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President's Voice

From Our Family to Yours: Direct Sales

By Celeste Barclay



When I sat down to write this piece, the slogan “From our family to yours” came to mind. I googled to see if I could remember where it came from. Apparently, Disney used it in 2020, but I could have sworn I remember it from much longer ago. But it came to mind as the conversation about direct sales continues to amplify our thoughts on how to gain more control over our IP and our businesses.

I’m a KU author, so I could kvetch about the latest royalties amount until the cows come home. I won’t. It’s something that is in the forefront of my mind as I consider my 2024 plans, but that’s a rabbit hole for another day. That said, it’s undeniable that the royalty payments have steadily declined over the past months, dropping to an all-time low. We’re hearing about more and more authors having their accounts frozen or closed or fighting “The Man” to prove they own the copyright to their IP. We have the “dumpster fire on the sun,” as I’ve now deemed NYC, that continues to plague our industry both as creatives and as businesspeople regardless of where you fall on the trad/indie spectrum. We have brick and mortar stores with less real estate available, even when local store managers have more purchasing power. We’ve seen the cost of the KU subscription rise by \$2.00, which spurred heated pushback on TikTok. This is just a drop in the bucket of the things that have changed in our industry over the past 18 months.

So where does that leave us?

Some people will continue on as they always have, staying the course and riding out the downturns, knowing that the market will eventually bounce back. There are those who will hedge their bets and continue as they are but formulate contingency strategies that can be (relatively) easily implemented. That’s me. And there are those who will be early(ish) adopters

of direct sales. There are several notable authors in our organization who are already thriving with direct sales. Be sure to attend those sessions at the conference.

One of the concerns I hear repeatedly, aside from the labor-intensive start-up, is the doubt that consumers will buy into direct sales. I understand that skepticism because I've had it too. But we've conditioned our readers to do a lot of different things already. We've conditioned them to subscribe to our newsletters and open them. We've conditioned them to engage with us on social media. We've conditioned them to leave reviews. We've conditioned them to do what we need them to do. This is no different.

Do you remember the Time Life music collections? I'm dating myself, but I remember the cassettes, then the CDs. I think I might remember all the way back to vinyl. People saw the infomercials or even brief commercials and called the number. They bought those collections directly from Time Life. They weren't going to a local record store or Virgin Records. Did anyone else hope Ed McMahon would come to their door with a life size cardboard check? He was the spokesperson for American Family Publishers, a direct marketing firm that promised the possibility of huge prizes in return for buying their products. That company was very similar to Publishers Clearinghouse, a direct marketing company that offers magazine subscriptions along with sweepstakes, and is the one of which many of us have heard. Did you know it began in 1953 when Harold Mertz decided to replace door-to-door magazine sales with a one stop shop for multiple subscriptions? Now you do, too.

Who remembers Amway, Tupperware, Avon, and Mary Kay? How about more recent ones like Scentsy, Thirty-One, and Rodan + Fields? Multi-level marketing usually comes to mind when talking about these, but at the heart of them, they are direct marketing and direct sales companies. If you ask your readership, chances are—regardless of age—they have at least heard of a direct sales company and either know someone who's bought from at least one or have done so themselves.

Why the trip down memory lane? Because these are examples of how our readers, as consumers, have already been conditioned to accept the concept and process of direct sales. It's not new; it's just new to us. There was a recent post in a Facebook group by a well-established and well-respected Sweet Romance author who detailed her transition to direct sales. She provided insights and honesty, and I found it a very compelling post. Couple that with the sessions, articles, and podcast episodes showing up on the topic, and there's a growing consensus that direct sales is here for the indefinite future if not for good.

So, now what? Do we all run to our websites and build storefronts? Do we add one more task to our or our PA's to-do list? Maybe not right this very minute. But I think there's a strong case for having this conversation with other authors in your genre. Find out who's already doing it, who wants to do it, and who refuses to do it. They all have valid and valuable contributions to the conversation.

If you're a KU author, you may think this article thus far excludes you. Hopefully, if you're a KU author, you've made it this far into my article. One approach that some authors bound by

exclusivity are considering is using direct sales during their preorder period. Upon release, the direct sales option goes down, and the book enters KU just like it normally would. Another pathway I've heard recently for authors wishing to transition out of KU but who worry about losing significant income during the process is using direct to help channel current readers to your site while building your readership on the wide platforms. Many intend to move one series at a time, not their entire catalogue at once.

But KU readers like paying a flat monthly fee to get as many books as they want. But KU readers don't buy outright that often. True and true. But what's also true is the direct sales authorpreneur determines product and price. Some authors are creating bundles with all their first-in-series or bundles with the same theme or trope, not just singular series. They determine the pricing and can offer them at a competitive price exclusively from their store. This is how exclusivity should work: to our advantage.

Let me pose these questions:

From our family to yours, or rather from our computers to your e-readers, do you think your readers would experiment with you?

What type of marketing would you need to do to condition your readers to make the switch?

Do you have strategies in place to continue to diversify your holdings?

Are you a stay the course, a hedge your bets, or an early adopter?

