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President's Voice

By Erica Ridley



Happy March! For some of you, spring is in the air. In the Costa Rican rain forest where I live, spring showers are part of the year-round adventure. Another fun year-round adventure: keeping up with changes in technology.

Before I became a full-time novelist, I owned a web and software development company. Prior to that, I worked for an international ad agency making websites and marketing materials for organizations ranging from the Fortune 100 to non-profits.

I've been meaning to overhaul my author website for a while now, but there always seems to be some other priority on fire that I need to contend with first. (I'm sure you know the feeling.) This year, I will finally make it happen.

Want to join me in creating an optimized author website? After the NINC updates below, I'll share some tips and tricks for content, marketing, search engine optimization, and monitoring analytics.

2017 NINC Conference: Discovery

Registration for the 2017 NINC Conference: Discovery is now open! To register, please log in, and visit [the conference section of our website](#). You'll also find:

- [The Conference FAQ](#)
- [Hotel information](#)

Accessing the NINC Website

Not sure how to log in to the new NINC website? Visit the [login page](#).

Your username is your email address, and your password was sent to you in an email with subject line "NINC: New website for renewals & more!"

If you didn't see it, be sure to check your spam folder, or email webmaster@ninc.com and we will reset your password for you.

NINC Member Benefits

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

Missing a newsletter? Past issues can be found [here](#). You can also [propose an article](#), submit a [letter to the editor](#), or volunteer to [be an assistant editor](#) and become part of the team. You can also buy a paperback copy of the 2016 Best of Nink!

Optimizing Your Author Website

Whether we're talking websites, product pages, mailing lists, or anything else, the golden marketing rule to keep in mind is that your copy should always be focused on the benefit to the consumer, not to the author.

As a common example, "Subscribe to my mailing list" is the author asking the reader for a favor. Whereas, "Get an exclusive bonus scene by signing up here!" is the author doing the reader a favor.

Similarly, you want to ensure you set up your website not just to share information and buy links *you* want to impart, but rather to provide a service to the reader.

Most visitors to your website have already heard of you before they reach your page. So why are they there? Make sure you're providing whatever information or experience they came for.

Websites 101

Most websites do one or more of the following:

- Share information
- Collect information
- Promote someone or something
- Sell a product

In our case, we want to do all of the above. The first item, share information, is reader-focused. That's why they came. Items two through four are author-focused. We want to collect their emails, interest them in our backlist, sell them our new release.

The key is to strike the right balance. We don't want to be salesy to the point of obnoxious or garish, but we do want to make it as easy as possible to find whatever information the reader came for, and to encourage them to take the next step, be it sign up for our newsletter or pre-order an upcoming title.

To achieve that, we don't need a fancy, super-expensive website with the latest whiz-bang flash animation of our most popular protagonist. In fact, that's a terrible idea. Every day, more and more people find us using their cell phones, Kindles, iPads, etc, many of which lack the plugins necessary for whiz-bang animations, and all of which lack predictable screen resolution.

Once upon a time, virtually everyone surfing the web did so with a horizontal screen of a fairly standard size. Today, people access the internet using everything from widescreen laptops to smartwatches.

For example, here is how people visited my website over the past seven days:

		1,027 % of Total: 59.78% (1,718)
<input type="checkbox"/>	1. Apple iPad	223 (21.71%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	2. Apple iPhone	183 (17.82%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	3. (not set)	40 (3.89%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	4. Amazon KFFOWI Fire	27 (2.63%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	5. Samsung SM-G920V Galaxy S6	20 (1.95%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	6. Nokia N900	16 (1.56%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	7. Amazon KFTT Kindle Fire HD 7	13 (1.27%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	8. QMobile i10	11 (1.07%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	9. Amazon KFSOWI Kindle Fire HD 7 3rd Gen	9 (0.88%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	10. Amazon KFTHWI Kindle Fire HDX 7 3rd Gen	9 (0.88%)

And these are the sizes of their screens:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Screen Resolution ?	Sessions ? ↓
		1,718 % of Total: 100.00% (1,718)
<input type="checkbox"/>	1. 768x1024	240 (13.97%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	2. 360x640	233 (13.56%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	3. 1366x768	155 (9.02%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	4. 375x667	101 (5.88%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	5. 1440x900	94 (5.47%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	6. 1024x768	92 (5.36%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	7. 1920x1080	86 (5.01%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	8. 320x568	76 (4.42%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	9. 1600x900	59 (3.43%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	10. 1280x800	58 (3.38%)

Which means, above all, we must ensure our sites are:

- Legible
- Intuitive
- Easy to navigate
- Easy on the eyes

Legible means no funky fonts—particularly if your website doesn't serve them in a way that the site is still legible when accessed from devices that do not have that font, or cannot render it for whatever reason.

Other legibility no-nos: Black text on gray backgrounds, white text on tan backgrounds, overly large font or overly small font, forcing the user to scroll horizontally as well as vertically to read the text, inability to print in a legible format.

Intuitive means that the reader should not have to waste time figuring out what to do when they visit your website. The location of the primary menu should be obvious. The most important links, images, or text should all be “above the fold”—meaning, visible without scrolling.

Easy to navigate: Whether the reader came in search of your backlist, your front list, your newsletter, your social media, your blog, your bio, your deleted scenes, your bonus content, or anything else, they shouldn’t be more than one click away from their goal, no matter what page they land on.

Easy on the eyes nowadays includes easy on the ears. It’s best to avoid loud, clashing colors, spontaneous music or video that they must then click to shut off, ads that pop up over the content before they’ve even had a chance to orient themselves, animated backgrounds that distract from the text, etc.

If you are not a designer, please make sure your web developer knows that you want what’s called a *responsive design*. This means that your website will be legible and navigable via any device, and is arguably the single most important design element.

Now that you’re attuned to how websites should look, here are the three key questions to keep in mind when designing your website’s content:

What position or image would you like your brand to hold in the minds of readers?

Whether you write gritty horror fiction or inspirational romance, everything about your website should indicate to the reader that they’ve landed in the right place.

If you write multiple genres and you use your website to send each demographic to the right location, just remember that not everyone lands on the home page or splash page. If they’re reaching your site from a Google search, chances are fairly high that their landing page is actually a sub page, rather than the home page. Make sure it’s still clear to them that they did land in the right spot—or that they’re a mere one click away from that spot.

