



The official newsletter  
of Novelists, Inc.,  
a professional organization  
of writers of popular fiction

 **novelists,  
inc.**

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**VOLUME 30 : NUMBER 10  
OCTOBER 2019**

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# *Nink* October 2019

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# President's Voice

*By Wayne Stinnett*



Y'all! That was awesome!

As I write this, I'm sitting in my room at Tradewinds, waiting to watch another beautiful Gulf Coast sunset. It's Sunday and the conference ended just a few hours ago. I said goodbye to a bunch of old and new friends, with hopes of seeing them again next year.

It's a bit surreal down in the lobby now. For the last four days, I was with my tribe—the people who understand what it is we do. I talked to hundreds of authors and industry guests from literally all over the world. The discussions revolved around writing, marketing, advertising, branding, and dozens of other topics, which when I bring them up in most social settings, eyes roll back and hands go up to stifle yawns. If you haven't been to our conference, it's difficult to explain. I feel like I'm now coming down from a massive sugar buzz. The crowd is gone and when I strolled through the lobby a little while ago, I didn't see anyone I knew. I miss y'all already!

I arrived in St. Pete Beach last Sunday afternoon and immediately ran into two other members checking in. It seems that a lot of us are turning the conference into a week-long tax-deductible vacation, getting together socially with other tribal members. That's a good thing. I brought my wife and youngest with me this year and I met many members' spouses, too. This is also a good thing. There is so much to do in the area that it can easily be a family working vacation.

Then the conference started. Right from the get-go I knew this was gonna be fun. I'll be digesting all the things I learned for the rest of the year, I do believe. I have to say, these last four days have been mind-blowing. Alyssa and the conference committee did a stellar job of not only putting together a terrific conference lineup but bringing every part of it together ahead of schedule and under budget. The hours put in by countless member volunteers in that committee, as well as the social media committee, and the many volunteers, just like you, is astounding. To the whole conference team—Bravo Zulu!

I'm in the last three months as your president. I've been humbled beyond belief to lead such a magnificent organization and I hope I did you well. Or at least made you laugh. I know

I've been grinning for a whole week and the sun has added some serious laugh lines to my face. I'll carry the memory of this past year for the rest of my days, as one of the best years ever, and I've had a few. As my year draws to a close, I'm very excited about next year.

We broke records this year: more members attending, more industry guests, more assistants, and yes, more companions. But this was just the tip of the iceberg. Next year is sure to blow this out of the water. Registration will start Jan. 1 and will end earlier than it did this year. So, when you get the word, don't dawdle. Because next year will be the last for record-breaking attendance. The hotel is only so big and to keep the intimate tribal feeling, we will be capping attendance at 500. While we might not hit that in 2020, I can guarantee we will in 2021.

I signed contracts with Tradewinds through 2025. I know this will disappoint some of our members, but the logistics of moving a conference of this magnitude to a different city and different venue would be enormous. This was a unanimous decision by the board, as well as the Advisory Council.

Over the next couple of months, *Nink* will be publishing reports from all the workshops and panels. Michele Dunaway and her reporters were in every presentation and typing at near talking speed. I feel so sorry for whoever covered Damon Suede's workshops, that man was off the hook. These reports will be much more than just a few sentences highlighting what was said. So even if you weren't able to make it, you'll get this huge benefit of being a NINC member. Even those who did attend couldn't be in two places at once, let alone in each of the three tracks.

And the trade show! The industry guests went above and beyond to bring us bright, shiny toys. This will be even bigger next year and moved out of the conference room into the massive Colonnade area. Having the fourth conference room will then allow for two conference rooms to be combined as one. Tradewinds can move the walls around at will. In many of this year's and last year's presentations, it was standing room only. I don't see it getting smaller in the future.

In closing, I want to thank everyone involved from the Tradewinds staff all the way down to the security people and room attendants. The hospitality was as expected in the Sunshine State, and being a native, I know.

—Wayne Stinnett, president  
[wayne@waynestinnett.com](mailto:wayne@waynestinnett.com)

## **NINC Member Benefits**

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

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

## **Accessing the NINC Website**

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

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

# That's A Wrap!

## NINC Conference 2019

*By Alyssa Day*



Thank you to NINC for the highest-ever attendance at a conference—both in members and in industry guests. We had a fantastic, informative week at the beach. We are delighted with the results of our first-ever trade show, and moving the conference to three tracks ensured everyone could see more of what's exciting and innovative in publishing, instead of missing 3/4 of the workshops.

Also, having a dedicated track for traditional authors, with programming of interest to their needs during every hour of the conference in Sawyer Key, helped our traditionally published authors with content relevant to their needs.

Finally, I'm thrilled to announce that this year's assistant chair, Tawdra Kandle, will move up to programming chair for **NINC 2020: Vision For the Future**.

Registration begins January 1st — **Watch this space!**

—Alyssa Day

2019 president-elect and conference programming chair

# Using GMC to Troubleshoot a Scene

By Colleen Thompson



As wonderful as it would be, as writers, to have every word leap flawlessly from our fingertips onto the page, we sometimes get the sense or we receive feedback indicating that a scene we've written isn't working. When the reason for the issue—or a solution—isn't immediately apparent, I've found it helpful to go back to the building blocks, using lessons learned from author Debra Dixon's how-to classic, *Goal, Motivation, and Conflict* (Gryphon Books for Writers, 1996) to jumpstart the troubleshooting process.

## Clarity of goals

*"Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water." —Kurt Vonnegut*

The character's goal, his/her need or desire, is the true backbone of the story. If a scene feels aimless, ask yourself if you've clearly communicated what the protagonist hopes to achieve. An external desire, such as victory in some contest, the acquisition of a skill, or escape from danger is something tangible, whereas an internal desire, such as independence, acclaim, or fear, is emotional and often hidden, sometimes even from the character him/herself.

Though the character's purpose, as well as the scene's, may not initially be apparent, the author needs to know the purpose, at least when going back to revise the scene, sharpen it, and give it clarity and focus. Other goal-related weaknesses may occur when other characters in the scene have no apparent needs or desires, leaving them to float as aimlessly as dust motes.

Though not every character's goal must be known to the reader, the author should consider these goals carefully. Think about how each character's goal might serve the scene or the story as a whole if an antagonist or any other character were acting at cross-purposes or in opposition to the protagonist because of a conflicting goal.

Takeaway troubleshooting questions:

- Is it clear what the protagonist of this scene wants?
- Do I know what every character in this scene wants?

## Motivation

*“Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.”—Archimedes*

When a character's motivation—his/her reason for needing to achieve the goal—are strong enough, the writer can move the mind of the reader to accept nearly anything the character does to achieve this goal. The trick is convincing the audience to fall under the spell of the character's desire, to give this desire both plausibility and an urgency that resonates without becoming a hyperbolic bludgeon. (The audience will eventually succumb to adrenal fatigue—or perhaps eye-rolling—if the main character is saving the universe from annihilation or dangling off the edge of a precipice by his/her fingertips in every scene.)

As with the goal, motivation may be external, making it easily perceivable by other characters, or internal, playing out within the realm of character emotions, some of which may be deeply buried. To cite a well-known example, in the movie *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Luke Skywalker's goal of rescuing the princess and aiding the rebellion (*a call to adventure* he initially resists) is an externally motivated goal that receives impetus when his aunt and uncle are slain by Imperial stormtroopers. Though Luke wouldn't be able to articulate it, he's also driven by a hunger for adventure, romance, and the yearning to connect to something larger.

To turn up the heat on a scene's motivation, ask yourself what circumstances would make your protagonist want or need to achieve the goal more urgently? Alternately, what could more strongly motivate the antagonist, or any other character in the scene, to thwart the main character, often in the pursuit of his/her own goals?