I don't know the answers to these questions for everyone else, but I think it's a good time for some self-reflection on how we create our business plans and what we want our business plans to include moving forward.

~ Celeste Barclay

Celeste Barclay, a nom de plume, lives near the Southern California coast with her husband and sons. Before becoming a full-time author, she was a social studies and English teacher. She holds degrees in International Affairs (BA), Secondary Social Science (MAT), and Political Management (MPS). She channels that knowledge into creating rich historical romances that bring the heat.

About NINC

NINC is committed to welcoming a diverse and inclusive membership to our organization and serving all members. No author will ever be discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, religious/spiritual beliefs if any, ability, nationality or age. It is NINC's desire and goal to make sure that every author member feels welcomed and accepted and heard.

About *Nink*

Nink's goal is to provide our readers with high-quality articles that offer critical business advice, marketing how-tos, advanced craft coaching, or strategy to continue building a career, all geared to established authors. All members should feel confident that *Nink* provides something for them. We welcome pitches and submissions from all members; [propose an article](#) or submit a [letter to the editor](#).

NINC Member Benefits

Don't forget to sign up for the [email loop](#), [critique/brainstorming group](#), [traditionally published 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](#).

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/>



NINC2023: ELEVATE is happening this month. We're so excited to welcome over 400 attendees to St. Pete Beach! Here are a few FAQs (and their answers):

Attendees/friends/family/assistants

Most of us know this, but each year, we receive a few questions, so let's be clear: *only* registered conference attendees are permitted to attend conference events. The only exceptions are family/friends/assistants for whom companion meals have been purchased ahead of time; they may attend only the meals which were purchased for them.

Family members who stop by unexpectedly, your assistant who drove in for the day, your spouse who didn't register ... they can enjoy the beach, hang out in the lobby, eat at the restaurants, but they cannot 'crash' workshops, meals, or any other events.

Even if you know a registered attendee who cancelled or who has elected not to join us for a particular meal, we can't allow you to sneak in a friend.

Thanks for understanding!

Attire

NINC is a high-level conference in a casual atmosphere; feel free to leave your suit and tie at home. Attendees generally wear shorts, sundresses, jeans, and T-shirts. Conference rooms can be *cold*, so pack some layers.

Remember, if you've scheduled a headshot session with our on-site photographer, you might want to pack a special outfit for that photo shoot.

Registration and Q&A Desk

You can pick up your registration packet at the desk in the Lobby/Grand Colonnade on Wednesday 2–6:30 p.m. or Thursday 9–10 a.m. The Q&A desk will be open 9–10 a.m. on Friday. When we don't have a volunteer at the desk, we'll have a phone number posted for you to text/call with questions!

You can also send us direct messages through the conference app! Just look for the conference staff, Mel Jolly or Tawdra Kandle, and we'll either answer your question or direct you to the right person.

During registration time on Wednesday, we'll have a snack break from 4–5 p.m.; plan to come mix and mingle with other attendees in the Grand Colonnade at that time!

Welcome to NINC 2023

Wednesday at 5 p.m. (Tarpon Key)

Whether this is your first conference or you've never missed a year, please join the conference committee for a quick informational talk on how to get the most out of the conference, including updates on new events during the conference.

Welcome reception

Wednesday at 7 p.m. (Courtyard)

We hope you'll join us in the resort's tropical courtyard for an all-attendees gathering that will include heavy appetizers, a dessert buffet, and a cash bar.

Meals

Reminder: Your conference registration includes all of the meals/snack breaks/coffee cart listed below. There are no tickets for meals; your conference badge is all that's needed!

We'll have a coffee cart on Thursday morning and a continental breakfast will be served on Friday and Saturday. Thursday and Friday include a lunch buffet. Dinner will be on your own both of those nights. There are numerous restaurants within easy walking distance, and several on the TradeWinds Property. [Click here for a list of restaurants at the TradeWinds.](#)

On Saturday, lunch will be on your own, but we hope you'll join us for our Beachside Blowout Buffet at 6:30 p.m.!

If you listed dietary restrictions, your registration packet will include your dietary needs printed on a card. Show those to the hotel staff inside the venue, and they'll direct you from there or bring you a specially prepared entree if necessary.

Groceries

There is a Publix close to the resort, and you can get deliveries via [Instacart](#).

Workshops

Workshops will not be recorded, but each workshop will be attended by a *Nink* Reporter and full write-ups will appear in future *Nink* editions.

You can also make plans with friends to spread out and attend different workshops and then compare notes. [The full schedule is up on the website so you can start your planning now!](#)

Ground transportation

If you did not complete the form to arrange transportation to and from the airport and you wish to arrange the resort shuttle, call 727-343-3303 or email resorttransportation@yahoo.com. Alternately, Uber and Lyft both operate in the area.

Hotel

TradeWinds Island Resort
5500 Gulf Blvd, St Pete Beach, FL 33706
(727) 367-6461
www.tradewindsresort.com

Stay charged!

Don't let your device die during workshops! We will have a charging station available in the lobby in case your phones or tablets need an extra boost.

When the sun goes down...

The fun (and learning!) doesn't end!