What is the one initial action you want the reader to take when visiting your website?

Again, keep in mind that this may not be the home page, and that “bounce rates” are the high number of visitors who leave after visiting the first page they land on, without clicking to any other pages. If they’re only going to visit one page, you definitely want to make it count.

Note also that this doesn’t always have to be the same action. Maybe during release week, the information you care about most is getting your cover in front of reader eyeballs. Or perhaps you are less concerned about promoting one single title, and are more focused on capturing as many new leads as possible for your mailing list.

Whatever your goal is, make sure it is the easiest, most obvious action to take no matter what page the reader lands on.

In my case, I want new readers to sign up for my newsletter. To make it as easy and obvious as possible, I give the option in multiple ways.

First, I make sure it’s a top-level option in the primary menu bar on every page. However, not everyone will navigate to that page. In fact, a good chunk of people will never click beyond

the home page. So how do I get them on board?

One trick is a signup bar at the top of every page (I use the free Sumo plugin):

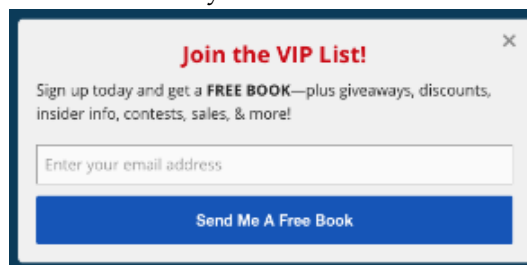


The “smart bar” is self-explanatory and unobtrusive. Not everyone even notices its presence. Less than 1% of visitors click it. So why bother? Because in the twelve months it has been on my site, it has garnered a minimum of one new subscriber per day. 430 reader emails I wouldn’t have had otherwise? I’ll take it!

Name	Status	Bars	Shown	Subscribers	Conversion	Created
Campaign #1		1 active / 1 total	50,599	436	0.86%	2016-03-02 07:56

Another trick is to use an exit-intent popup. Yes, yes, everyone hates popups. That’s absolutely true. It’s also true that the darn things work. I set mine up to only display once every six months (so as not to annoy people who don’t care or are already on the list) and to only fire when the website thinks they are about to navigate away to another site.

Newsletter popups don’t have to be fancy. Mine looks like this:



It has a MUCH higher conversion rate than the smart bar at the top of the screen. Here are the popup stats for the past seven days:

Daily Stats			
Date	Popups	Subscribers	Conversion
Friday	23	4	17.39%
Thursday	13	3	23.08%
Wednesday	48	3	6.25%
Tuesday	127	10	7.87%
February 27th	98	9	9.18%
February 26th	38	8	21.05%
February 25th	34	7	20.59%
February 24th	34	7	20.59%
Total	15,343	2,860	18.64%

In the twelve months that I have had the popup in place, it has garnered almost 3,000 subscribers. Which means just by doing a few set-it-and-forget-it items, my newsletter grows by around ten subscribers per day—of engaged, interested readers.

Once you include the subscribers you gain from the sign-up links in your front- and back-matter, social media, email signature, interviews, blog posts, and so on, it can start to make a huge difference.

As a side note, if there is a secondary action you want web visitors to take—perhaps your newsletter is your #1 focus, but you also want to promote your blog or your upcoming series or your rereleased backlist—then you’ll also want to make sure that it is just as easy to flow from the primary action to the secondary action.

For example, if your first goal is to collect email addresses for your mailing list but your second goal is to promote a discounted boxed set, then one way to achieve this is by taking advantage of your newsletter service’s “redirect” options for new subscribers.

Rather than using the default “Thank you! You are now signed up,” message, most newsletter services allow you to specify a specific thank you page on your website. This page does not have to be part of the regular navigation, and therefore can be tailored to appeal to your brand-new subscriber.

What are the key elements or information you wish to have available on every page or in every section?

Before you get into the actual aesthetics of a design, the first things you need to have are the framework and the content you’re going to provide.

Start by visiting the websites of the top ten authors in your genre and make a note of any perks they offer their readers that you might also like to offer yours. Once you’ve got that, a sometimes even more interesting exercise is to visit ten great websites of authors completely outside your genre to see what they offer their readers. Inspiration can come in the most surprising places.

You by no means need to do or offer every feature you find on every author website on the internet. I don’t use them all either. But you should be offering some sort of added value that they can’t find elsewhere.

In no particular order, here are a few ideas:

- Printable book list (by title, release date, series, etc)
- Family trees
- Map of the story world
- Character interviews
- Character connections (readers love to know how people/places connect across books and series)
- Deleted scenes
- Exclusive prologues, second epilogues, or bonus short stories
- Research notes/photos
- Downloadable excerpts
- Real-life inspirations
- Author interviews (print or video)
- Book trailers or videos
- Contests or giveaways
- Audio editions
- Foreign editions any special international content
- Merchandise (t-shirts, pins, pens, coffee cups, bookmarks, trading cards)

- Recipes (Do you or your characters eat interesting food?)
- Soundtrack (Do you write to music? Do your characters waltz or play the bagpipe?)
- Frequently asked questions (could be about you, your series, your genre/world, history/research, etc.)
- Events & signings (Are you going to be at a workshop or signing? Where have you been in the past?)
- Author cave (Where and how does the magic happen?)
- You as a person (Readers love to feel like they know you. Do you live on a boat? Build Lego masterpieces? Carry a Pomeranian in your laptop case? Photos/stories like these add a great personal touch.)

Note also that readers aren't the only people visiting your website. Make it easy for bloggers, booksellers, and librarians to find the information they seek, as well.

Ideas include:

- Printable author bio
- High-resolution book covers
- High-resolution author photo
- Media kit for book and/or series
- Links to past interviews, essays, and articles
- Descriptions of workshops you offer
- Contact information for subrights
- Booklist with ISBNs, accolades, and publisher info

Design Your Product Page

It will perhaps not come as a complete shock when I confess to you that I am a shameless data nerd. I love numbers. I love statistics. I love psychology. I was that incessant child who never stopped asking "why" and I am still that person to this day.

I am also not afraid of making huge mistakes. I love to experiment, to see what works for me, and to discover what doesn't work. And of course, the only way to find out the answers is to be able to monitor and track reader behavior.

