES

The surface camaraderie of Hollywood masks a deep-seated

a gossip columnist, but not for a legitimate reporter. Once I'd decided my source was good, I needed to find others — and not just one, but many. That meant reaching out to the people I knew, acquaintances cultivated over many years of breakfasts and lunches and Hol-

where he lived and the property he owned; soon I learned that he'd sold his house and put a second home on the market, enough to hint there was fire where there was smoke.

RULE NO. 4: REACH HIGH AND LOW

Assistants can be as valuable as their bosses, though in Hollywood, oddly, it's the higher-level people who are usually more comfortable talking; the lower-level ones are too scared. Now a low-level contact led me to a higher-level one, who let slip the most critical piece of information so far: that the writer's wife had sued his business managers for allowing her husband to spiral into debt.

Think of Hollywood as a glorified high school, and know that if you write something unpopular, you'll be unpopular too.

schadenfreude 📖 that pervades even its closest relationships. And that makes understanding a source's motives doubly important. Who's telling me this and why? Does he have an ax to grind, or is he just helping me out? Here, my source was impeccable; not a gossip, he didn't expect me to take the information further. Only, now I did.

RULE NO. 2: USE ALL YOUR CONTACTS

Having one source might be fine for

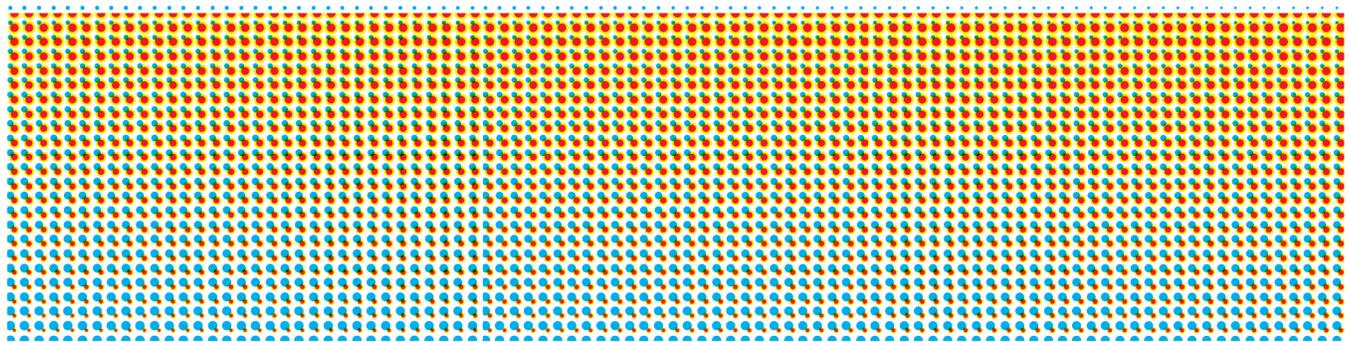
lywood cocktail parties, always bearing in mind two things: that anyone who helped me would want something in return; and, given the dense thicket of the Hollywood community, there was a real risk the story would spill out.

RULE NO. 3: GOOGLE

You'd be astonished how much information exists on the web. After a few hours of trolling, I found a horse-racing newspaper in which the writer discussed his gambling. It didn't take long to discover

RULE NO. 5: USE LEGAL DATABASES

As an editor with *The Hollywood Reporter*, I have access to various databases — and, even better, a helpful colleague who's an expert at using them. Once I'd learned the name of the writer's wife, my colleague did his sleuthing, and twenty-four hours later: bingo! He sent an intern to the courtroom where the lawsuit was filed, and later that day I had it on my desk with all the astonishing details.



RULE NO. 6: REACH BEYOND HOLLYWOOD

The lawsuit was just the beginning, because now the story had to be fleshed out, and that meant throwing a net past the usual suspects. Enlisting another reporter to help, I started venturing with him to racetracks and casinos to see what we could find. We got lucky: At least two men we interviewed at the Santa Anita, California, track provided valuable details, adding “color” to the story if nothing essential. Now we had all the facts, and just needed to verify them.