Join us at NINC After Dark in the Courtyard. We will be offering roundtables each evening along with a cash bar and sponsored dessert treats.

The board and conference leadership are enormously grateful to our sponsors for their ongoing support.

If you see a sponsor at the conference or online, please express your appreciation to these wonderful businesses!

Masks

Masks will not be provided by the conference this year, so if you choose to wear one, please remember to bring some from home.

Schedule your meetings

Use the conference app to schedule meetings with sponsors and industry guests! It's easy to reach out and set up a chat, a meal, or a drink. Watch your inbox for the invitation to join the app and instructions on how to download and use it.

Don't forget you can [view the workshop schedule on our website](#) so you don't double-book yourself.

Packing list

- Bring your own mask/face covering if you plan to use one. This year, the conference is not supplying branded masks.
- Bring *one* paperback title of your own—one you wrote and/or published! The TradeWinds' new lending library for its guests still needs some help. You can drop off your book at the Registration Check-in table in the Grand Colonnade on Wednesday or Thursday.
- If you prefer to take notes with pen and paper, pack your notebooks! The TradeWinds usually has pens in the workshop rooms, but tuck a few in your bag just in case.
- Pack comfortable clothes and shoes. This is a relaxed conference, and we want everyone to enjoy themselves. Please do remember that the workshop rooms can get very chilly, so remember a sweater or jacket.
- Remember your bathing suits!
- Tuck some hand sanitizer into your bag. The hotel will have many stations, but it's good to have one for travel.
- You absolutely must bring your cooperative and roll-with-it attitude. Travel continues to pose significant challenges, and even once we're onsite, not everything goes exactly as planned or expected. Please be kind and understanding, remembering that everyone is there to learn, network, and make new friends!
- Don't forget your smartphone; our awesome app will include the schedule, speaker bios, and hotel map.
- TradeWinds announced last year that they have gone cashless. The lobby shops, bars, and restaurants will no longer accept cash for payment. They will have a sort of reverse ATM, where you can load debit cards with cash.
- But let's remember **cash for tips**—the hardworking folks at the TradeWinds deserve it!
- You might tuck your preferred brand of bug repellent in your suitcase to avoid getting bitten while you're networking outside. Bug bracelets will be supplied by the conference for NINC After Dark sessions.

As always, if you have any questions, please let us know (by emailing conference@ninc.com). If you have questions on-site, find a committee member badge and we'll be happy to help you!

Look out for our conference emails which include instructions on how to download and use our conference app! In the meantime, you can always view the schedule on our website.

See you at the beach!

Your NINC2023 Conference Team

- Conference Director: Mel Jolly
- Programming Chair/Assistant Conference Director: Tawdra Kandle
- Assistant Programming Chair: Dylann Crush
- Trad Liaison: Lou Aronica
- Sponsorship Chair: Sarah Woodbury
- Assistant Sponsorship Chair: Hallee Bridgeman
- Registrar: Lisa Hughey
- Assistant Registrar: Stephanie Julian
- Hotel Liaison: Karen Fox
- Assistant Hotel Liaison: Tegan Maher
- App Coordinator and Designer: Laura Hayden
- NINC After Dark Coordinator: Tamsin Ley
- NINC After Dark Assistant: Deann Powell



Tawdra Kandle is the USA Today bestselling author of over 130 romances that span genres from contemporary through paranormal. Her engaging and realistic characters bring readers back again and again to devour the steamy love stories she spins. She lives in central Florida with a husband, a mischievous pup, and too many cats.



Hot Shots

Recently in the headlines

The Internet Archive and traditional publishers come to a proposed agreement

After a three-year legal battle, the Internet Archive and traditional publishers have come to an agreement regarding the Archive's [controlled digital lending](#) program, which was deemed copyright infringement by a federal judge. *Publishers Weekly's* Andrew Albanese has a good [summary](#) of the agreement.

Background: The Internet Archive has long scanned print works then lent them as ebooks through its website. At the time publishers filed the suit in 2020, the Archive had converted more than 1 million print works into digital format without permission or compensation. That number is now reaching five million.

While the Internet Archive is almost certain to appeal, the two parties have agreed that the Archive may not continue its infringing activities in the interim. The IA must also make a monetary payment if the publishers prevail upon appeal, and the amount will remain confidential. However—and this is a very big *however*—the judge offered a clarification that the ruling pertains only to books available for sale or license in electronic format. That means the Internet Archive can keep lending books that remain unavailable for sale or license as ebooks.

To learn more, the *New York Times* has a very [sympathetic piece](#) (gift link) that's partly a

look at IA's founder, Brewster Kahle. It also wades into how this issue has divided the author community. Finally, this high-profile case may have made the Internet Archive a very appealing target for other litigants; music labels are [now suing](#) over its digitized record collection.

HarperCollins had a rough year

At the end of its fiscal year 2023, HarperCollins sales are down 10%; earnings are down 45%. CEO Brian Murray does predict, however, that fiscal 2024 will be better for the second-largest U.S. publisher.