On my website, I use two different free analytics providers: [Google Analytics](#) and [StatCounter](#).

By reviewing the "search engine keywords" sections, some years back I realized that a few people stumbled across my website by searching for "[My Book Title] FREE DOWNLOAD." Grrr.

After I got over my initial annoyance at what I interpreted as the scourge of book piracy raising its ugly head, I realized I actually had an opportunity to ensure that my site always comes up as the first search result for such queries.

In the world of search engine optimization, ranking takes into account not just page names, links, and titles, but also the actual content provided. I already had excerpts on each of my book pages, but by offering downloadable varieties, I could ensure that my site would be the first to appear when readers google "Free Epub" and my book title.

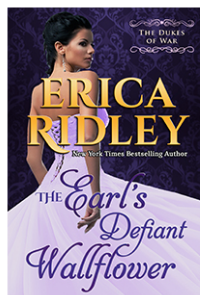
While I was at it, I decided I also wanted to be one of the first sites to come up when a

reader wasn't really sure what book or author they were searching for, and was instead googling a particular trope, such as "teenage vampire romance" or "locked room mysteries."

To that end, I make sure that all my product pages (i.e. the web page for each individual book) includes a list of tropes that appear in that title, so that anyone searching for a certain plot or experience has a better chance of organically stumbling upon one of mine.

Here's a sample:

The Earl's Defiant Wallflower



Get yours!

Dukes of War Series #2

Oliver York returns from war to find his father dead, his finances in arrears, and himself the new Earl of Carlisle. If he doesn't marry an heiress—and fast!—he and his tenants are going to be pitching tents down by the Thames. He definitely shouldn't be trading kisses with a penniless debutante... no matter how captivating she is!

Miss Grace Halton is in England just long enough to satisfy the terms of her dowry. But a marriage of convenience isn't as easy as she'd hoped. Back in America, her ailing mother needs medicine only Grace's dowry can afford. Which means the dashing earl she can't get out of her mind is the one man she can't let into her heart.

Regency-set Historical Romance Novel

Grab the audiobook on: [Audible](#) | [iTunes](#) | [Amazon](#)

Join the official [Dukes of War Reader Group](#)!

Download a free excerpt: [epub](#) | [mobi](#) | [pdf](#)

Get Yours: [Apple iBooks](#) | [Amazon/Kindle](#) | [Kobo](#) | [Nook](#) | [Audiobook](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [SAMPLE](#)



What readers are saying . . .

Tight plot, flowing narration, humor, drama, romance, a little angst, a wonderful hero, and a great heroine!

— [The Book Gourmet](#) on *The Earl's Defiant Wallflower*

My product pages include:

- Cover image
- Book title
- Description (a.k.a. back cover copy)
- Direct buy links to all stores for paperback, ebook, and audio
- Excerpt on-screen and downloadable
- Social proof (review quotes)
- Bonus content (videos, interviews, reader group, etc.)

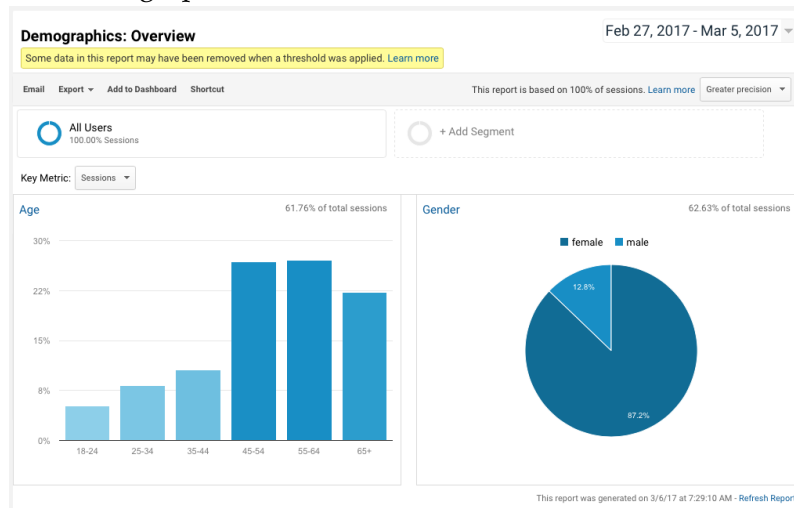
As always, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and your website does not need to mirror mine. My goal is to explain the reasons behind why I offer some of the things I offer, and to give you a few anti-piracy and search engine optimization ideas you may not have heard elsewhere.

Statistics and Monitoring

Now that you've figured out your content and launched your redesigned website, how do you know if it's working?

Hopefully you've created a free account at [Google Analytics](#) and/or [StatCounter](#) and integrated it into your website.

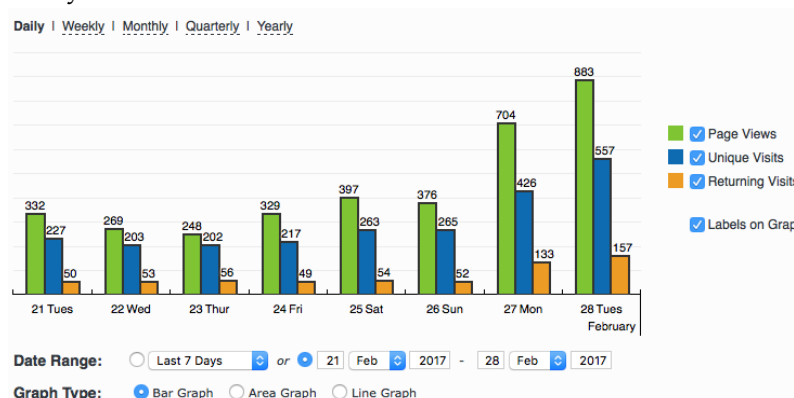
Even if you do nothing more than that, you'll have information on keywords, device types, number of visitors, and demographics:



As you can see, my audience skews female and older, which makes sense given that I write historical romance novels.

When do they visit? Unsurprisingly, traffic goes up when I send out a newsletter. Because of this, I always include links to a few recent blog posts in my newsletters, if I think they may be of particular interest.

Here you can see my web traffic double because of this:



Because of my list size, I send my newsletter out over the course of 24 hours, which is why the increase in traffic lasts for two days.

But what about other traffic? I can see the impact my newsletter made, but that is by no means the only way people are finding my site. Nor does it describe how they interact with my site once they get there.