RULE NO. 7: GIVE EVERYONE A CHANCE TO RESPOND

It’s only fair to let each side have his say, and so I reached out to the writer, his wife, his agent, and PR people, and also the managers that his wife was suing. I pleaded with the writer’s team to have him speak; I even offered to let him write his own story, because I wanted readers to empathize with his predicament as much as possible. Nobody agreed, but at least they had an opportunity to shoot down anything false.

RULE NO. 8: DON’T SUCCUMB TO PRESSURE

Think of Hollywood as a glorified high school, and know that if you write something unpopular, you’ll be unpopular too. That’s what I faced — and believe me, the criticism was intense, especially when the article came out and one of the best-known comedy producers in the country tweeted his fury. But the truth was too compelling to ignore.

RULE NO. 9: CHECK FOR LIBEL

The libel rules differ for public figures (such as the writer) than for private people; still, I wanted to be cautious in the extreme. In addition to running my story past two high-level editors, I had our lawyer read it with great care before we went to print. She adjusted the wording in some parts, but otherwise gave me the green light.

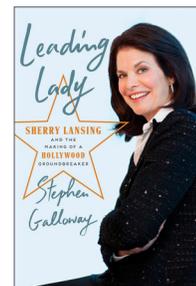
RULE NO. 10: DECIDE WHETHER TO PUBLISH

This was the hardest part of all. With all the work I’d done, I still had doubts. Should I print this story about a writer who clearly had a problem with addiction? Or should I kill it, simply because I felt sorry for him? Empathy and objectivity were at war within me.

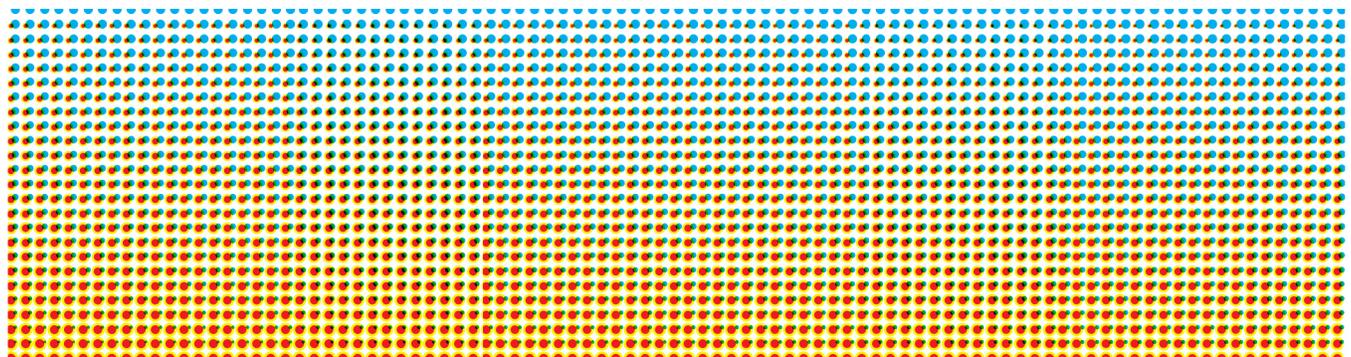
In this case, two factors tipped my thinking toward going with the story: 1) The sheer size of the writer’s losses, with \$17 million still owed to the IRS, made the story significant; and 2) The court papers that the writer’s wife had filed made the matter indisputably public. Once a suit has been filed, there’s no way it will stay secret. That’s harsh for an innocent person who wants to keep his life private, but it’s the way the system works.

Publish and be damned, I thought, better than not publish at all.

STEPHEN GALLOWAY is the author of *Leading Lady*.