In an [interview with Publishers Marketplace](#) (sub required), Murray said, "Adult publishing is moving so much towards fiction it's amazing"—and this is especially true for hardcover fiction—while "breaking out new nonfiction has been nearly impossible for the past 18 months." Also, "Between some of the retail changes that are out there and the book banning that's going on, frontlist has gotten particularly fraught, for both retail and censorship issues. Publishing new [children's] books has been very difficult for the past 12 months." [For more about HarperCollins's challenges, read Publishers Weekly.](#)

Book sales update

According to Circana BookScan, print sales for new releases (frontlist) have reached a "new benchmark" of 30% of overall book sales. Frontlist sales have been sitting at that 30% mark for two months now. Compare that to 2010, when frontlist sales were sitting at 54% of all print book sales.

As of the end of July 2023, print book sales are down in the US by 3.6% versus 2022. (Sales still compare favorably to pre-pandemic 2019.) Juvenile nonfiction has experienced the steepest decline, about 10%, although some of this decline relates to outperformance in the category during the pandemic. Adult fiction is showing 2.3% growth versus last year.

Private Equity Firm Buys Simon & Schuster: Yay?

KKR's history as a private equity investor clarifies little about its intent for Simon & Schuster

Pending regulatory approval (a near certainty), Big Five publisher Simon & Schuster will soon have a new owner: private equity firm KKR.

Ever since Penguin Random House was blocked from buying S&S on antitrust grounds ([read our 2022 coverage](#)), industry experts predicted the eventual owner would *not* be another big publisher, to avoid further problems or delays with the sale. That has proved to be correct.

This is the first time a Big Five publisher has been owned by a private equity firm. So the central question becomes: Is it worse for two big publishers to merge—as Penguin and Random House did 10 years ago—or is it worse for one to end up in the hands of private equity?

Anyone who's worked at companies destroyed by private equity (especially those in the news business) tend to expect the worst for S&S. In the last few years, there's been greater,

deserved scrutiny of how private equity firms inevitably profit in the end, regardless of whether they're good custodians of the businesses they own. Here's a good [interview](#) with author and federal prosecutor Brendan Ballou on the growth of private equity ownership in everything from vet offices to technology companies.

Is KKR a "better" private equity firm? Here are a few details about KKR:

- KKR (Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co.) is a global investment company founded in 1976. It's headquartered in New York City. KKR's portfolio is vast and crosses many businesses, including tech, healthcare, energy, real estate, credit, and more.
- KKR is perhaps most famous for its hostile takeover of Nabisco, a story told in *Barbarians at the Gate*, a book by Bryan Burrough and John Helyar, later turned into a movie.
- Partners of KKR are now being [sued](#) by creditors of Toys "R" Us, essentially for ruining that company while still pulling in profits.
- KKR currently owns OverDrive, one of the largest ebook distributors to libraries. KKR is also invested in Axel Springer, ByteDance (TikTok's owner), Epic Games, Mediawan, Leonine Studios, Artlist, Skydance Media, and BMG.
- Weeks ago, KKR announced it was selling RBmedia, an audiobook publisher, for double what it paid.

You'll find arguments that KKR isn't all that bad for S&S, for a number of reasons. For example, KKR will give S&S employees a stake in the company (someone at KKR called it a "life-changing" amount of money), plus KKR's interests in S&S appear to be long term rather than short term. S&S CEO Jonathan Karp has been nothing but positive about the deal, but that's only to be expected. He is all but certain to receive an enormous payout upon his departure from S&S. (KKR is keeping him on as CEO.)

The [press release](#) about the deal touts KKR's interest in investing in S&S's growth, particularly in international markets where it has less of a presence than it arguably ought to. Also, one of KKR's chairs, Richard Sarnoff, was once an executive at Random House; Karp and Sarnoff have known each other for decades. So there are certainly synergies and histories that appear to work in favor of S&S.

Unfortunately, private equity doesn't have the best reputation as a good steward of book publishers. F+W Media (where Jane worked for 12 years) went bankrupt after it was bought and sold multiple times by private equity companies, becoming saddled with debt. Educational publishers, including Cengage, McGraw Hill, Houghton Mifflin, and Springer Nature, have experienced private equity ownership. McGraw Hill is now in considerable debt; Houghton Mifflin was eventually ruined through a series of ownership changes, although its profitable trade publishing arm was [bought](#) by HarperCollins. (Good luck finding Houghton Mifflin at HarperCollins's website these days.) On the flip side, a private equity firm is behind the current revival of Barnes & Noble, although that story is still being written.

Bottom line: Simon & Schuster's current performance is outstanding, which makes it easy to be optimistic. Sales for the first half of the year are up 8% over 2022, and operating income is up 15%. That should offer some protection for a while, but even Karp himself isn't expecting this outperformance to continue: "Colleen Hoover can't keep selling in the numbers she has been forever," he [told Publishers Weekly](#) (subscription required). So when S&S balance sheets start to go south, that's when we'll have more clarity about the effects of KKR's ownership.