Motivations must not only be believable but broadly relatable to an audience. To achieve the latter, work on strengthening the link between the characters' motivations and one of what psychologist Paul Eckman referred to as *basic human emotions*: anger, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt, and happiness. Though moviegoers viewing *Star Wars: A New Hope* for the first time will never find themselves in young Luke's identical situation early in the movie, they are able to connect to his sense of loss, his terror, and his fury, and they can put themselves in his situation, imagining themselves behaving heroically (even if in reality, they'd run screaming to hide out in the desert caves) to fight back against this wrong.

Takeaway troubleshooting questions:

- Are character behaviors adequately and plausibly motivated?
- To what universal human/reader emotion does this motivation relate?



## Conflict

*"...the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat." —William Faulkner*

Whether it's among rivals for a prize, characters struggling for survival, or a host of other familiar variations, conflict is the accelerator that drives both a story and a scene. Within the larger structure of a novel, some scenes will require a heavier foot than others on that gas pedal, but every scene needs to contain some element of tension to keep it from falling flat.

When a scene feels too static, it's often a relatively simple task to, at least metaphorically, "put another bear in the canoe," creating another complication, crafting a betrayal, or shortening the timeline available for the completion of the goal. To prevent the conflict from feeling arbitrary, check to see if it's closely related to the protagonist's or another character's goal and if motivation is apparent or alluded to, even if it's to raise questions about what the reasoning might possibly be.

Conflict is also essential in revealing the real character beneath the veneer. Anyone can put on an act when things are going smoothly, but under enough pressure all sorts of flaws are exposed. Put enough pressure on an individual in the form of conflict and character transformation may occur, allowing the protagonist to achieve the goal—or perhaps to recognize it as unworthy.

Takeaway troubleshooting questions:

- Does the scene contain adequate and relevant conflict?
- Does the conflict serve to motivate character growth?

Many novelists come to take for granted the concepts of goal, motivation, and conflict, just as drivers take for granted their preferred mode of transportation when the engine's running smoothly. It's during a breakdown that it's worth going back for a peek under the hood—or even taking a few moments to sketch out a GMC schematic to help you once more get all the basic parts back in alignment and get both your scene, and the novel it's a part of, running smoothly once again.

## Resources

- *Goal, Motivation, and Conflict*, Debra Dixon, Gryphon Books for Writers, 1996.
- "[Writing 101: Internal Vs. External Conflict](#)," *Writer's Ink: the Official Blog of Shannon Curtis*, 11/13/2013.
- *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*, Paul Eckman, Times Books, 2003.

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*A former teacher and frequent speaker on the craft of writing, [Colleen Thompson](#) is the RITA-nominated author of 30 romantic suspense and historical romance novels and novellas written for Montlake, Harlequin, Dorchester, and Kensington Publishing. Look for her next release, *Deadly Texas Summer* (Harlequin Romantic Suspense) in March 2020.*

## The Art of the Ending, Part Three

*By Michele Dunaway*



We've been discussing endings over the past two months, and we'd be remiss if we didn't discuss characters and epilogues.

Characters also play a role when developing and finishing a series.

"I'm a seat-of-the-pants writer," [Allison Lane](#) said. "When I start a book, I know the backstory, flaws, and secrets of the major characters, have a decent image of the first scene and a vague image of the final scene. I then turn the characters loose to tell their tale. They rarely disappoint me, though that first scene often changes drastically by the time the book is finished, and they have surprised me about the ending a time or two as well. Then there was the book in which I had no motive for the villain, who was behaving insanely. He finally filled me in a week before deadline, and everything made perfect sense. I'm still grateful that he opened up because the book would have drawn massive criticism without that key knowledge."

"It depends on the book, and which parts of it come to me when. I might have a general idea of the direction I want the story to go, but it doesn't always end up like that. Sometimes the characters take me in very different directions, and when that happens, it's nearly always better than where I thought it might be at the start," [Anne Gracie](#) said. "And sometimes I have no idea of how I'm going to finish the book, and the closer it gets, the more I panic, and then finally there's a minor miracle and I get an idea and it works and it brings everything together—and that's when I believe there is a muse!"

Lane pointed out that it is difficult in a romance genre novel to write multiple books with the same h/h.

"I've seen it done a few times," she said, "but the sequels always suffer since the h/h supposedly found true love in the first book. Readers don't want couples to run into problems after that explosion of love; they were supposed to live happily ever after. It works much better if a series in the romance world involves groups of people who pair off, one couple per book with the others playing supporting roles. Nora Roberts does this very well as do other well-known writers. My series all involve groups of one sort or another (close friends, siblings, etc.)."

Lane advises that if you want the series to star the same h/h for all books, then stay away from pure romance.

“Do romantic suspense or mystery, for example,” she said. “J.D. Robb does a fabulous series starring Eve and Roarke (well over 40 books so far). I just dived into a Victorian mystery series by Deanna Raybourn starring a lepidopterist and a taxidermist. I nearly died laughing and can't wait for the next book in the series. Both of these series show character growth in each new book (quite a feat for Robb...)”

Ending a series containing recurring characters takes balance. The internet exploded with disappointment following the ending of TV's *How I Met Your Mother*. Critics still cite the best, most memorable ending of a series to be the *Newhart* finale, in which Bob wakes up in bed with his wife from *The Newhart Show*, and that *Newhart* was all a bad dream. My friend actually owns Bob Newhart's script for this finale, in which Newhart signed a letter saying that the script's actual typed ending was designed to mislead so that the secret wasn't spoiled.

Scripts are often designed to be misleading—for instance the cast of *Avengers: Endgame* thought they were filming a funeral only to find out it was Tony Stark's funeral. Talk about a universe the writers had to wrap up. But it was time. As writers, we also have to know when is the best time to end things. This is why the writers of TV's *The Good Place* decided to end the series after this season, and why they weren't met with fan flames. The same goes for Adam F. Goldberg, who already knows when he plans to produce the final episode of *The Goldbergs*, the show based on his family. We won't even get into the debate as to whether *Supernatural* should have ended long ago, and we hope now that this is the last season, it ends well.

“When I begin a series, I always imagine that I will keep going past the four or five books as originally conceived,” [Jennifer Stevenson](#) said. “Sure, why not? Some highly successful authors are up to 30 or even 60 novels in the same series or set of connected series. I can't explain why not, but it seems as though my muse feels donety-done-done with a series at the end of the original set. This is probably a brain thing, like not being able to cook a dinner with more than three courses and get them all to the table on time.”

“So far, I've known the endings to all of my books when I started,” [Nicole Evelina](#) said. “I like having an end goal in mind, something that I know I have to get my characters toward through all the changes they will go through in the book(s). That being said, the endings don't always turn out *exactly* the way I planned. I have to leave some leeway to let my characters have their head because they are usually right.”

One final thought on endings. The debate of whether to use an epilogue or not is simply a personal choice. (See what I did there?)

“I rarely use epilogues unless there are ends I absolutely must tie up that don't involve the h/h story arc,” Lane said. “Or in the last book of a series where there is something involving all couples from the series that must be done together after the action of that last book. But most books end with the last story scene.”

“I only use an epilogue if there's a question the ending didn't answer or if I want my readers to get a further glimpse into where those characters ended up. If I need to let readers see them with a problem solved. If there's a new baby, a new job, living conditions, etc., that need a further 'happy ending' that's the only time I'd use an epilogue. I think readers want to see those

characters successfully recovered/handling life after everything that was thrown at them in the main story," [Barbara Meyers](#) said.

"Some stories need them to wrap up the plot and some don't. I only use them when I need to flash forward a serious amount of time to show what happens in the future or to provide additional information. For example, there is one in my book *Madame Presidentess* because the book ends at a certain point in my real-life heroine, Victoria Woodhull's, life," Evelina said. "I used the epilogue to briefly summarize the rest of her life for the reader. In biographical historical fiction, I feel like that is sometimes necessary because otherwise your readers don't know what became of the person they've just been reading about for hundreds of pages."