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Six Rules for Writing Great Detective Fiction

by SUSIE STEINER

You know the W. Somerset Maugham quote: “There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.” I’m on my fourth novel and my third detective novel and still feel as though I’m driving through a forest in dense fog at night without headlamps. So let me be your guide.

WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

What? You’re not a detective, you say? You’ve never investigated a murder? And you’ve never been a victim of violent crime, ingeniously covered up by a mastermind villain? What are you *doing* in this genre?

I’ve never held with the write-what-you-know thing because I think writing is all about curiosity and imaginative empathy. The research is the fun part: The lives of cops are fascinating. Contact real cops, then make friends with

them. I’m not even kidding. I could not write my novels without the detectives who advise me.

Newspaper clippings are your friend, as are true crime documentaries (*shh, go away, I’m working on my novel while watching TV*). Go where your nose takes you. Real cases, adapted into fiction and adjusted to fit your character’s life situation, are the perfect basis for crime novels.

CUT TO THE CHASE

All novels thrive on incident but detective novels rely on a constant stream of incident to make them gripping. Don’t go describing the rain for pages on end. Have someone walk into the room with a gun instead. If you’re lacking pace, try entering your scene three paragraphs in. You’ll often find there is preamble to the action that you simply don’t need. No one cares what color the chair in the corner

is; they want to hear the couple arguing about their sex life.

JUICY GOSSIP

When I’m trying to think up plot (and I genuinely find it hard), I make an effort to hone in on the things I find juiciest in life — either to hear about in gossip or to read about in books and newspapers. Which story last made you absolutely fizz with curiosity? Did it involve sex? Infidelity? Rotten childhoods? A grisly end? Go to the marrow of what interests *you*, and don’t take your time getting there. See above about entering the scene mid-action.

TWIST SCHMIST

There’s a lot of pressure on writers of psychological thrillers to come up with some killer twist or high concept. Worrying about this can tie you in knots and paralyze your creativity.

Fuhgettaboutit. Suspense can come from knowing the “who” but not the “why.” It can come from the gradual release of clues, which urges the reader to play detective. And it can come from your reader being ahead of your cop, realizing a danger or threat before he or she does. So like I say, twist schmist.

STRUCTURE IS EVERYTHING

I truly believe novels succeed or fail because of their structure. Not caring about structure is like saying your body would be fine without your skeleton. It wouldn't. You'd be a puddle.

I recommend Carolyn Wheat's book *How to Write Killer Fiction* for advice on structure. These days, I'm fairly instinctive about it. I'm aware that the opening three pages have to be the very best writing that you are capable of. My revisions will go over the first pages ad nauseam. I know that by a third of the way through, I instinctively want a secondary plotline to crash up against the first inciting plotline, sending waves across it and confusing just about everyone in the novel. The plot literally thickens at this point.

I've suffered from mushy middle in the past and am very anxious about it these days. Try to avoid this with lots of developments in the police investigation and avoid flashbacks at all costs. (Flashbacks are a recipe for mushy middle. When I read them, I feel like I can hear the author humming, “Dum de dum de dum, is my word count up yet?”).

Then the ending: Oh my gosh, how

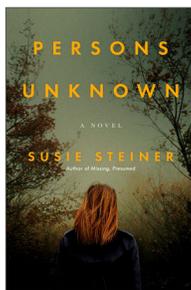
hard is the ending? It has to be satisfying, somewhat unexpected, yet foreshadowed sufficiently so as to not be out of the blue, not to mention psychologically astute. Your resolution needs to give the reader that, “Ahhhhhh, of course! If only I'd seen it earlier!” moment. I try to work out the ending at the beginning of plotting, though I'm rarely successful in this.