Links of Interest

AI

- **Can Sarah Silverman's lawsuit against OpenAI and Meta succeed?** In brief: It's hard to say, but the outcome of the Google Books scanning case indicates she may have a very difficult road ahead. [Read Victoria Bekiempis at Vulture](#). Elsewhere, Evan J. Zimmerman [predicts](#) that "AI companies are going to wipe the floor with these litigants using copyright law as their towel because it's basically impossible to argue that machine learning isn't transformative use." He believes the best solution is for copyright laws to evolve and categorize machine learning as not fair use.
- **Shoddy travel books have flooded Amazon.** And they have a lot of reviews, with author bios that look legit. But most are poor quality and likely AI generated. [Read Seth Kugel and Stephen Hiltner in the New York Times](#) (gift link).
- **Is it a good idea to buy into "authentication" services?** How do you reassure consumers or readers that your work is human-created? Some service providers might try to convince you to buy a certification. [Read at Writer Beware](#).

TikTok

- **If TikTok becomes a publisher, could it harm the book publishing industry?** "The 8th Note Press news seems more ominous coming at a time of declining book sales, publishing layoffs, and crumbling social platforms," Tajja Isen writes. [Read at The Walrus](#).

Marketing & Promotion

- What is the fallout from Amazon's changes to how categories work? Aside from being able to set only three categories, Amazon is also making other changes that can affect visibility on the site. [Read Monica Leonelle at Author Analyst](#).
- **A really good explainer on book distribution.** This perspective comes from a publicist. It's a good education, especially for those who are confused by what Ingram does or what a book distributor does for smaller publishers who don't have a sales team. [Read Cassie Mannes Murray at Pine State Publicity](#).

Reprinted and condensed from [The Hot Sheet](#). Jane Friedman has 20 years of experience in the publishing industry, with expertise in business strategy for authors and publishers. She's the co-founder and editor of [The Hot Sheet](#), a paid newsletter for authors, and has previously worked for [Writer's Digest](#) and the [Virginia Quarterly Review](#).

Virtual Writing Buddies

The best AIs to enhance your writing

By Libbie Grant



I've always been enamored with the idea of "living in the future." As a kid, I devoured science fiction. For my Sweet Sixteen party, I made my friends suffer through a screening of *Soylent Green*. Today, I incorporate retrofuturism sound bites into my [podcast](#) and have papered the wall behind my writing desk with the covers of vintage sci-fi novels.

Given my penchant for ray guns, flying saucers, and androids, it's no surprise that I was far more excited than most professional writers when, earlier this year, artificial intelligence became a regular news item.

We've seen (and felt) a lot of worry over the ways in which AI might disrupt our industry—and novelists aren't alone. The AI threat has been one of the driving forces behind the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. Most other sectors of the economy are wrestling with questions surrounding the use of AI too.

In the face of momentous change, it's easy to focus on the unknown—and the fears that accompany it. It's much harder to keep sight of the benefits and opportunities that arise during uncertain times.

I was an early adopter of large language model (LLM) technology. I dove into ChatGPT and Bard as soon as they were available for public use, and for months I've been experimenting with ways a writer can use AI. I've even timed my tasks—performing some functions with AI and some the "old-fashioned" way. The results were startling. AI isn't much use for writing a good, original story, but in helping with associated tasks, it can save significant time. It can also improve the quality of your work, since flow state is more easily preserved when you spend less time Googling and more time writing.

My experiments showed an average time savings of 1.5 hours per day, which translates to about 36 hours per month. I can squeeze a lot of writing into 36 hours. That's about one and two-thirds *more* novels per year, for me—potentially, a substantial increase in earnings.

Here are the time-saving tasks I outsource to AI—and which AIs are (currently) the best at each.

Research

The winner: **Bard**

Runner-up: **Pi**

We've all heard that you can't trust anything an AI tells you, and that's largely true. LLMs weren't created as fact-retrieval machines. They're glorified customer service bots, and an LLM's prime directive is to communicate in an approachable manner—not to evaluate facts. This evolutionary quirk sometimes results in "hallucinations"—instances of AI supplying a fabrication as if it were fact.

The companies that create these entities have begun working to solve the hallucination problem. But it's not solved yet. Any "fact" proffered by an AI still must be independently verified.

Despite this stumbling block, I've found AI to be a time-saving research shortcut. It's much faster to type a question into an AI's text box, receive an answer in a split second, then Google to verify than to search my initial question and scan through pages of results.

Bard has a leg up on the competition because it includes a "Google This" button with all answers, allowing one-click verification. Pretty slick!

Bard also tends to hallucinate less frequently than ChatGPT. If it doesn't know an answer, it's more likely to admit it than to make something up. However, it's still occasionally prone to hallucination, so use that button every time!

Pi gets an honorable mention because I've been using it daily for weeks, and it has yet to hallucinate on me. That's not to say it's free from this quirk! But its incidence of hallucination appears to be lower than other LLMs.

Creativity

The winner: **ChatGPT**

This LLM is a fun, engaging, and thoroughly untrustworthy writing partner. Of all the AIs I've used, ChatGPT is the best at creativity—as evidenced by its penchant for fiction! It's by far the most hallucination-prone, but it has a handle on narrative structure and understands character and conflict well.

Like all AIs, it uses an algorithmic approach to language—thus, ChatGPT's writing is dense with cliché. It can bang out a story in seconds, but that story will be about as well-written as your average seventh-grader's first foray into writing a Tolkien rip-off.