However, one caveat of writer beware.

"On the other hand, I've read books where the epilogue totally ruined the story for me," Evelina said. "There was one where if the author would have left it off, the book would have been *perfect!* This same author, in another book, had so many epilogues I felt like I was watching the last Lord of the Rings movie. 'Okay, this is the end.' \*turns page\* 'Oh, wait, maybe, not.' Over and over. I think she was trying to convey that the main characters were hiding even more secrets and were more duplicitous than you ever thought. But all it did was twist my brain into knots and leave me confused as to how the book ended. If you are going to use epilogues, please limit yourself to one."

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[Michele Dunaway](#) serves as your Nink editor. This series has now ended. Next month, you'll be seeing conference reports.

# All I Need to Know About Writing Life I Learned From... Buying A House

*By Michele Dunaway*



By the time you read this, I will have been in my new house since June 29. Getting here has not been easy, or cheap. In fact, most of the time buying a new house involves a lot of stress and drama. At some points along the line, it also involved crying, consulting with my lawyer, and finding myself standing at the pits of despair.

Much like the writing life.

So as we dig into this next installment of things I learned, here's a brief timeline: My house sold in February. The goal was to downsize into a condo in March. On the walk through, March 5, we discovered tons of issues, so we walked away. That meant all my life went onto a moving truck March 7, and instead of buying, I rented an apartment and moved in March 8. This began the entire saga. In hindsight someday, I hope I'm laughing.

## **Lesson One: You need someone in your corner.**

My real estate agent, my mortgage broker and my inspectors have been godsend. When I told my agent three days before closing that the amount of damage I found was far too unacceptable, she didn't blink an eye. She told me what needed to happen for a mutual release, and when the seller began to balk, I contacted my attorney who gave me the wording. Yes, it was inconvenient to the seller, but my agent and I didn't appreciate being deceived. Hence, with my attorney saying "Let me know if I need to do anything else," the seller signed off and refunded my \$2,500 in earnest money. Yes, I was out the \$1,000 in inspections, but I wasn't out the \$10,000-\$20,000 of damage/work that my agent and I never saw because the homeowner refused to leave during showings and inspections (more on that in a minute).

Hence the need for a good support team beyond your family and friends. In traditional publishing, this may mean finding the right agent for you. (Currently, I'm still homeless in this area.) As we're all published authors, I'm not going to dwell on finding an agent (*Nink* did a series on that earlier), but I do want to reiterate that it's important to constantly assess if your

team is truly working for you. You should be the number one priority no matter what it takes—their earning a commission comes second.

My real estate agent several times kept telling me she felt like she failed me, but she always had my best interests at heart. I can't tell you how many times she dropped everything so we could be the first ones through the latest new listings. It took us three times to sell my house. It took us three inspections to finally find a home that wasn't either damaged or structurally deficient (I clearly don't know how to pick them). I can't tell you how many contracts we wrote (six? eight?) only to have the deal fall through for one reason or another. Remember, she's not paid until she sells my house, and she's not paid again until the one I buys closes. Having someone who is with you for the long haul is important. I once had a literary agent whose interest in me stopped once she made the sale. It was all about the sale, not building my career. When I had three, well-reviewed books that didn't sell well (through no fault of my own), she suggested I find someone else.

So whether you use an agent or not, find someone who believes in you and your career. Yes, you are paying them. But whether it be an agent, a cover artist, a freelance editor, an accountant, an attorney, or a publicist, these business relationships matter. Assemble your best team. If you feel something isn't working, then look into making changes.

## **Lesson Two: Rules are there for a reason.**

The general rule of thumb is that if you are the homeowner, you should not be present for the showings or, once under contract, the inspections. But this happened to me twice.

The owner of the condo was an artist who specialized in large, oil canvases. He trailed us around the apartment making sure we couldn't see anything—meaning we couldn't see behind any of the paintings he had stacked everywhere. But it was the 15th floor, had 2,200 square feet and great views, so we made an offer. Then came inspections, which did not go well. Then came the walk-through. By then, thinking it would close, he'd moved out. The hardwood floors all needed refinishing—if they could be saved (\$8,000 to refinish). That was the least of it. So we sent photos of things we couldn't see. What did he do? He reached out to me on Facebook telling me he hated my agent, she was incompetent, and that he'd only deal with me and that I was a fool for not thinking of what a steal I was getting. Hence, the lawyer and walking away.

The next place was a beautiful 100+-year-old Brownstone in Lafayette Square. During the inspection process the homeowner was there, sipping from a Venti-sized cup, which he refilled from a liter bottle of Svedka vodka twice while I was there. I wish I were making this up. He told me his wife had served him with divorce papers that day. He told me about moving to Phoenix to be near his dying mother. As he explained who the neighbors were, he sobbed how much he'd miss the house and spontaneously gave me a hug (uh—awkward). He did apologize. Once again, happy, he later offered to take me to dinner (more awkward).

As for the house? I loved it but my inspector found tuckpointing issues and structural defects. We called in a structural engineer who said, "Do not buy this house." We didn't. Once again, earnest money back and continuing to do business with another creepy person avoided.

In writing, the contracts you sign outline a series of behaviors and tenants each party is expected to follow. The process for publishing is similar to that of buying a house—there are

specific, contractual obligations on each side. Because everyone followed the process, the mutual release ending this contract went through easily, and without us having to bring up his inappropriate behavior.

Make sure that you read the contract. Whether you are contracting for a cover or for art, or assigning away your rights, make sure you know what a company is going to do for you, when they are going to do it, and how much it is going to cost. The terms should be of benefit to both parties and should include termination clauses.

I recently received the rights back to the last three books that my former agent sold. Because the publishing contract was specific as to the sales numbers needed for the publisher to retain rights, and because the royalty statements gave specific numbers proving the sales weren't there, I referenced both in my reversion letter.

PS—On the house I just bought, the owners sat in the backyard for the first showing only because it was such short notice. But they were gone for all inspections, and they agreed to fix everything.

### **Lesson Three: Don't fall in love right away.**

As this one seems a bit of a paradox, let me explain. As I did my search, my agent would ask me if I loved it. I loved the brownstone on first glance, but it wasn't to be. You invest so much energy and so much excitement, only to be disappointed.

It's what literary agents and editors do to us. We send them our best, and they hate it. We publish a great book and readers pan it or don't buy it.

Falling in love is risky. If I didn't love it, I rejected it and we moved on. Selling my house meant you'd hope the people going through would be your buyers. I've been on both sides and it's hard.

Something always comes up that sucks the wind out of your sails. As I tell my students who produce the yearbook, someone will always complain and someone will always say your baby is ugly.

On the writing end, this translates into a smackdown and drain on your creativity. Honestly, I felt like I was on an episode of *House Hunters*, except that the TV show makes it look easy. Probably the most realistic show is *Property Brothers*, where Drew and Jonathan Scott show people their dream house. They fall in love—but it's out of budget.

Writing is like that. Like with buying a house, we may not get everything that we want. I'm getting a basement laundry room and no longer have walk-in closets. Everything won't be immediately turnkey perfect with your dream paint, so we have to prioritize what we really need. We do the same to make our manuscripts work. We have to be willing to let our favorite scenes go. We have to be willing to accept our first draft may not be the best draft. We have to be realistic. Yes, the process sucks. But unless you're one of those for whom everything is perfect all the time (and if so, I hate you), the real world isn't going to be easy. Which brings us to the next lesson.



#### **Lesson Four: You need grit and perseverance.**

Throughout this process, I felt like Goldilocks: too big; too small; nothing just right. When it was, it cost too much. Or the house sold in a bidding war that we didn't win (yep, went through that, too).

Writing is much like this. There are days when the words won't come. Days when your creativity is dead. Days when you feel like your career is over. But this is a business. It's our livelihoods. Unless you're a quitter, you are going to have to dig deep.