To better track that, we need to do two things. First, we can build trackable Google Analytics links using the [URL tool](#):

Enter the website URL and campaign information

Fill out the required fields (marked with *) in the form below, and once complete the full campaign URL will be generated for you. *Note: the generated URL is automatically updated as you make changes.*

* Website URL
The full website URL (e.g. <https://www.example.com>)

* Campaign Source
The referrer: (e.g. [google](#), [newsletter](#))

Campaign Medium
Marketing medium: (e.g. [cpc](#), [banner](#), [email](#))

Campaign Name
Product, promo code, or slogan (e.g. [spring_sale](#))

This generates a link that looks something like this:

http://www.somewebsite.com/?utm_source=EricaRidley&utm_campaign=newsletter&utm_medium=email

You can add Google Analytics links to your newsletter, your back matter, and so on. You can also use them within your site itself, if you'd like to track how readers are navigating your site.

For example, I had read that cover carousels were passé, and no one clicks them anymore. True? False? I had no idea. So I changed the links in my website sidebar and my home page cover carousel to trackable Google Analytics links to find out.

Here are one week's results:

Campaign	Acquisition			Behavior			Conversions	
	Sessions	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Newspaper Signup (Goal 1 Conversion Rate)	Newspaper Signup (Goal 1 Completions)
	615 % of Total: 35.80% (1,718)	29.92% Avg for View: 54.77% (-45.38%)	184 % of Total: 19.55% (941)	74.31% Avg for View: 71.65% (3.71%)	1.70 Avg for View: 1.67 (1.98%)	00:01:16 Avg for View: 00:01:27 (-12.64%)	4.07% Avg for View: 7.80% (-47.88%)	25 % of Total: 18.66% (134)
1. vendor	173 (28.13%)	38.15%	66 (35.87%)	87.86%	1.24	00:00:41	2.89%	5 (20.00%)
2. vipdow	112 (18.21%)	35.71%	40 (21.74%)	83.93%	1.36	00:01:07	7.14%	8 (32.00%)
3. backlist	80 (13.01%)	66.25%	53 (28.80%)	85.00%	1.39	00:00:56	5.00%	4 (16.00%)
4. Website Sidebar	71 (11.54%)	9.86%	7 (3.80%)	57.75%	2.17	00:01:45	4.23%	3 (12.00%)
5. 2016-12	52 (8.46%)	1.92%	1 (0.54%)	69.23%	1.50	00:01:21	0.00%	0 (0.00%)
6. Main Book Page	23 (3.74%)	4.35%	1 (0.54%)	26.09%	5.26	00:03:56	4.35%	1 (4.00%)
7. Series Page	22 (3.58%)	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	59.09%	2.82	00:01:04	0.00%	0 (0.00%)
8. Home Page Cover Slider	20 (3.25%)	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	35.00%	2.80	00:02:14	15.00%	3 (12.00%)
9. winner	20 (3.25%)	30.00%	6 (3.26%)	80.00%	1.35	00:02:35	0.00%	0 (0.00%)
10. 2017-01	17 (2.76%)	5.88%	1 (0.54%)	58.82%	1.71	00:01:14	0.00%	0 (0.00%)

The No. 1 and No. 3 funnels to my website are from vendor links in the back matter of my books. (You see both “vendor” and “backlist” because I changed the campaign name at one point, so both exist in the wild.)

“VIPDOW” is a newsletter link present only in my Dukes of War series. That is the No. 2

funnel.

Website sidebar shocked me by being No. 4. I had no idea people really clicked things found in sidebars, and had assumed the covers I put there would mostly serve as branding reinforcement rather than actual website navigation. I was wrong.

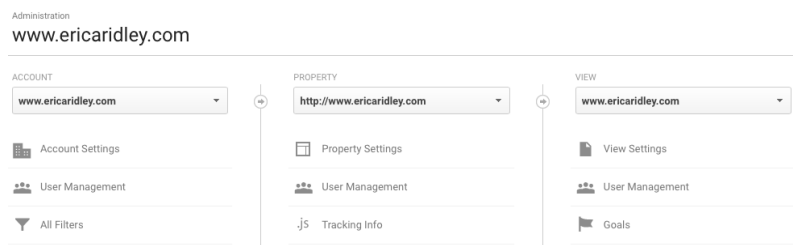
No. 5 and No. 10 are both newsletters, which is why what you see is a date. No. 6 means they landed on my website via a specific book page and continued navigating from there. No. 7 means they landed on my website via a page dedicated to a specific series, and continued navigating from there.

No. 8, at last, is the lowly cover carousel on my home page. This week, only 20 people clicked one of the covers in the slider to view more. But hey, that's three people per day. Plus, as you can see in the last column, 15% of them went on to sign up for my newsletter.

Because I'm taking advantage of free analytics, I'm able to make decisions about adding, changing, or removing content based on actual data, rather than blindly following what someone else said.

Your results are likely to be different from mine. Maybe no one clicks your sidebar. Or maybe it's your No. 1 most-clicked item in the whole website. There's one way to find out!

While you're in your Google Analytics profile, you may want to navigate over to the "Goals" section:



As with the other items, this may all seem daunting or time-consuming, but once you set things up, you don't have to mess with them ever again. You can just drop by your analytics profile once in a while to see how things are going:

+ NEW GOAL		Import from Gallery	Search	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Goal	Id	Past 7 day conversions	Recording
<input type="checkbox"/>	Engaged Visitors	Goal ID 2 / Goal Set 1	55	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Interest: Blog	Goal ID 5 / Goal Set 1	11	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Interest: Books	Goal ID 6 / Goal Set 2	678	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Interest: Dukes of War	Goal ID 3 / Goal Set 1	131	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Interest: Newsletter	Goal ID 7 / Goal Set 2	354	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Interest: Rogues to Riches	Goal ID 4 / Goal Set 1	69	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Newsletter Signup	Goal ID 1 / Goal Set 1	134	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

As you can see in the above screen shot, my "goal" of getting random visitors interested in my books is definitely working. It appears to be by far the most visited section of the website, with two specific series (Dukes of War and Rogues to Riches) being the most visited off-shoots. I

imagine the recent addition of tropes and other content extras is also helping.