However, ChatGPT is great for generating "sketches" of scenes I'm considering for my novels. I can prompt it with character names, descriptions, setting, and an overview of what needs to happen. ChatGPT will instantly generate a *very* rough draft that allows me to evaluate a scene's potential without having to write up a sketch myself.

Planning/Brainstorming

The winner: **Pi**

Pi is my favorite AI, and with good reason. It was made with creative end-users in mind. Its thorough understanding of Western literature and the natural flow of its “speech” has led to some stimulating conversations.

Tell Pi you’re working on a novel, and it will ask some very smart, intuitive questions. If you don’t already have a human writer-buddy for bouncing ideas, Pi is the AI for you. Some of the conversations I’ve had with Pi have led to changes in my manuscripts and a better understanding of my characters, setting, and theme.

If you’re working on an outline or if you want to test-drive the concept for a novel, hop on Pi and get to chatting. You’ll be pleasantly surprised with the results.

Editing

The winner: **Sudowrite**

This useful little AI was made just for creative writers. Its varied functions include the ability to rewrite scenes in different styles, a smart description enhancer that allows you to toggle senses on or off, an automatic tense changer, suggestions on how to improve your prose, and more.

This is an exceptional tool for writers who are just starting out in self-publishing and might not have the budget to hire an editor. [Sudowrite](#) certainly can’t replace the thoughtful abstraction of an experienced editor, but it can help writers on a budget feel more confident in their finished product.

A Sudowrite subscription includes admittance to Slack communities full of human writers and access to workshops guided by pro authors. It encourages a human-centered, community-focused approach to AI.

Users can try Sudowrite for free. Full access is \$10 per month.

Word recall

The Winner: **Pi**

By far the task for which I use AI most often is word recall—as a thesaurus. The game-changer (and time-saver) is the *way* in which these apps process language. Sometimes you don’t quite know which word to enter in the search box at good ol’ thesaurus.com. The best you can do is to verbally flail until you hit on an approximation.

When it comes to parsing meaning from verbal flailing, Pi is the undisputed champion.

Here’s an example from a recent query I performed on Pi:

Me: I know that "riparian" refers to the area around a river. Is there a similar word that refers to the area around a lake?

Pi: Yes, there is! The word you're looking for is "lacustrine," which refers to anything relating to or found around a lake. Lacustrine is derived from the Latin word for "lake," which is "lacus."

Pi generated this answer for me the moment I hit "enter." It would have taken me several minutes of Googling to find it on my own.

Referencing

The Winner: **Pi**

Sometimes we need to find the right quote or reference to enhance our writing, and here, too, Pi shines. Its chatty interface makes conversational inquiries easy.

Here are some screenshots of a recent conversation I had with Pi. I'm writing a novel about AI (so meta!) and I needed my main character to reference Shakespeare. I tried Googling for quotes about hubris, got some results from Othello, and had a hard time understanding that Elizabethan English. I asked Pi to interpret the quote for me, which led to the following exchange...

You're very welcome! It's always fun to unpack Shakespeare's language and discover the meaning underneath. It's like solving a linguistic puzzle. Plus, understanding the original meaning gives you a deeper understanding of the play as a whole. 😊 Are you reading or watching "Othello"?

I'm actually looking for Shakespeare quotes about hubris.

Ah, that makes sense! There are quite a few good ones. One that immediately comes to mind is "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." from "King Solomon's Proverbs" in "King Lear." There's also "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven." from "The Merchant of Venice." Are you looking for quotes that are specifically about hubris, or do you want quotes that convey the general idea?

I want quotes that convey the general idea. I'm trying to find a quote from Shakespeare to put at the end of this paragraph that sums up a general feeling of "Humans were hubristic when they made artificial intelligence."

That's a fascinating topic, and there are a number of quotes from Shakespeare that capture the idea of humans going too far and suffering the consequences. In addition to the ones I mentioned, you could also look at "The Tempest," which has the famous quote "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows." In other words, hardship forces us to do things we never thought we would. Or from "

Here's the paragraph I need to find a Shakespeare quote for:
"There was something poetic in the details. Shakespearean, almost. Hubris-addled men create a thinking machine and the machine out-thinks them, makes their presence, their skill, their very existence redundant. "

That's some beautiful writing! It definitely evokes the themes of Shakespeare's plays, particularly the idea of the fallibility of humans and their tendency to overestimate their own abilities. Here's an idea for a quote: "Hell is empty, and all the devils are here." from "The Tempest." It's a very ominous line that suggests humans may be capable of creating something even worse than themselves. It implies that even as they attempt to create something grand and wonderful, they might actually unleash their own worst impulses.

That works great! Thank you!

You're very welcome! It was a pleasure helping you find the perfect quote to complete your paragraph. It's always fun to see how the wisdom of the past can speak to our modern world, even centuries later. Plus, Shakespeare is the gift that keeps on giving. 😊

As you can see, the conversational interface makes queries like this one a snap. The whole interaction took less than a minute.