Bad stuff is going to happen. Your books don't sell. Deals fall through. An editor requests your stuff—and you never hear from them again. You rebrand and start over. You get a personal setback. All my worldly possessions went onto a moving truck March 7. March 8 we moved into a 1,350-square-foot apartment where the third bedroom was stacked high with my things—the door would open and you could step inside but that was it. We signed a three-month lease. We stayed four, because on April 29, I had cervical fusion surgery and went on medical leave for the rest of the school year. When I was on the floor recovering, I learned we'd lost a bidding war. Later, after the required time of “you may not be in a car at all” I was shotgun in my agent's car, neck brace on, looking at houses.

Bad stuff happens in everyone's life. Grit and perseverance got me through times when I felt discouraged and desperate. I clung to my stubborn belief that things would work out—that I wasn't a psycho for passing on certain things and that the universe didn't hate me when deals didn't go through.

#### **Lesson Five: Don't be afraid to leave your comfort zone.**

One of the biggest things I've learned, and am still learning, is that we can get complacent in our comfort zones. I lived 30 miles away from my best friends—and it had been time to move back probably since 2015. But I found excuse after excuse because moving into the inner St. Louis suburbs meant giving up the house I built after my divorce. I'd raised my kids there. I also knew that I wouldn't get the same style house (not without an additional \$400,000).

Writing is like this. Currently I've got a couple of projects going and I'm not sure what to do with them. Traditional publishing is what I know best, but that's not working out. The discouraging agent rejections have piled up. I've done a few self-pub works but I find the process overwhelming. Covers? Freelance editors? Advertising? It's out of my comfort zone, which is one reason I love NINC and reading about others' experiences.

Buying this house pushed me out of my comfort zone. Unlike many of those on *House Hunters*, we didn't reject the one at the top of our budget. We bit the bullet because that's the best house and in the words of my best friend “it's a great house.”

Moving has been hard, because I left behind a 3,100-square-foot two-story on five acres in the country and the best neighbors—we'd been there since 2001, so 18 years. I changed my mind during this process—my goal of downsizing into a condo or a city home with little-to-no yard went out the window. In the end, I bought a brick ranch on a half-acre in Kirkwood, where I grew up and went to high school, making me five minutes from my friends. In essence, while not my dream house, I moved home.

As we go through life, the people who we were yesterday may not be the people we are tomorrow. I learned to be realistic about what I needed and with what I could live with or live without. It's okay to change your mind.

Side note: Denise Agnew wrote several articles about authors doing genre switch-ups, and how doing what they loved and needed to write has been helpful to those authors. I can't add much more to her words of wisdom except to say that you have to do what's best for you, not someone else. If it feels wrong, the answer might be to walk away, as I did twice.

### **Lesson Six: It's not going to happen overnight.**

In our digital age, we are so used to getting answers immediately. There's a deadline on every home sales contract—acceptance by this date and time. So while you may find out if your house sold or your offer got accepted overnight, there's a process of inspections and financing that follows that takes time.

In writing, we tend to hear about and focus on the overnight sensations. Those who hit the big lists and their careers rocket to the sky. The reality is that, for most of us, our careers are going to take time. The band Panic! at the Disco formed in 2004, but the band seemed to truly burst on the mainstream scene in 2018-2019. Long before Gwen Stefani went out on her own and became a judge on *The Voice*, her band No Doubt formed in 1986—and it wasn't until 1995 when "Don't Speak" spent 16 weeks at number one on the Billboard Hot 100 that most people heard of her, and not until 2001's *Rock Steady* that the band won two Grammy Awards.

All we can do is keep working (remember that grit and perseverance?) and never giving up. Which brings me to the final lesson.

### **Lesson Seven: Revenge is a dish best served cold.**

How many contracts did we write? How many people didn't want to take my top price for their property? How many tears did I shed? How much stress did I go through? Plenty.

My Realtor and I jokingly call it the "Dunaway Curse." Or perhaps, as I've indicated earlier, I clearly don't know how to pick a house.

Whatever it is, several went under contract and then the deal fell through. We offered \$5,000 below list price on one house, only to be told the owners believed it would be sold the first day with multiple offers (nope). Another house went for almost \$15,000 less than what I offered.

The one with the structural defects? No one else bought it and the owner withdrew it from the market. The guy who contacted me via Facebook messenger? He said I was making a big mistake I'd regret. He sold the condo 65+ days later for more than my offer, but when you subtract out agent commission, two extra months of condo fees, taxes, and personal utilities, he came out the same, if he didn't actually lose a little.

As for the regret he insisted I'd have? After living in an apartment and listening to the herd of elephants upstairs, I'm delighted not to be in a condo that needed tons of repair. If my cats were unhappy being three floors up—I now can't imagine them happy at 15. Someone upstairs was clearly watching out for me—saving me from a big mistake. (Thank you.)

As authors, the best revenge is to write our best books and experience fantastic success. Perhaps your book is one that traditional outlets rejected and now has made more money than it ever would have had you gone that route. Perhaps your revenge might be firing that agent or publisher and hearing “You’ll regret it,” only to be happier and more successful by going elsewhere or going out on your own. While I don’t advise ever burning bridges, privately I have no problem with a good gloat. As Toby Keith sang, “[How Do You Like Me Now?](#)”

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*Michele Dunaway* still hasn’t decided what direction she’s going with her publishing life, but she figures that’s fine—she can always change her mind. The cats, subject of a previous article, are adjusting to the new house and demanding a catio.

# Untraditional Publishers

Filling niches & finding fresh voices

By Laura Resnick



WMG Publishing, UFO Publishing, and Zombies Need Brains, LLC, are three *untraditional* publishing companies, each less than a decade old, that thrive by taking advantage of evolving production technology, new distribution channels, and innovative funding opportunities—just like indie writers. In fact, the founders of these three companies are all writers—and they publish many other writers in their ventures.

(Disclosure: These companies have all published my short fiction. They paid me rates identical to or *better than* what major publishers pay me for similar work.)

[Joshua Palmatier](#) was already a university mathematics teacher by day and a busy fantasy novelist by night when he launched [Zombies Need Brains, LLC](#). When asked what madness led him to add a publishing company to his work load, he explained he had edited a few short story anthologies for DAW Books (his fantasy publisher, as well as mine), had enjoyed it, and looked forward to editing more.

“Except there was a shake-up in the publishing industry at that point and DAW cut back their anthology line from six to eight a year to one or two. I waited a few years to see if they’d end up bringing the anthologies back, but after three years I decided that wasn’t going to happen and the only way I’d be able to edit anthologies in the future was to create my own company.” So he founded Zombies Need Brains (ZNB) and ran a Kickstarter campaign to fund his first project, *Clockwork Universe: Steampunk vs. Aliens*.

The name of the company came from a party that Palmatier and a group of fantasy author friends decided to host at a World Fantasy Convention. “We called the party Zombies Need Brains, had t-shirts printed up, invitations to hand out, etc. [George R.R. Martin](#) came and stayed the entire night. It was a blast. When it came down to coming up with a name for the small press, I wanted something that was obviously SF&F related, but at the same time fun, because I wouldn’t be doing this if it wasn’t fun. Zombies Need Brains seemed like the perfect name, so I stole it from that party. I think it’s a perfect representation of what I want the press to be.”

ZNB has by now published more than a dozen anthologies; the writers whose stories appear in the books include sf/f award-winners, bestsellers, familiar names, and newcomers.

One of the well-known sf/f writers ZNB has published is [Kristine Kathryn Rusch](#). Along with her husband [Dean Wesley Smith](#), she's co-founder of WMG Publishing (named in honor of **W**alter, **M**onet, and **G**alahad, the couple's cats at the time they launched the company). Rusch and Smith are both very prolific authors, having written hundreds of titles—novels and short fiction—under multiple pseudonyms over the years. Sf/f writer Rusch, for example, is also award-winning mystery writer Kris Nelscot and romance novelist Kristine Grayson. She and Smith both have extensive editing experience (and Rusch won a Best Editor Hugo Award when she was editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*), as well as previous publishing experience—they owned and ran Pulphouse, a small press that operated in the 1990s and published well over 200 titles.