The blog goal looks uninspiring, but that is because it is set up to only track hits to the main blog page, rather than to individual blog posts, which is where all the blog traffic actually goes.

Newsletter interest appears to be second only to books, so yay! Half the people interested in my books are also interested in the newsletter. That seems fabulous to me, especially since a reasonably high percentage of people visiting my book pages are already on the newsletter, and are just looking for excerpts or news from my upcoming series.

You'll note that Newsletter is in the list twice. First as an interest, secondly as "signup." This is because I am tracking the number of people who hit the mailing list form versus the number of people who actually sign up ... and click the "confirm your email" link in the confirmation email. The smaller of the two numbers is the one tracking people who sign up and then follow through with email confirmation.

If I was able to give you a few new ideas or food for thought, please let me know by posting your feedback on the loop, in the Facebook group, or emailing me at erica@ericaridley.com.

I want to dedicate the 2017 president's letter to the things that interest you, from NINC news to marketing tricks to the publishing industry. Please let me know what you want more of, and I will do my best to make sure you have it!

Thank you so much for making NINC a truly wonderful organization.



Erica Ridley is a New York Times and USA Today best-selling author of historical romance novels. Her latest series, The Dukes of War, features roguish peers and dashing war heroes who return from battle only to be thrust into the splendor and madness of Regency England. When not reading or writing romances, Erica can be found riding camels in Africa, zip-lining through rain forests in Costa Rica, or getting hopelessly lost in the middle of Budapest.

Adversity: Writing About It, Writing Despite It

How to write when everything goes wrong—part three

By Allie Pleiter



One of the first things many authors are asked when something big happens in our lives is, “Are you going to write about it?”

In this final article, we’ll explore the issues and tactics to take into account as you decide how much of your own personal challenges to fuse into your fiction. The process can be more complex than you first think.

Give it time to know what matters

High emotions can keep us from being wise about experiences in the thick of them. We may crave putting our experience into a story before we have gained an even keel and essential perspective. It takes time to process and discover what truly matters.

Resist taking your work out into the world before you’re truly ready. What mattered, what became important, what stayed with you long beyond the crisis—wait until you can identify these, because they will make your story *significant* rather than just emotional.

The Universal Truth

“The Universal Truth” is my term for the heart of your story that goes deeper than you—the lesson that goes beyond circumstance or details. This essential core resonates with others in similar or even different situations. It is the lesson you learned, the strength you acquired, the thing that didn’t kill you but made you stronger.

The first novel I attempted after my son’s bout with cancer couldn’t help but be about a mother protecting a son in danger. My life was too full of such emotions, and writing them into fiction served as a useful outlet.

My editor wisely recognized that writing about my exact circumstance would present a minefield of writing traps because I lacked objectivity. Instead, we brainstormed a story that reflected my experience but didn’t mirror it exactly.

Should you consider writing something close but not identical? Is there a similar

circumstance where that “Universal Truth” also appears? Even then, expect a wildly angsty first draft. And second draft.

In my case, it took four drafts to tone that book down to a place where it didn’t feel like an emotional shotgun going off all over every page.

What if you have no choice but to write under fire?

Disaster thrusts itself upon working writers with no regard to their deadlines. While independent publishing has given us more control to shift a deadline, it’s still hard for creative people to power through a project in the middle of trauma.

I polled a selection of working authors who have had to produce under a wide range of traumatic circumstances, and here are the coping tactics they shared:

Try small batches in new formats. Pick a word count that feels doable—even if it must be tiny. Can you dictate four sentences into the voice memo function of your smartphone? Write one hundred words in a small notebook? All you need at first—maybe all you need at all—are baby steps.

Change locations. Your creative brain might need a different location to fire up. Carve out time away to write, recognizing that when you return, you can be more fully present.

Don’t feel guilty if you crave the escape writing offers. One writer discovered that trauma shut down her internal editor and let words gush out. Take care that you don’t ignore when your crisis needs your attention, but remind yourself and others that it is OK to work if it helps you cope.

Compartmentalize. You might enjoy writing a first draft, but revising makes you twitch. The business elements of indie publishing might offer a much-needed sense of accomplishment without creative strife. Sort your current project tasks by how easy they feel. You can likely accomplish more than you think.

Set a timer. Most of us can stand a short burst of just about anything. Once or twice a day, set the timer for 15 minutes and have at it. For just those minutes, give yourself permission to “be a writer” rather than someone who is ill, caring for others, or coping with disaster.

Go through the motions. One writer started her day by typing an existing newspaper article just to get her fingers working. Eventually, the muscle memory would jump-start her writing brain and a bit of story would emerge.

Pull an all-nighter. Some of us got through college this way. Now might be the time to resurrect it—you’re probably not sleeping well anyway. Be very careful in how you implement this, however, as lack of sleep can launch its own problems.

Warning: know when to surrender

After pushing on towards a deadline, one writer never regrets stopping altogether when her father was in his last days. When the stress of my son’s illness finally took its toll on my own health, my agent gave me a straightforward “halt” command, and I obeyed it.

Sometimes it really is too much to attempt, and you must yield to your circumstances. Be aware that someone else may recognize this in you before you recognize it in yourself. Face the truth that you can’t write through everything.

When you're ready to write about what you've been through

When you get a green light to move forward, either from your own pondering or a publisher, here are some steps to take:

1. Scour your journals for potent details, emotional moments, victories and dark hours. Pay attention to how you feel as you do this—it may tell you how truly ready you are to write about this subject.
2. Respect the gush ... or the trickle. Be prepared for your creative speed to be disobedient and inconsistent—your subconscious knows more about what you're ready to face than you do.
3. Gain that Universal Truth. Talk to others who have been through something similar, or those who haven't been anywhere close to the valley you've walked. See where the connections lie and what stories people relate to most strongly.

If you have to wait

If doors are still shut, or you know you're not yet ready, here are some tips while you wait:

1. Write to process, not to publish. Start the project anyway, but keep the goals appropriate. Your first draft will teach you much if you remember that there are likely several revisions yet to come.
2. Strengthen your trust and patience muscles. Recall other times when your personal timetable failed, especially those where the final outcome ended up far better than your original plan.
3. Build a file of memories, scenes, and thoughts. Write to record, knowing that one idea or memory often spurs more. Think of your writing as building a stockpile for that time when the project does come to fruition.