BOOKS AREN'T WRITTEN — THEY'RE RE-WITTEN

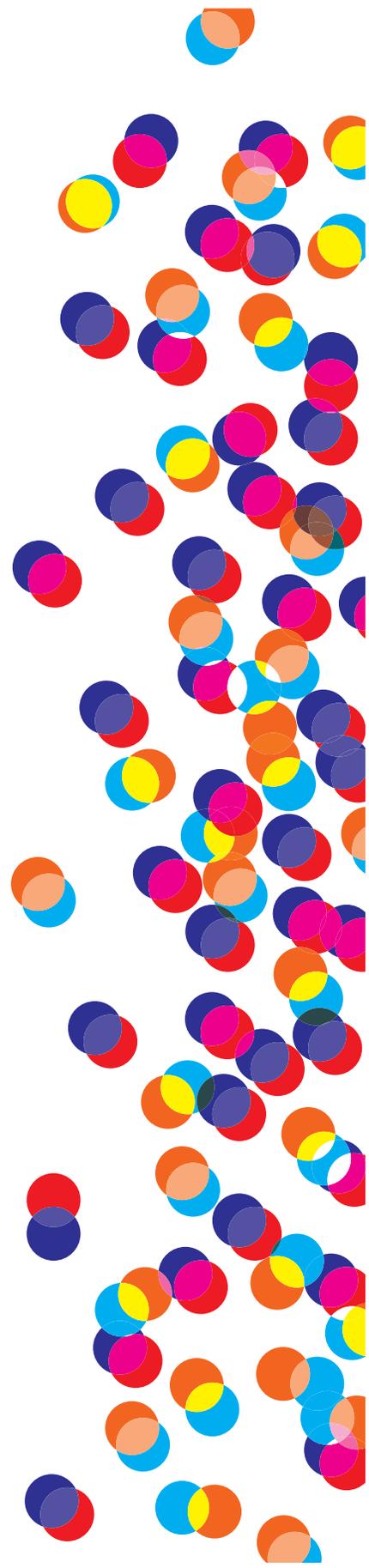
...as Michael Crichton once said.

I revise each manuscript upward of ten times, allowing each draft to go cold before rereading and taking it apart like a cack-handed neurosurgeon. It's okay for your first draft to be an unbridled mess. It's okay for the plot to have more holes than a Swiss cheese. Your first draft is only your undercoat. Slap it up onto the wall and move onto the next phase. Because revising is where the fun stuff happens.

SUSIE STEINER is the author of *Persons Unknown*.



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Genre as Liberation: On Learning to Manipulate Thriller Tropes

by LEE IRBY

Genres can be stern taskmasters, none more so than the thriller with its conventions of suspense that come variously from Aristotle, Poe, and Dan Brown. The action must unfurl from the novel's inception and should be compressed to fit into a short time window. A web of intrigue should span the globe and reach the very highest vaults of power. Forces of darkness conspire to work against a sympathetic protagonist who must battle relentlessly, overcoming obstacles, solving puzzles, and usually saving the planet from wickedness or annihilation.

Taskmasters can coax mediocre work from the lazy and great work from the inspired. The trick is in mastering the conventions of genre with the required depth and confidence so that an author can turn the tables. The reason that Dan Brown sold forty million copies of

The Da Vinci Code wasn't because he slavishly followed all the rules of the genre; it's because he had years of erudition in his head that genre allowed him to organize in

He began with a dead body, but the dead body of a very interesting person ...

a coherent fashion. In effect, genre gave him a road map to follow but without a destination clearly marked out. He began with a dead body, but the dead body of a very

interesting person — perhaps the greatest dead body in all of commercial fiction, a curator of the Louvre. This was the hook of all hooks, and Dan Brown has been justly rewarded.

So the convention appears to be: begin with a dead body. But an author must push beyond that simplistic formula and constantly probe the outer limits, such as Alice Sebold did in *The Lovely Bones* — with her dead body serving as narrator. Here the genre established a basic rule, but this basic rule in no way precludes fictional possibilities. A novel written in genre is still a novel, from its inception a playful medium to address deeply human concerns. Authors cannot allow genres to dictate action, to assume control of the novel. At the same time, when writing a thriller, an author can't spend thirty pages dwelling on how his mother once

kissed him good night as a child, as Marcel Proust did.