Rusch and Smith developed WMG via the indie-writer route. They started by self-publishing their reverted backlist titles, of which there were many. "In the beginning," Rusch said, "the publishing arm was mostly Dean, doing Power Point covers (!) and me, finding copy editors. In our first year, we made much more [money] than we expected, even though getting the books up was slower than expected. We figured we'd still be publishing with traditional publishers, but once we saw the money and felt the control and watched traditional publishing contracts try to take every aspect of the copyright, we decided to leave traditional and publish our own novels."

Publishing only their own titles at the time, they hired a manager as soon as they could afford it, relying on WMG income to pay her salary.

"We are writers first," Rusch explained. "Our goal was to have someone else run the company... While Dean and I are great at start-ups, we suck at the day-to-day running of a business. It's too much like a real job, and we'd rather be writing. So when we set up WMG, we always had planned to bring in the right CEO. We are lucky to have Allyson. She's spectacular."

[Allyson Longueria](#) was editor of the newspaper in the town where Rusch and Smith lived. She told *Nink*, "I interviewed Dean for a story and he invited me to their weekly writers' lunch, where we all got to know each other. I have an extensive business background in addition to my journalism background. When they decided to start WMG Publishing, I was their first choice to head it as publisher and CEO. I came on board April 2012."

Longueria's job, like the company, has expanded considerably since then: "We've grown from about 100 titles published and me as the only employee to more than 700 titles, a staff of [five employees, several contract proofreaders, and many contract editors and writers]. We have launched four magazines since my tenure. I am also the series editor for one and edit volumes in another... We have an audio booth and have done our own audiobooks in the past, but at the moment, we work with primarily with Audible and ACX."

The book division of WMG publishes only Rusch's and Smith's work (which keeps the company busy), while the magazines, *Fiction River* and *Pulphouse*, publish many writers.

Rusch explained the structure of the two magazines: "*Fiction River* is an ever-changing anthology series with different editors whom we hire. We act as series editors, approving or (once in a while) vetoing stories. We search for different voices. I tend to edit a number of the

volumes, but I didn't want to edit all of them. Dean does *Pulphouse* and it's off-beat, in his voice. He also takes reprints, which *Fiction River* doesn't."

Another innovative small publisher is [Alex Shvartsman](#), a writer, editor, and translator (Russian). He owns and manages [Kings Games](#) in Brooklyn, NY, and he's the award-winning author of more than 100 short stories. He recently released his first novel, *Erdani's Crown*, through his company, UFO Publishing, which he founded because, "I'm a glutton for punishment." Agreed!

"Seriously though, I've been a serial entrepreneur for much of my life, and when I saw how relatively cheap great fiction content is, it was difficult to resist. I also saw a niche that no one was filling: pro-quality humorous sf/f anthologies. I write a lot of such stories, and when I realized that many of the top sf/f venues either do not care for humor or publish it quite sparingly, especially when you compare that to what I perceived the demand to be among readers, an anthology idea was born. And out of that, a (tiny) company... Although we've gone on to publish some non-humorous books as well, most of what UFO Publishing does is on the lighter side."

He named the company after its first anthology, *Unidentified Funny Objects*, which was so popular that it became an annual series. "Of course, not a month goes by without some tinfoil hat-wearing conspiracy theorist sending me their screed about UFOs," said Shvartsman, "but that only makes me happy I didn't name the company Big Foot Press or Flat Earth Books or something."

UFO Publishing "is really a one-man show; everyone else involved is either a freelancer or a volunteer. From our first project, my goal has been to publish books that look and feel like the best titles available from major New York publishers. This meant not skimping on cover art, layout, and all other aspects of publication, even if it makes each title more expensive to produce.

"I try to find and collaborate with incredibly talented people: be they authors, artists, or editors. I reach out to people whose work I admire and then try to give them as much free rein as I can, within the bounds of the project. Generally I look at the creatives' past work and style to see how well-suited they are to the project, and try to respect their input and creativity, especially in areas where they know more than I do... Much of our success is due to my team's incredible contributions."

A love of fiction, editing, and fresh voices is a common factor among these untraditional publishers.

"The part I like best is simply the creation of the anthologies," said Palmatier. "I like visualizing the themes, then seeing what others write about for that theme (often quite different from what I see in my head). I like finding those stories in the slush pile that epitomize the theme and then working with the author to make them even better. And I love releasing the books to the wild to see how the readers react to them. All of those steps involved in creating an anthology excite and intrigue me."

The way Palmatier designs his ZNB anthologies (similar to how Shvartsman does his at UFO) is that he fills about half the slots of each book with "anchor authors," professionally published writers with names readers will recognize; these are writers who he personally

invites to participate in the anthologies. Those authors are guaranteed a slot in the book (assuming they write something appropriate to the anthology's theme).

"The rest of the anthology is filled out with stories from the open call," Palmatier said. "I do this because I firmly believe that we should have open markets seeking new voices and the only way to do that is with open calls. Anyone can submit a story. And often the 'best' story in the anthology comes from the slush pile."

Rusch at WMG said, "We love short fiction, and we love editing. My problems as an editor were always with my 'boss,' the publisher. The stories I could tell you about *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* would make your hair curl. It was a terrible experience. Not the editing part; the working for someone else part. So when I was back working for myself, I wanted to edit again."

"Editing the work of other writers definitely makes you a better writer because it helps you identify the same weaknesses in your own prose you're trying to smooth out in others' work," said Shvartsman at UFO. "That's based on my role as editor though; I'm not sure being a publisher makes you a better writer. In fact, it's probably the opposite because I'm using valuable writing time to upload ebooks and figure out promotion strategies."

Indeed, the administrative portion of publishing is what they all like least about it. Rusch and Smith hired Longueria to run the company as soon as the earnings could justify it. And Palmatier says, "The downside to it is the paperwork involved with running a business—keeping track of sales and expenses and all of that drudgery."

His explanation of what was involved in setting up *Zombies Needs Brains* might seem daunting to some (it does to me): "Well, first I had to legally set up the company, which isn't easy and, of course, costs some money. So I did the research and filled out the forms and sent in all of the required paperwork. The worst part of that was trying to figure out how to satisfy the 'creation of the company must be reported in two local newspapers' clause. I knew I needed to hire a lawyer in order to make certain the contracts with authors, editors, and artists were worded correctly, so I got the lawyer to finish out the newspaper issue as well. He also set up the wording for the contracts and now does all of the copyright work for the anthologies.

"In addition, I felt that adding a business would make my taxes significantly more difficult to file, so I hired a tax representative, who made certain I was collecting sales tax correctly (more paperwork) and generally handles my taxes each year. Aside from that, the only issues were setting up a business account with a local bank and then designing and running the Kickstarter to generate the funds for that first anthology."

All three companies engage in crowdfunding some or all of their projects on Kickstarter. Their thoughts about how to make that work for a small press are fairly similar.

"The biggest lesson I've learned with crowdfunding is that it's work, and it will always be work," said Palmatier. "I'd like to [run a] Kickstarter that instantly funds and then does two, three, or ten times its stated goal by the end. I'd certainly have less gray hair if that happened. But that's not how 99% of the crowdfunding projects that succeed work. Most of them require a good solid month of set-up and planning ahead of time (if not more), and then a good solid month of nothing much but promoting the Kickstarter while it's running."

“You have to know what you're doing when you crowd-fund,” said Rusch. “You must plan. You also have to make sure your backer awards don't cost you more than you earn in the Kickstarter. I've seen six-figure Kickstarters that bankrupt their creators because those folks never factored in the cost of the rewards and shipping.”