Final thoughts: pearls and irritants

"You can't get a pearl without a little grit." The pearl is the perfect metaphor for writing in crisis. Beauty born of an irritant, a pearl represents time coating over an invasive grain one thin, shiny layer at a time.

Each word about the crises, traumas, and challenges of my life coats the pearl. I couldn't do life any other way. Neither, I suspect, could you.

All of life is indeed material for those of us born with the need to tell stories, to create from our experiences. The story that survives your trauma to find its way into the world will have a tone and power it wouldn't have had without your challenges.

No matter what the outcome of your words, the act of creating them is an honorable deed.

Allie Pleiter spends her days writing four books at a time and buying yarn to knit. Both a RITA and Carol Award finalist, as well as a RT Reviewer's Choice and RomCon Reader's Crown Award winner, Allie recently celebrated her millionth book sold. She speaks nationally on writing, faith, women's issues, and time management. To obtain a free copy of the Chunky Calculator, visit www.alliepleiter.com or text the word CHUNKY to 22828.

Craft pitfall: Unearned beginnings

We make sympathy for our protags the old-fashioned way—we *earn* it

By Jim Thomsen



One of the more common tropes in genre fiction is a lead character who is haunted by a tragedy in their past. Think sibling murdered, child kidnapped, spouse taken by cancer, parents killed in plane crash, yada yada yada.

The character is introduced as a brittle, abrasive person, with their background revealed in a perfunctory way: *The sound of brakes screeching on city streets reminded her of the screams her mother made as she was being stabbed to death.*

The author signals us with everything short of frenetic semaphore.

It's OK that the character acts this way because she is broken, see? Take my word for it! You as the reader must sympathize with her because I'm telling you to! I don't need to show you! It's enough for me tell you that she can never form an attachment to a man because the man who killed her mother when she was a child—while she cowered in a nearby cupboard—is still out there!

Now, shut up and love her!

I recently edited a debut mystery novel. The author's main character, a young woman, is foul-mouthed and alienating—and yet she's given license to be in nonstop agitation with her environment because her sister had been kidnapped and killed when they were kids. Page after page, I was repeatedly told how much anguish she was in over this, how it colored her every human interaction, how much she didn't want to talk about it or deal with it (this, she told her therapist!), and how much she deserved a support system of unchallenging enablers at every turn.

Yes, main characters can be unlikeable. But I felt the author was taking the risk of severely limiting her audience by making her not just unlikeable, but unrelatable. And I couldn't relate to the character's suffering because I wasn't shown the arc of it, just its residue.

A character journey without an arc is a flat line. And reading novels about such characters is a flatline kind of experience.

Making trauma tropes work

To me, traumatic-past tropes can work. But only if you take away the tropey-ness of it and make the shattering loss happen *in* the story (and not just in prologue, which we writing-craft students know is highly problematic). That way, we see the main character deal with their shock and pain and seemingly never-ending sense of loss.

And that's how such characters earn sympathy from your readers—by showing their struggles, instead of being told simply that they've earned the right to be in conflict with their environment by virtue of their unshown trauma.

James Scott Bell, my favorite writing-craft guru, tackles this in his book, *Elements of Fiction Writing: Conflict and Suspense*. "That's the first, nonnegotiable key to conflict in fiction: The reader must care about the people it's happening to. That creates an emotional investment in the characters and a desire to see where the trouble leads."

Here's another way to think about it. Think of a time you've heard someone raging or complaining about oppression in their lives, and you've thought: "Ugh! Quit being such a whiny victim!" Chances are, you had that response because you weren't witness to the origins of the alleged oppression, or shown more than one selective account of it. Perhaps you weren't convinced of the reliability of the person doing the raging.

Instead, you were just told.

And retold.

And told that she's the only reliable interpreter of events.

As a result, you may feel a modicum of pity, but pity is the cold plate-scrapings of sympathy, and sympathy is what you're after. Sympathy requires being shown that the person deserves our investment, not just being told that it is deserved on demand.

If you had a more sympathetic reaction to your agonized friend, ask yourself why. Chances are it's because you were able to bear witness to an inciting incident, or because you've gotten know all the players involved and were able to form your own decision based on the feeling that you have accumulated enough evidence to arrive at it.

And that's the difference between caring ("That rat bastard!") and not caring ("Quit whining!"). Why should it be so different in fiction?

Drawing the readers deeper

Showing-not-telling is Story Craft 101, as we all know, and yet this unearned-sympathy trope persists in many genres, particularly in romance and crime fiction that make up the bulk of my editing practice. Worse, it's often rewarded with publishing contracts. Such stories make up the bulk of the snackable novels you find in supermarket checkout aisles and airport kiosks.

But if your aim is not just sales but the word-of-mouth passion for a story that leads to truly durable careers, I'd like to posit that the benefit of showing the character's struggles as part of the inciting incident or at the beginning of their arc, as opposed to the middle or the end, is twofold:

1. Relating to a character's emotional journey from the inside of its origin makes for a more engaged and immersive emotional experience for the reader; and
2. Bringing the story's antagonist into sharper relief, by forcing the author to give some

sort of motivation or even justification for that person's actions, makes the protagonist's quest more compelling.

And any student of writing craft knows that the more complicated and humanized the villain, the more we feel invested in the protagonist's efforts to defeat him.

Casablanca, in my opinion, is the only absolutely perfect story ever written, and as such has a craft lesson for every possible story pitfall. In this case, think of Rick Blain, who seems like a jerk early on, even after we knew that Ilsa Lund broke his heart. ("Stop being such a whiny victim!")

But the story, through the artful use of flashbacks, shows us how Rick came to *earn* his pain—and his subsequent "I stick my neck out for nobody" misanthropy. Through immersive glimpses, we sense there is a chance he can be saved—or, rather, that he can save himself.

And it's at that point that we're on his side, that we truly hope he'll get in touch with his long-dormant better angel and do the difficult but undeniably right thing.

Without those flashbacks—and notice how brief they are, how they never overwhelm the forestory—all of his present-day scenes with Ilsa (and her husband, Viktor Laszlo) would fall flat.

He'd just be another loser in love feeling sorry for himself, and not particularly interested in doing much else. That's not my idea of a hero, let alone a relatable or sympathetic one.

Casablanca did better than that. And so can you. Strive for that kind of perfect, and you'll probably end up at pretty good.