Which leads to another thorny problem: the relentless present of a face-paced thriller. The building of suspense resides at the heart of any good thriller. To find out what happens next is why readers turn the page, of course, and so action reigns supreme. But action without strong characters is thin gruel indeed, and here is where true artistry comes in, the ultimate challenge of genre that resembles a battle. Can the author bend genre in a way that allows for full creative expression without sacrificing pace?

The conundrum lies in delineating character while delivering plot twists and the other expected tropes. Gillian Flynn is particularly adept at filling in the backgrounds of her characters while maintaining the foot-falls of mounting dread. The vivid details of her small-town landscape in *Gone Girl* help fuel the action, showing that the world of her novel was fully realized. It's a thriller, but very much rooted in

lives we recognize. She didn't let genre replace the hard work all novelists must do.

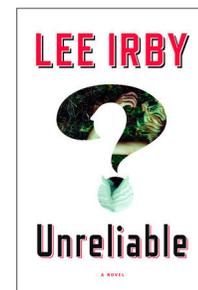
Genre can be liberating, in an artistic sense. To follow and break the rules at the same time can lead to moments of true serendipity. For me, it has elevated the concept of form, the actual structure of the novel, to become the most crucial element, because as in architecture, form follows function. The best architects use local materials and take advantage of natural topography, as Frank Lloyd Wright did with houses like Falling Water, which was built over a waterfall.

I look at genre in a similar way. A thriller, like a house, must have certain features: a bedroom, a dead body, a kitchen, a bad guy. But there is no limit to the possible arrangements of these tropes. In effect, the conventions of genre have opened up new vistas of form to explore, new ways of telling a story that demand much from me as an author. I feel free to take risks knowing that I must adhere to certain storytell-

ing parameters of a thriller, while testing to see how much stress my experiments can take.

I fully expected *Unreliable* to fail, since I was adhering to and violating every convention of a mystery/thriller I could summon. Eventually I assumed it would collapse, and yet it never did because the familiar tropes I subverted maintained the structure. To paraphrase the Bobby Fuller Four, I fought the genre, but the genre won.

LEE IRBY is the author of *Unreliable*.



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The Fine Line Between Humor and Tragedy

by JARED RECK

I book-talk new titles almost every day in my eighth grade classroom, and I always tell my students that while I love books that can make me laugh, what I'm really looking for is the book that can make me laugh *and* rip my guts out.

my readers laugh, right alongside scenes that emotionally gut them. The key, in my own writing, is balancing the two, as each enhances the other. And while I don't think there's any one way to pull this off, there are a few ideas I cling to in

In my first book, a YA contemporary called *A Short History of the Girl Next Door*, that idea comes across as, "Any given moment just might be perfect." Moments like "Trick or Treat" traditions, bus rides to school, neighborhood home run derbies, Candyland played with little brothers, or playing in the snow as kids come to mind. That stuff matters, you know? How many of us, when we lose a grandparent, or a parent, or anyone that matters to us, think, *I really wish I could just go back and have one more cup of coffee together — munch on one more of Grandma's sugar cookies — and talk?*

Similar to recognizing the importance of ordinary moments, emotional resonance can be found in specific, ordinary objects.

They'll look at me like I'm crazy, but I want to *feel* something when I read. I want to be devastated, torn apart by a full range of emotions.

I write what I most love to read. Which means, somehow, I've got to pull off this same kind of magic — writing scenes that make

trying to reach this range of emotional resonance.

ANY GIVEN MOMENT

I love the idea in writing that *in the particular lies the universal* — that there's beauty and emotion and connection in specific, ordinary, seemingly insignificant moments.

Think about the moments that make up your characters' lives before they ever step onto your pages. What are the tiny moments they wish they could go back to?