Shvartsman told *Nink*, “A successful campaign requires a lot of hard work, and the overwhelming number of backers are people you direct to the campaign—not strangers who find out about it on Kickstarter. They're a platform, but they're not there to do your marketing for you.”

Palmatier explained, “Everyone within your own personal reach will be aware of the Kickstarter and will have pledged to it if they intend to within the first week. After that, you've got to figure out a way to go beyond your own reach and find new backers. That's what all of the planning ahead is for. You need to find a way to get to those other backers, either by setting up blog posts about topics with people willing to host them or sending out press releases to potential websites who might post something about the project. I use the anchor authors for each of my anthologies as my initial attempt at 'reaching' beyond the current ZNB fanbase. I firmly believe the *only* reason ZNB's Kickstarters have been successful is because of those anchor authors. But even that isn't enough. I spend hours writing blogs, setting up hostings, sending out requests for interviews or guest posts about the Kickstarters... What really matters for outreach is social media (in particular, Facebook), the support of the anchor authors, and those posts on webpages and blogs.”

Crowdfunding can also give you a sense of how viable your project is.

“Going straight to the readers is great in that not only it helps finance the costs,” said Shvartsman, “but it also is a proof of concept; you know right away what level of interest/support to expect based on how the Kickstarter campaign does, and can make printing and marketing decisions accordingly.”

Rusch said, “We often use Kickstarter to gauge interest in a project or as advertising, as well as to raise funds.”

“Kickstarter is also a great platform for repeat business,” Shvartsman noted. “As long as you deliver quality projects on time, many folks will come back to preorder your next book, again and again. In fact, because UFO books are so expensive (we pay writers, artists, and everyone involved pro rates!), I would have a very difficult time financing some of these books without the preorders made possible by crowdfunding.”

So where are these companies going from here?

Zombies Needs Brains has recently succeeded in crowdfunding its next three anthologies, *Apocalyptic*, *Galactic Stew*, and *My Battery Is Low and It Is Getting Dark*. Submissions to these volumes are open until the end of the year; you can find more information [here](#).

“As sort of a mid-future goal,” said Palmatier, “I'd like to do something more along the lines of a shared-world anthology and/or mosaic novel. These plans are still tentative, but they've certainly shifted more forward in my head in the past year or two.”

At UFO Publishing, Shvartsman will start developing his next couple of humor anthologies, including the eighth annual volume of *Unidentified Funny Objects*. “Over the course



of last year we've been publishing [Future Science Fiction Digest](#)," he said, "a magazine which is free to read online. This has also provided a visibility and audience boost to other UFO projects."

At WMG, they're working on a big holiday project, looking at expanding licensing of their content (film/TV, translation, games, toys, etc.), adding online and in-person workshops to their schedule, and eventually refocusing on their in-house audio department.

In conclusion, I think Palmatier does a good job of summing up the ethos of these untraditional publishers:

"I'm trying to build up a respectable reputation for the press with authors, so that those published and those who haven't been discovered yet know that ZNB is professional, produces quality products, and pays on time. I want writers to *want* to be in our anthologies (and the competition is tough). As for readers, I hope they see the quality of the stories we choose, from our anchors and from the stories we pick from the open call for submissions, and that they feel they can buy a ZNB anthology without thought because they know they're going to enjoy a good read."

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*Laura Resnick is the author of novels, short stories, and nonfiction.*

# An Insider Look at Traditional Publishing

Interview with Patience Bloom, Senior Editor, Harlequin Romantic Suspense

By Nicole Evelina



*Patience Bloom*

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

This month we feature Patience Bloom who has been in the publishing field since 1997. Originally from the Northeast, she has lived in France, Connecticut, Ohio and New Mexico and now resides in New York City. She has a master's degree in French literature, which she declares on her blog hasn't really helped with her work as an editor. In addition to editing, her real-life story of editing romance and marrying her high school's popular class clown, *Romance Is My Day Job*, came out in February 2014 from Dutton Books.

What follows is my interview with Patience.

**1. What are things an author can do to advance their career? What are some "career" busters or mistakes that traditionally published authors may not even know they are making?**

Authors can keep writing the best book possible. Once an author hands one book in, she should take a break, then write the next one. That is the foundation of a career.

Beyond that, an author should research her profession, know the lists, her peers' work, what's outside of her genre, basically everything that is happening in books.

As for publicity, I have authors who do no publicity and some who do more publicity than actual writing. The one thing that seems to resonate the most is consistency and thoughtful frequency. I say consistency because when readers see you on a consistent basis, they are liable to look for you. Thoughtful frequency in that it's easier to sell an author when they have a body

of good work and write a few books a year. But there is such a thing as too many books, which can be too much, giving the idea that not every book is written with care. It all takes time, and in my experience, many authors are impatient.

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

Each author is different so the meaning of “best author” is relative. I have one author who writes eight books a year and does little in terms of social media. For me, she is the best because she’s writing a lot for us and the stories are consistently entertaining. Another author may excel at self-promotion and writing great romances, which we love also. If I had to choose the qualities that make for a harmonious relationship, I’d choose the following: (1) Willingness to accept criticism, (2) Devotion to craft, and (3) Decent communication skills. This is hoping that I have those skills, as well.

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

I don’t choose to buy an author based on social media, but their platforms give me good information. In some instances, it has provided a reason not to buy. Like most editors, I just want to read a good book and crafting a good tweet doesn’t play a large role in this. This probably doesn’t apply for every publisher. I can tell what kind of author a person is by their twitter account.

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

This is a great question and it really depends on the publisher. Some may see over a couple books whether that author is a good investment (publishers have to think of the financial aspect, as you know). Harlequin (at least on the category romance side) is generous about keeping authors longer even with low sales. We tend to try a lot of different tactics to boost someone’s profile: suggest stronger hooks, different packaging, or start from scratch in some way. But if over six books the sales remain very low, it isn’t helping our business, and frankly, the author. I’ve seen authors leave and have ecstatic success at another publisher or self-publishing. Because the market changes, a publisher has to change its mandates. Unfortunately, this affects the author in ways that can be maddening. I wish I had a solution to this, aside from “keep writing.”

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

This is a tough question to answer since our marketing strategies are based on selling a category romance series rather than an author. As with any traditional publisher, our marketing budgets are limited, but we do try to promote as much as we can through blog posts, promotions, social media platforms.

**6. What stands out about your publisher's approach to marketing?**

I've been on both sides of the desk when it comes to marketing. I was able to see the extensive plans that go into marketing one book and how hard the marketing department works and the crazy number-crunching (a skill that eludes me) that they do. In many ways, marketing makes decisions that I couldn't bear to make in terms of timing, dollars, and divining the future. It has given me new respect for the marketing managers I work with every day at Harlequin. The volume they work with is mind-numbing and they do it with such flair.

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

From a company's perspective, my biggest success might be seeing my author make the Top 10 of the *New York Times* bestseller list. For me, though, it is always my relationship with an author and if I'm able to provide what they most need. It's a failure for me when working with me is not in the best interest of an author.

**8. What have you just bought in romantic suspense and what direction is that genre heading?**

My sense is that romantic suspense will remain strong, but that readers will want stories that will help them escape rather than show them what is happening (or could) in the real world. Given international and domestic events, readers still enjoy the fear factor of suspense and characters, but it can be too real if it's, say, a romance set within a mass shooting nightmare. On the other side of this, the granular details of a case and how a character transforms into a villain could become even more popular, with the resurgence of interest in how serial killers are born. As a society, we tend to popularize the bad and figure out the unredeemable ones.

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

Switching genres is not a favorite thing for a publisher to deal with, but hey, if it's a great book, we should just deal with it. You never know. I encourage my authors to establish a readership first before switching, but then some are so prolific that they can do more than one genre, which I understand.