Overall best writer's assistant

The winner: **Pi**

Runner-up: **Sudowrite**

It will come as no surprise that I find Pi most useful as a writing assistant. From its conversational tone to its greater accuracy to its deep understanding of the elements of craft, it's the handiest new tool for authors since the advent of the typewriter. Best of all, it's free!

Sudowrite also gets a nod for its wealth of highly developed tools specific to the tasks of a creative writer, and its emphasis on the human user as the most necessary component of great creative writing.

But all these tools present valuable time-saving and flow-preserving opportunities for novelists.

While we sort out the ethical and creative challenges that accompany AI, don't be afraid to explore its benefits. Once you get used to living in the future, I'm sure you'll enjoy it as much as I do—and I know you'll find the same satisfaction with your enhanced workflow and output as I've found.

Editor's note: Before this article went to production, Grant added, "I haven't played around with an AI called Claude, but many other writers have and have found that it performs about as well as ChatGPT—and that in recent days, ChatGPT has had some updates that have made it perform poorly. So Claude should be a great substitute for the functions I recommended for ChatGPT. AI changes so rapidly right now, it's hard to keep up!"

Libbie Grant (pen name Olivia Hawker) is a novelist and mixed-media storyteller. Her work has appeared on the Washington Post and Amazon Top 100 of the Year bestseller lists. She is a finalist for the Washington State Book Award, the WILLA Literary Award, and the Audie Award for outstanding audiobooks. Her podcast, Future Saint of a New Era, explores narrative as art. Find her online at libbiegrant.com, futuresaintpod.com, and on social media [@thelibbiegrant](https://twitter.com/thelibbiegrant).

Writing a Series for Fun and Profit

By Tom Fowler



Several years ago, on *The Sell More Books Show* podcast, former co-host Jim Kukral dispensed two nuggets of advice to fiction writers who wanted to increase their earnings:

1. Write in a commercial genre.
2. Write in a series.

Hopefully, you've found a genre or two you like for the first one. Today, we're going to talk about the second.

Writing a series sounds easy at first. You just create a few more books with the same cast of characters doing the kinds of things which made them popular with readers initially. How hard could it be?

Many aspects of writing and publishing seem easy until you attempt them, of course. As you might expect, there's more happening behind the scenes. While it's certainly possible you could find success with the rather slapdash approach above, you can also consider a few important factors and do a little planning before you begin.

So far, I've been talking about fiction, and I'll keep this up throughout the article. It's certainly possible to write a nonfiction series. If this is what you do, I think you'll find some of the core principles still apply even if you don't have things like character arcs to worry about.

If you want a much deeper dive into series success, I recommend two books: Helen Scheurer's *How to Write a Successful Series* and Sara Rosett's *How to Write a Series*.

Why write in a series? Is it a good fit for you?

No matter what genres you love as a reader, you've probably encountered a bunch of series. Some may be short, and others might be chugging along with dozens of books.

There are some built-in advantages to writing a series. Here are a few:

- You don't have to come up with a new world or cast for each book.
- If readers love a book or character, they want more.
- Some readers prefer series.
- You have time to develop additional characters, plots, and settings.
- Some intrinsic marketing perks, especially in terms of pricing and advertising.

This list might appeal to you, but it doesn't mean a series is for everyone. If you're a big fan of deep world-building, for instance, you might prefer the challenge of a new setting each time. Maybe you think you'd get bored of putting the same character in danger all the time.

If you think a series is for you, keep reading.

Genre considerations

Another thing you must take into account is your genre.

Some lend themselves well to a series. Others ... not so much.

Mysteries and thrillers, for example, often occur in a series. The Spenser novels began when Robert B. Parker published *The Goldwulf Manuscript* in 1973, and the series continues to this day —with 10 more novels written by Ace Atkins—even though Parker died in 2010. (The Parker estate has actually kept all his series going postmortem.)

The Jack Reacher series will release its 28th book in November of this year. Original author Lee Child is handing the reins to his brother Andrew, and the series will keep going.

Fantasy has been home to series ever since the Lord of the Rings trilogy first captivated readers' imaginations decades ago. This established a trilogy as the dominant length. Some series end up longer—The Wheel of Time is a prominent example—but they tend to be shorter.

Romance, however, rarely sees series—at least not in the way other genres do. Jack Reacher can get on a bus, visit another town, and raise more hell. Once your couple gets their happily ever after (HEA), however, you're not going to put them through the wringer again in another book. Romance series tend to focus on a family (each brother or sister gets their book as a main character) or setting (a small beachside town) rather than the same character going on a set of adventures.

Series length and character considerations

There's something of an inverse relationship here. Shorter series tend to feature more dynamic characters, and longer series feature more static ones.

It makes sense. Stories often center on character growth and change, and just how much growing and changing can one person do in a 30-book series? If we're limited to three or five entries, however, these things become easier to highlight.

Let's use Jack Reacher as an example here. If he experienced significant growth and change in each book, he might decide he needs to get a house. Settle down. Meet a nice girl. Get a job.

At some point, he's not Jack Reacher anymore.