Jim Thomsen is a manuscript editor and writer who lives on Bainbridge Island, Washington. Find him at jimthomsencreative.com or email him at thomsen1965@gmail.com.

The Mad Scribbler

“Now hear this”

By Laura Resnick



“I remember once talking to a bestselling author about audiobooks. He’d written a book that was narrated by a 20-something black male and the audiobook was read by a 50-something white female. He had no say in this, and after listening to it for five minutes he stopped, feeling physically sick.”

—Neil Gaiman, interviewed in Salon (11/23/11)

I got my first iPod back in 2003, and I soon thereafter began exploring the world of audiobooks.

I was frustrated, because I now had the perfect device for doubling my reading time by listening to books while doing all sorts of daily activities (cleaning, gardening, walking, waiting in long lines, etc.), but audiobook choices weren’t yet keeping pace with that technology. The selection was still pretty limited, and I often had trouble finding audiobooks I wanted to listen to.

This was primarily because the publishing world, where (if I may steal a phrase from Mark Twain) everything happens ten years later, was slow to exploit the dramatically improved distribution possibilities of releasing audiobooks in digital format.

Therefore, a lot of books still weren’t getting produced in audio format, not even after almost everyone but my parents owned an MP3 player. (They still don’t own one.) One reason, no doubt, is that even after eliminating the expense of physical production and distribution, audiobooks are still costly to create, since they still involve, at the very least, an actor and some sound engineering—and they also often involve a director, a sound studio, a producer, etc.

Then in 2008, Amazon purchased Audible, a company that had been around since the mid-1990s, and started expanding their acquisitions and offerings of downloadable audiobooks. And in 2011, Audible launched the Audio Creation Exchange (ACX), a marketplace where authors, actors, producers, and publishers can all connect with each other to create audiobooks.

In much the way that the ebook market that same year was exploding with innovation and profitable opportunities for writers to self-publish their written work, digital production and

distribution in audio format opened up the market for writers to produce and release their own audiobooks. The platform was so successful that only a year after its launch, Audible announced that more titles were being produced through ACX than through its top three traditional audio providers combined.

One of the innovative programs at the company was “Neil Gaiman Presents,” in which the critically acclaimed and bestselling author selected and produced a line of audiobooks, created via ACX and distributed and promoted by Audible. Neil Gaiman was also by then the award-winning narrator of his own audiobooks, and he had long been a vocal advocate and fan of the audio format.

His early involvement in ACX helped draw attention to this new mode of production wherein authors and narrators work together directly, rather than being separated by layers of non-creative bureaucracy.

“The short-term reason I got involved with ACX,” Gaiman told Salon in 2011, “is that there are books I love that I want to bring to the world. The long-term reason I signed up is because I want to live in a world where every book that exists has a great audiobook.”

I am a huge fan of audiobooks and want to live in that world, too. So the extraordinary expansion of the audiobook market since 2011, thanks to indie production and various new audio ventures emerging, has been a great pleasure to me as a reader.

I now have a big personal collection of digital audiobooks, as well as an embarrassingly large collection of digital radio plays (mostly BBC, but also two or three dozen by L.A. Theatre Works). I keep multiple audiobooks and radio plays loaded onto my iPod at all times, so that I am never in danger of being without a story to listen to.

In addition to audiobooks making it possible for me to “read” more books than I used to, I have also found there are some books that, for whatever reason, I have trouble getting into when reading the text, but which I become immersed in when listening to a talented narrator.

And the phrase “talented narrator” underscores a crucial issue with audiobooks: the narrator makes all the difference. I recently listened to Benedict Cumberbatch reading some Sherlock Holmes fiction, for example, and he was so good, I not only became immersed in the story, I soon forgot there was only one narrator—his vocal skill created an entire cast of characters whom I saw in my head. (His cheekbones aren’t the only reason he has such a successful acting career.)

By contrast, though, a few months ago I wound up quitting halfway through the audio version of a novel written by one of my favorite authors. I found the narrator’s interpretation so flat and lifeless, it made a very enjoyable book (in print format) dull and disappointing for me.

Obviously, getting the right narrator for a project is crucial, whether you’re producing the audiobook yourself through ACX or one of the other indie production venues that have arisen in recent years, or if you license audio rights to a production company (in which case, you’re likely to be excluded from decisions about narration).

Concern about narration was among the reasons I was anxious, as well as excited, when a company called Graphic Audio recently released the first audiobook in my (so far) seven-book Esther Diamond urban fantasy series. If I didn’t like it ... then I was in for at least six more disappointing experiences.

It was a long road to get to this point. Back when I first sold the series to DAW Books, there was little or no realistic prospect of an unagented midlist writer making an audio deal, so I licensed the audio rights to DAW. And I kept doing that in my subsequent contracts with them.

By the time producing one's own audiobooks or licensing one's own audio rights was a common practice, I believed that nothing was ever going to happen at DAW with those rights, and I started composing a letter requesting they return the audio license to me.

I never finished the letter, because they suddenly contacted me with a good offer from Graphic Audio. I was familiar with the company, I thought it would be a great fit with this series, and Graphic would do the sort of audio production that I definitely couldn't afford to produce myself.

Graphic Audio describes its format as "a movie in your mind." It's halfway between an audiobook and a radio play (and, as indicated above, I love radio plays). They produce a full cast recording, with individual actors reading all the dialogue parts, and they adapt the novel accordingly.

Most of the narration remains intact, but rather than the first-person narrator in my series telling you, for example, "Max spoke to me in an anxious whisper," you just hear the actor who plays Max saying the line in an anxious whisper.

Moreover, Graphic Audio productions include sound effects and background music. So if there's an explosion in the story, you hear the explosion. If the narration describes a panicking crowd after the explosion, you hear running feet and background voices that sound like a panicking crowd.

Ever since I'd first heard a Graphic Audio production, I thought that this format would be ideal for this urban fantasy series. However, after my enthusiastic acceptance and my various follow-up messages ... nothing happened. For months. Then one fine day, Graphic Audio withdrew their offer.

I had a long discussion with my publisher at that point. I wanted to get my audio rights back after that, but they wanted to keep the rights under contract and find a market. For various reasons, I decided to agree to this.