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

Anything and everything! Call all your friends, schools, churches, affiliations and get them excited. Make a list of everyone you know who can pass on the great news of your book. Start a newsletter, contact other authors and find out what they do, and make it the Thing to Do every day to promote yourself.

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

An author should not accept ghosting. An editor needs to give a status update on a submission, unless it's stipulated on their website that they don't answer you. Otherwise, ghosting is rude. Usually, when I've had a manuscript in house for too long, I appreciate the nudge to get an answer.

**12. If you could look into your crystal ball for 2020 and beyond, where do you see the market headed? What trends might be coming? What do readers want more of, and what are readers tired of seeing?**

I'm an idealist in a cynic's clothing. I like to think that in 2020, diversity in books will explode, making stories more exciting, inclusive, and horizon-expanding for all. I think readers are tired of dated tropes and clichés. If you are marrying the oil tycoon for convenience, there better be a good reason.

**13. How has the #metoo movement affected romance and/or publishing in general? What should authors be aware of here?**

The #metoo movement had a profound effect on romance publishing, at least in our office. We've had several discussions in-house and this is ongoing. The authors were already several steps ahead of us and assured us that they had been dealing with this issue for a long time in their writing. We have had to acclimate more than usual and I, for one, have had to do a lot of re-reading of older stories to find areas that we would probably edit today. In any case, the #metoo movement has guided us toward creating boundaries in romance—in ways that preserve the essential connection between characters falling in love.

**14. How has the #ownvoices movement affected publishing in general?**

From what I can see, the #ownvoices movement has made it imperative for us to do outreach and communicate that we want #ownvoices stories. It's not nearly enough for us to sit at our editor desks and wait for submissions. We have to do research, go out, and find great writers.

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

Harlequin has so many different lines and imprints and is constantly inventing new ways to attract readers. We develop programs, task forces, long-running franchises, a zillion books, while working with a massive author base. Our latest creation is the Feel Good Project, which focuses on the “feel good” aspect of romance and how we can leverage this in new directions. In addition, we have now Harlequin Studios, a natural offshoot of our storytelling tradition.

**16. You’ve been with Harlequin for over 20 years. Tell me a little bit about why you still love this job after all of these years.**

As with any relationship, there are highs, lows, and in between times. The foundation is a love of books and that I get to work with such talented people every day. Living in New York can be tough, but I get to read romance for a living! In times of stress, I often pick up something to review or edit. That usually tells me why I still do this.



*Nicole Evelina is a USA Today best-selling author of historical fiction, non-fiction, and women’s fiction. She’s currently querying her first biography and will take any prayers/good vibes you’re willing to send her way.*

# Creativity: Recharge and Reload

*By Denise A. Agnew*



Over the years, writers have expressed to me that horrible feeling of having no desire or interest in writing. They feel as if they will never again have the energy or the inclination to sit at the keyboard and create. This sensation can become depressing and letting it go on can lead to a host of substantial problems. If you take some proactive steps now to ensure your creative health, your chances of burning out are substantially reduced.

Losing your drive to create doesn't happen without a reason. Of course, traumatic events such as the death of a loved one or serious health issues can instantly switch off the drive to create. However, many times it's a far more insidious process that can sneak up on you until you awaken one day to find your creativity has drained away.

As writers develop their careers, the innate newbie feeling of creating can falter from hearing others' criticism or even from your own toxic self-criticism. While many find a way to pull themselves up by the bootstraps and continue, even that initial return to creativity might slow down. It's a rare writer who has an inexhaustible supply of creativity from which to draw years on end. The old cliché about the creative well needing to be refilled isn't a myth.

## **Major creativity blockers include:**

- A writer might buy into the idea that more is better. A series of things such as publisher, agent, and reader demands can pile on until the writer is spending more time writing but producing less satisfactory results. Even if the writer doesn't have outside pressures on them, a good work ethic can go wild. Soon the author believes that if they don't write 14 hours a day, five-to-seven days a week, and produce numerous books a year that they are somehow a failure. This can lead to health problems, including depression and anxiety.
- The writer spends far too much time noticing what other authors are doing in their careers rather than following their true passion. Comparison is never a good thing.
- How much money the author makes becomes the reason they are writing. If a writer is relying on their writing career to make a living wage, this can cause a creativity drain. If

they have another day job, this can also drain them of the physical and mental energy for creative pursuits.

- Health concerns. Any time an author experiences a health problem, there may be a lack of enthusiasm for writing. If the author is required to take medication for the health issue, side effects must be taken into consideration because they also could block creativity.

### **How can a writer recharge and reload?**

- First and foremost, you must regulate stress, anxiety and/or depression, which impact a host of things in your life, including creativity. There is some evidence (although this theory is controversial) that creative types can be more prone to anxiety and depression. Many creative people become more depressed if they don't create. If you are saddled with various stressors, take steps to reduce whatever it is that is causing the stress. This could include consulting with a mental health care provider for a plan specifically for your situation. An interesting book on the subject of creativity and mental illness is *Touched With Fire* by Kay Redfield Jamison. It's an older book, but I personally feel there's a lot of value in the information. If you are simply blocked but not necessarily depressed, a creativity coach could help you.
- Consider meditation as a way to reduce overall stress and improve health. Before you say that you can't meditate because you've tried it before, there are different types of meditation. For example, if you've tried guided meditation but can't visualize, there is actually a real thing called [aphantasia](#). For someone who can't visualize, mindfulness meditation can be an excellent way to meditate because it doesn't require the ability to see images. I use the One Giant Mind app on my phone. Creative writers are less likely to experience aphantasia, but my guess is there are some who still have this situation.
- Take a mindful attitude. Overall mindfulness is an excellent way to regulate stress levels. I've noted that the more mindful I am, the fewer mistakes I make. I'm also less clumsy. An excellent source on mindfulness is [Mindful.org](#). This site also offers a monthly magazine I've found tremendously helpful. Jon Kabat-Zinn has written quite a few books about mindfulness, and he is one of the earlier explorers into the concept.
- Befriend writers who have a solution-based attitude toward life and career. Sometimes you just want a shoulder to lean on. This is okay up to a point, but it can lead to endless rounds of complaining without putting into action a solution. By solution-based, I mean individuals who help each other find reasonable solutions to writing problems. It should go without saying that these individuals will be supportive and non-competitive. I can't emphasize the non-competitive enough. Beware of writers or groups where they emphasize a one-size-fits-all attitude and use bullying tactics to shout down others with differing opinions within the group.
- If it is in your budget, consider a monthly massage and/or Reiki session. It's amazing what a massage can do for stress. While not everyone believes in energy work such as Reiki, I can attest both as a Reiki Master and someone who has received Reiki, that it can work wonders for stress levels and overall health.



- Exercise. It's amazing what one or two miles of walking a day (even just gentle walking) can do for your mental and physical well-being. For writers who don't want to go outside, there is always the treadmill or the exercise bike. Gentle weight-lifting to keep toned is an excellent idea. Tai Chi (which at first looks like you're not getting any exercise) can help tremendously with flexibility, gaining calm, strength, and balance. You don't have to be an exercise nut to gain benefit from motion. Many people need a motivator, so special watches/devices such as a Fitbit that log how many steps you're accomplishing per day can help.
- Consider the day trip. Don't underestimate budgeting some time in to explore the museum, the art gallery or see a movie. Take time to read a book in a park, in your backyard or anywhere that isn't your abode. A change of scenery can do wonders to spark creativity.
- Speaking of change of scenery...have you considered writing somewhere different? A different room, your backyard, your front yard, a library or coffee shop? Try it. If you make various scenery changes and discover these don't help, at least you can say you tried.
- If you are an empath, you might be allowing this to interfere with your life in general. An empath is someone who is sensitive to other people's emotions and can feel those emotions as if they were their own. Many empaths are introverts and if the empathy and introversion is making it more difficult for you to get out in the world and experience creative opportunities, you can learn how to change this to your benefit. Many empaths believe there is no way to keep other people/places from negatively affecting them. As an empath and creativity coach, I've learned this isn't necessarily true. [Consult me](#) and we'll chat.
- Take a vacation or mini vacation. Even if you're a go getter, the benefits of scheduling a vacation can do wonders for your creativity. You don't have to book an expensive getaway. Even one week of time off at home reading, watching movies, sleeping in or other fun activity can do a wonderful job of restoring your creativity. Give yourself permission to do some loafing. You deserve it.