I use a simple character question-

naire before I ever start writing my stories — twenty, thirty pages of my main character just rambling and sharing his moments with me, interview-style. When I get stuck mid-story, I use the same technique. Knowing these tiny moments is crucial in making his emotional responses authentic.

THE IMPACT OF THINGS

Similar to recognizing the importance of ordinary moments, emotional resonance can be found in specific, ordinary objects. When teaching poetry in my Writing Workshop, I love the William Carlos Williams line, “Say it, no ideas but in things.” To get my students to tackle the big things — love, loss, identity, the alienation of adolescence — they need to zoom in on the little things, in specific objects that hold emotional significance for them.

Think of some of your own. The more weirdly specific, the better:

- the porcelain chicken from your grandmother that sits on the windowsill above the sink in your kitchen;
- the sour-smelling Pound Puppy hidden beneath your pillow, all the stuffing long since wrung from its neck;
- the blue dog collar with the stripe of little white bones, still hanging over the edge of the basket by the door to the garage.

Each item has a story. I’d be willing to bet there are really funny parts to that story if you look early enough on its timeline. Maybe you used to use that floppy-necked Pound

Puppy as a nunchuck against your unsuspecting older brother, asleep in the bunk below you.

Maybe, now, you really miss your brother.

The key is acknowledging — exploiting, even — both ends of that object’s timeline. In *Short History*, the same objects that bring smiles can break hearts: a box of Nerds, a crocheted hat, a stuffed giraffe, a tureen of inappropriately good gravy. And in the end, those same objects may help heal. It’s a balance.

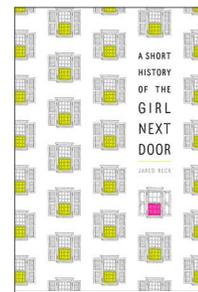
EMOTIONAL RELEASE VALVES

One final thought on balancing humor and tragedy in your writing: Mr. Ellis, Matt’s English teacher in *Short History*, tells his students that there’s a fine line between laughter and pain — that sometimes things are so awful that all you can really do about it is laugh.

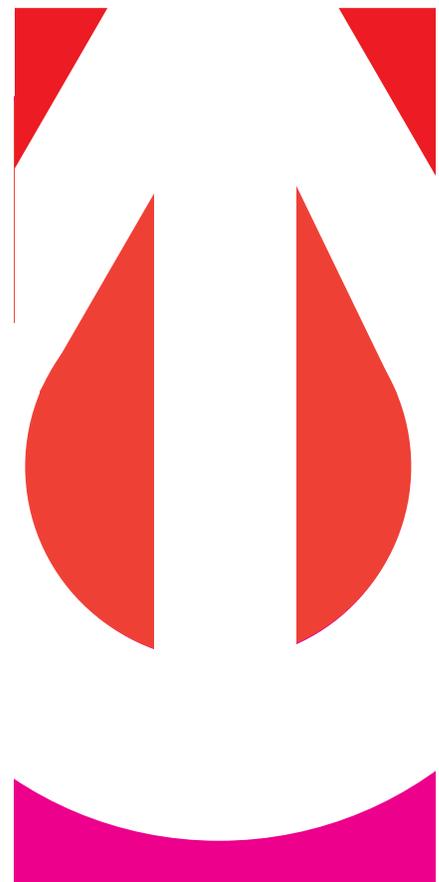
In our own lives, laughter often tags along behind despair, awkwardly waiting for the right moment to speak up. A couple years ago, my wife lost her cousin to cystic fibrosis. I remember sitting in the hospital near the end, after the doctors had removed her cousin from all transplant lists, listening to this girl’s mother howl at old Eddie Murphy clips from *SNL*. She and her daughter used to recite them to each other around the house. Hearing her laugh in that hospital waiting room was simultaneously funny and heartbreaking and beautiful. Her world was crumbling. She needed to laugh.

When your characters’ worlds are crumbling around them, let them laugh. You may crush your readers, but your characters will thank you.