I changed my mind after another eighteen months passed with no new audio deal. Clearly, I would have to get those rights back and produce audiobooks myself. I was drafting a letter to DAW Books to this effect, when (wait for it!) they suddenly contacted me with a good offer from Graphic Audio. It was, in fact, the exact same offer I had agreed to two years earlier. But for more books this time, since I'd released two more titles by then.

I said yes. Again. And then, after my prompt acceptance of this renewed offer from Graphic and my various follow-up messages ... nothing happened. For months.

I am not making this up.

Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice—and now I want to paint rude graffiti all over your company's building.

However, the counter-signed contract and the signing advance finally arrived—nearly a year after I had accepted the offer.

Fortunately, despite this rocky start, I was very encouraged when Colleen Delany, who is directing the productions and also playing the first-person narrator/protagonist in the series,

subsequently contacted me with some reasonable questions. Since she has a strong acting resume and clearly knows what she's doing, I made a decision not to intrude on her process; and she, in turn, was very receptive to my input (mostly about pronunciation of character names, place names, and foreign phrases). We've maintained contact since then, and we've done a long podcast interview together about the series.

Nonetheless, despite the confidence I was developing in the director/lead actress, the casting of multiple actors for my audiobook meant there were multiple opportunities to cast someone totally unsuited to the material (or someone who's just an awful actor). And the complexity of sound effects and background music, while potentially exciting, also meant there was a lot of potential for that to go badly—sound effects drowning out actors, music choices that clash with the story tone, timing that kills the comedy, and so on.

Before the first title in the audio series was released, I listened half a dozen times to the five-minute sample that Graphic posted online. I was pleased with the way it sounded—but still anxious. The upshot after listening to the whole seven-hour production, though, is that casting, acting, narration, direction, and sound engineering were all extremely good, and I was genuinely thrilled with the final product—and am very excited now about hearing the rest of the series.

As it happens, no one in the cast sounds the way the characters sound in my head. They probably don't sound the way most readers picture them, either. And that's fine.

One of things we love about reading text is how private and personal it is, how much of the story we picture and hear in our own heads, in a way that doesn't exactly duplicate the experience of any other reader—or of the author.

An audiobook is necessarily a different sort of experience than that. Someone else's interpretation comes between us and the text, to a certain extent. That interpretation is part of what makes an audio experience great, absorbing, mediocre, disappointing, or really annoying ... and never identical to the experience of reading text.

I never expected Esther Diamond, her friends, and her nemeses to sound in an audio production the way they sound in the privacy of my own head. What I wanted, hoped for, and am very pleased the production achieved, is the right tone, attitude, and energy in the storytelling, good sound engineering, and credible casting.

The actors all sound appropriate for the characters they're playing (gender, type, age, accent), and they all deliver the dialogue with a clear understanding of what the characters' personalities and intentions are. Wanting more than that is like wanting the cover of your novel to look exactly like the places and characters in your head: a pointless obsession destined to lead to foolish dissatisfaction with a good result.

Speaking of dissatisfaction, though ... despite my delight with the quality of the production, I am frustrated that the audio company seems to interpret their obligation to make a payment "upon release" of the audiobook as being more of a playful suggestion than a contractual requirement.

Laura Resnick, author of many books and short stories, notes that in this tumultuous age of perpetual change and

upheaval, some things remain constant—such as the reluctance of publishers to pay writers.

The Nink Wish List

NINC's generous and wise membership is largely responsible for the content of our newsletter.

How can you contribute?

We're always looking for subject matter experts to write for Nink—articles are paid and the authors retain copyright to use them again for their own purposes.

If you or someone you know has special skills, we'd love to hear from them. Email ninkeditor@gmail.com with a few sentences of an article proposal, or introduce us to an expert we can interview or request to write for Nink.

Here's a wish list of article ideas we're considering for the future:

- How to **retain readers** and keep them engaged while waiting for your next book
- Deep insights from various **advertising platforms**, including Facebook, Instafreebie, Bookbub, and more
- New tools to track books or marketing **campaign performance**
- How to make the most of working with a freelance **editor, publicist**, or other author support professional
- Trends in book **cover design** and packaging your book
- **Tips and how-to** guides for ebook and print book production
- How to write a more enticing **author bio**, with lots of examples
- Maximizing Amazon **Affiliate income**
- **Legal and tax** considerations for author business
- Emerging changes in **contracts** from traditional publishers; pitfalls and recommendations
- Genre-specific **trends**
- **Series** marketing techniques
- Bridging from one series to another to earn **crossover readership**
- Borrowing **craft concepts from screenwriting** to improve the plot and pace of your novel
- Setting **deep hooks** throughout your novel to drive readers on
- **Scrivener tips** for plotters and pantsers; advanced uses of Scrivener
- Compare/contrast various **ebook production tools** (Jutoh, Calibre, Scrivener, etc.)
- Marketing a **backlist** and refreshing old titles for current readers
- **Front and back matter** recommendations to gain more reviews, newsletter signups, and clicks to purchase the next book
- Making the most of **NetGalley**; working with a co-op
- Fresh ideas for author **newsletters**
- Recommendations for recently published **books on author business**, author marketing,

and craft

- **Industry insights** on what's changing in traditional publishing and for the major ebook distribution platforms
- Great **research** sites to go deeper into the story
- Tips for choosing and launching a new **pen name**
- **Advanced craft** techniques that are applicable to all genres of commercial fiction

NINC editorial policy

What guides our choices for Nink content? The NINC board of directors adopted this editorial policy to articulate our approach:

Nink is intended to serve members of Novelists, Inc., with relevant, actionable, sophisticated, and industry-leading content that helps them in all aspects of their author careers: writing and editing, writer's life, business and legal, marketing and publicity, etc. It endeavors to serve all authors in membership.

Nink's editorial judgment reflects the philosophy of NINC, which means:

- Declining to comment on other writing organizations and their activities
- Declining to distinguish members through awards
- Equally valuing all publishing routes (self, traditional and hybrid)
- Advocating on behalf of authors' interests over publishers' or platforms' interests
- Emphasizing content relevant to all genres (and aiming to balance genre-specific information)
- Emphasizing industry-leading expertise and original content unique to Nink
- Refusing advertising placements and self-promotion from contributors
- Maintaining privacy by redacting new member applicant information from public issues of Nink.

If you have questions about the editorial policy, please contact the [Nink editor](#).



Founded in 1989

NINC Statement of Principle

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

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

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