I hope these tips will inspire you to take care of your creativity because it really is a precious thing.

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*Denise A. Agnew is the award-winning author of over 69 novels and screenplays. Denise's novels Love from The Ashes and Blackout were optioned for film/TV by Where's Lucy? Productions, Bright Frontier Films and MDR Entertainment. Denise is a writer/producer (Where's Lucy? Productions, Happy Catastrophe Productions, Bright Frontier Films), a paranormal investigator, Reiki Master, and Certified Creativity Coach. As a creativity coach, Denise assists anyone in the creative arts to maintain lifelong creativity. You can find her at [www.deniseagnew.com](http://www.deniseagnew.com) and [www.creativepencoaching.com](http://www.creativepencoaching.com).*

# The Mad Scribbler

The less I know

By Laura Resnick



*“Either it sounds right or it doesn’t sound right.”*

—Isaac Asimov

I don’t teach writing courses or read people’s manuscripts to give them feedback or advice, though I dabbled in both of those things earlier in my writing career. I’ve never been one to write about the craft of writing. I used to have a few prepared writing-craft workshops that I presented at conferences, seminars, and meetings, but I haven’t done that in years, and I’m likely to decline if asked to do something like that again.

None of this is because I think my time would be better spent writing—I mean, yes, it probably would be; but I engage in many non-writing activities, after all, and I’m generally much less protective of my writing time than I ought to be.

I also didn’t stop engaging in “how to write” activities because I got burned out, or felt unappreciated, or thought I was wasting my time. None of that was ever the case.

Rather, the longer I write, the less I feel I know about writing, and the less inclined I am to try to guide others who are exploring this craft. Over time, I became uncomfortable presenting myself as if I had some expertise—or even mere coherence!—on the topic of writing. I went from feeling, as a new writer many years ago, that I had a good handle on talking about some craft topics, to later feeling like I was wading through a swamp of vague options, to eventually feeling like I was just guessing and shooting arrows in the dark.

For me, this is part and parcel of what makes writing still interesting, challenging, humbling, and surprising today, three decades after the release of my first book. I still find the process hard and the craft mysterious—even more so, I think, than when I started writing my first novel many years ago, learning as I went and wondering if I would get all the way to the end.

After about thirty books (mostly fiction), eighty short stories, and hundreds of articles, I still haven't figured out "how I write;" it's an experiment and a learning process for me every damn time. Yes, after writing many works of fiction, you figure you can probably finish this one, too. But I find that's only because my own history indicates that's entirely possible; not because it ever *feels* like I can finish the current project.

As for how to make a book or story good, or engaging, compelling... I'm still grappling too hard with that to have any advice for anyone else.

For example, when writing *Poltergeist*, a book in my Esther Diamond urban fantasy series, logic would suggest that I knew how to write an Esther Diamond novel. This was my fifth book in the series, after all. I'd already written some 400,000 words by then about this protagonist and her world. This ought to be something I could do. And since the first four books had turned out pretty well, this one ought to be pretty good, too. Right?

Well... after writing about 100 pages, I took a few days off, came back to the manuscript and read it with a fresh eye... And I was not only appalled and dismayed at how tedious and lifeless it was, I was also dumbfounded. How had this happened? *What* had happened? I had no idea!

After a bout of self-indulgent hysterics (I had lost my talent, the gods had abandoned me, the muse had turned her back on me, etc.), I worked my way through the manuscript, trying to figure out why it had all the charm and verve of a rotting banana. After another reading, I was able to start diagnosing *why* it was so lackluster and labored.

For one thing, more than 20 years and a few million words into my career, I had made an obvious rookie mistake: the first two chapters were all info-dump, with almost no action, character interaction, conflict, or story development. Once I saw the problem clearly, I could start to fix it.

I am a better rewriter than writer. (I read somewhere that Nora Roberts said, "I can fix a bad page. I can't fix a blank one.") A lot of my process consists of realizing that what I've written isn't satisfying and figuring out how to make it better. But the reason I don't teach self-editing, or "second drafts," or how to revise an MS, for example, is that although I can articulate my method (I keep rewriting something until it sounds right), I don't have guidelines, or methodology, or trail markers for this process. I just keep wrestling with the thing until it's right.

So when someone in a workshop audience reasonably asks, "How can you spot when your own work needs rewriting? What are the clues?" ... my only answer is, read it—maybe after taking a break from it—and hopefully you'll see its flaws then and fix them.

"And how do you fix them?" someone might well follow up.

The truth is, after writing plenty of books and stories—many of which I'm proud of and would enjoy as a reader ... I don't know. Not in any general "here are three steps" or "here are five possible solutions" way. I just keep working on something until it's better. I don't have craft principles I can outline, explain, or codify.

Which is why I felt increasingly clumsy, unhelpful, and frustrated with myself over the years, when trying to convey something about the craft to people. So I took a break from that

kind of thing—and soon realized I never wanted to try it again. And so I don't, and probably won't. Teaching craft is understandably a common way for experienced writers to “pay it forward,” but I'm just not suited to it.

However, I do enjoy talking about writing. I even enjoy doing so in front of an audience.

I often participate in discussion panels at conventions or other events where I and several other writers discuss questions and comments put forth by a moderator and/or the audience. We talk about various approaches to writing, such as: plotter vs. panster, linear vs. patchwork, multiple drafts vs. revise-as-you-go. We discuss how we tackle specific aspects of fiction, such as: world building (a frequent topic for science fiction & fantasy writers); writing humor; writing a story arc that stretches over multiple books in a series; handling multiple major story threads and major POV characters in an epic saga; characterization; representation; themes; etc.

I may not have good “how to” advice to share about writing, but I have lots of thoughts, theories, questions, experiences, experiments, anecdotes, examples, and quibbles. And I enjoy hearing the thoughts of other writers on our craft, trading experiences, arguing priorities, and sharing observations.

I also enjoy attending workshops led by writers who *are* good at codifying and conveying information about writing craft. In an interview on *Inside the Actor's Studio* that I watched years ago, film star Danny Glover, by then a very accomplished and experienced professional, said he still periodically returned to his old teacher's studio to sit in on an acting class, because sometimes he still learned something new about his craft, and sometimes he was reminded of something he'd forgotten he knew—maybe exactly when he needed that reminder. That insight has always stayed with me, and I follow that advice from time to time, sitting in on craft workshops or reading books about writing.

Because the longer I write, the less I *know* about writing—and that's part of what keeps it fascinating.

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*Laura Resnick is the author of the Esther Diamond series, as well as Silerian Trilogy, which was described by Publisher's Weekly as “a marvel of storytelling” and appeared on multiple Year's Best lists. The Campbell Award winning author of dozens of short stories, Laura also worked briefly as a journalist for The Associated Press in Jerusalem and as assistant editor of the oldest Jewish newspaper in America. In addition to being a longtime columnist here, she is also Nink's production manager and a past president of NINC.*

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

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*Founded in 1989*

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### ***Nink* Newsletter**

October 2019 edition – Vol. 30, No. 10

To request reprint rights or to submit an article proposal, please contact [the editor](#).

Publication: 12 issues annually. Available in PDF, mobi and epub formats. Public issues redact NINC members-only information. To change subscription preferences, please contact [admin@ninc.com](mailto:admin@ninc.com).

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