JARED RECK is the author of *A Short History of the Girl Next Door*.



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How to Revise a Draft Without Going Crazy

by DINTY MOORE

Working one-on-one with first-time memoirists and novelists at various summer writing workshops over the past many years, I often find myself needing to deliver the hard news. Perhaps the most difficult lesson I have to pass along is this:

Once you are done writing your book, you aren't really done writing your book. When I say this, foreheads inevitably furrow. Faces fall.

Being reminded of just how much effort is required even after you've put a period on the final sentence of the final chapter of a multi-year project can be deeply discouraging.

Because yes, revision does take effort and time. It needn't, however, be painful.

The blank page is a frightening void. An early draft, however,

filled with words — all pointing in the right direction, but in need of some tender loving care — can be exhilarating. Words are like clay: You can push them around and make all manner of shapes with them. And clay reminds us of childhood. And childhood reminds us of the time when we were the most playful, most creative, and least haunted by voices telling us we can't do things well enough.

In other words, you can approach revision with your head low and your shoulders tensed, thinking, "Boy my sentences are so sloppy and wordy, and everything seems slow. All in all, I'm a pathetic failure."

Or you can approach revision thinking, "Hey, here's my chance to get it right. Let's play around."

Too many areas of life don't afford you a second chance, but writing

does, and you should see that as a good thing. So, here's my advice:

FIRST: GO BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Once you've found an ending to your novel or memoir, look back at your opening impulse. These two moments should be connected, either by a direct line of action and reaction running through the entire book, or through the current of emotion. Sometimes these two moments may also be linked by setting, by imagery, or through a recurrent metaphor. There is no steadfast rule, except that if the beginning and ending don't feel coupled in any significant way, you need to rethink plot and structure.

Remind yourself that a book begins with a question: "How will she overcome this unforeseen challenge?" or "Will this experience change him in some significant way?" The ending doesn't always answer the question fully, but it

should connect, and though the beginning doesn't ask the question explicitly, it should plant the seed.

THEN: EVERYTHING IN THE MIDDLE

Yes, everything.

Locate the emotional undercurrent of your book — what I like to call the Invisible Magnetic River — and review every word, image, metaphor, scene, character, and chapter. Look for scenes, even those you labored over for days that may no longer have any utility to the story, or images and metaphors that — though not poorly shaped — don't fit the overall flow. Though it is heartbreaking to delete twenty pages of honest effort, this momentary agony is far more desirable than settling for a book that limps or sputters somewhere midway.

FINALLY: THE SENTENCE LEVEL

This part is the most fun for me, honestly, though perhaps I have an odd sense of what is enjoyable. I love reading the manuscript through from beginning to end, every sentence, one at a time, OUT LOUD.

Listening to each sentence, feeling it inside of my mouth as I speak it, identifying words I use too often, finding phrases that fall flat, is an opportunity I don't have in everyday life, in spoken conversation. Getting it right just feels good.

Often I improve a sentence by speaking it out loud, then trying another pattern, substituting another word, and then speaking the revised sentence out loud. My ear is frequently more helpful than my brain in identifying simple awkwardness and in recognizing the more vexing problem of sentences that sound good but say little.

Of course, there are days that re-writing can be a slog, just as writing can be. There are moments in revision that I think I'll never find the solution, moments of despair and discouragement.

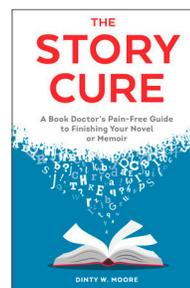
But overall the process is invigorating, and when working well, invigorating for both my prose and my story.

The difference, in my mind, between writers who are successful

in finding an audience and those who struggle, is when and where in the revision process a writer throws in the towel and settles for "good enough."

Learn to be just a bit tougher on your own work than the toughest editor you can imagine, and you just might find that agents and editors suddenly love your book.

DINTY MOORE is the author of *The Story Cure*.



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