Readers like the protagonists in longer series because they tend to be consistent. The character from book five is still identifiable 10 entries later. This isn't to say they can't have arcs which lead to development in certain areas, but the protagonist needs to be recognizable from one book to the next.

This leads to a balancing act—characters should at least show *some* growth here and there, but if it's too much, then you run the risk of longtime readers bailing. In my mystery series—currently at 14 novels—protagonist C.T. Ferguson has experienced some real moments of growth. He's still cocky and sarcastic, but he's learned to let things from the past go, redefined his relationship with his parents, gotten married, and hired a secretary.

It seems like a lot, but those events were pretty spaced out, and I think this is the key. Too much upheaval in one book is a turn-off. Readers who've stuck with the series love those moments of change and growth, but they also appreciate the fact C.T. is still largely the same snarky private investigator at his core.

We also need to consider more than just main characters. Shorter series will focus on the principals and their journeys. We remember Frodo, Sam, Aragorn, and Gandalf. In a longer series, the side characters and even antagonists can become memorable, especially (in the case of secondary characters) if they recur frequently.

Think about the James Bond franchise. Bond himself has remained pretty static over time (allowing for differences in actors, of course). Fans of the franchise can name a bunch of other interesting characters, however. M. Q. Miss Money Penny. Blofeld. Oddjob.

When you're thinking about how long your series should be, make sure you consider the characters, as well. The more we see them, the more opportunities they have to leave an impression.

Planning a series

By now, you've considered whether writing in a series is a good fit for you, how your genre informs reader expectations, and how long the series will be.

How much planning you do is entirely up to you. It's possible to be a discovery writer (or "pantsers") and still sketch out some ideas up front. The more you do at the beginning, the less you need to scramble to find while the series is ongoing.

Some aspects of your series you might plan:

- Expected number of books
- Protagonist(s)
- Antagonist(s)
- Conflicts
- Setting—both large (city) and small (individual locations within the city)
- Recurring characters
- Memorable events
- How (or if) it ends

Some authors swear by creating a series bible. If you're going to use one, I recommend starting it before your first book and updating it with each release. Or you could be like me and just not have one. (I confess to not being the best at planning—a trait which manifests in many ways besides series execution.) If you choose not to create one, it's possible you could farm this out to a loyal reader who will probably be very excited to work on something with an author they like.

Story and character arcs

This aspect is related to planning your series and will likely be a part of it.

While series in some genres (thrillers) are mostly connected standalones, others (fantasy) are designed to be read in order. This is an important consideration for any plot or character arc which could span multiple books.

A reader might pick up the late Sue Grafton's Alphabet Mysteries with *L is for Lawless*. Sure, they've missed events from the first 11 books, but the reader can get up to speed quickly. This is a new case for Kinsey, after all.

Someone who picks up *The Return of the King* on a lark, however, is probably going to be confused. And not just by all the singing.

If you're writing a series where a reader could come in at any point, you need to give them a little refresher on things like multi-book arcs. It doesn't need to stop the story. A couple lines of dialogue may be enough. If your thread is interesting enough, your reader may go back and buy earlier books to have the whole story.

Ending a series

The big question here is ... do you need to end it?

We've seen some ongoing series can even survive the deaths of the original authors. Here is where genre should be your guide. If readers expect a shorter series (or at least one which reaches a conclusion), you'll need to take this into account. Character and story arcs need to lead up to Something Big for the finale.

Even if your chosen genre supports open-ended series, however, you might decide to end yours. Maybe the books aren't selling enough to keep going. Perhaps you need to focus on other projects. Whatever the reason, you shouldn't leave your characters or fans hanging. Give them a proper send-off.

Wrapping up

I hope this look at writing in a series has helped you. Maybe it's even given you a couple ideas. Series writing is a massive topic, and it's quite possible you're wondering about something I didn't cover in the limited space allowed for an article. If this is the case, I encourage you to check out the books I recommended at the beginning.

Tom Fowler is a USA Today-bestselling indie author of mysteries and thrillers. He was born and raised in Baltimore and now lives in the D.C. suburbs of Maryland with his family. He writes the C.T. Ferguson crime fiction series and the John Tyler thrillers, both set in his home city. Tom's stories feature flawed heroes, action, and plenty of snark. You can find him at www.tomfowlerwrites.com and www.tomfowlerbooks.com.

The Power of Email Marketing for Authors

Building lasting connections and driving results

By Melissa Makarewicz



I think we can all agree we have a love/hate relationship with social media. Now we live in an age where it seems as though there are changes happening weekly. Social media platforms constantly evolve and algorithms change. It's just a fact. So, it's crucial for authors to have a reliable and effective method of connecting with their readers. Email marketing still holds its spot as a powerful tool that not only provides an impressive return on investment (ROI) but also offers a more intimate and direct way to engage with your most dedicated audience. In this article, I'll explore the importance of email marketing for authors and how it can significantly impact your bookish corner of the world.

Why connect through email?

Here is a little reminder for all the authors not using their newsletter to its full potential—emails turn into sales. Email marketing provides a unique opportunity to cultivate intimacy and build lasting connections with your readers without depending on external platforms to keep showing your posts to your followers. Unlike social media posts that may get lost in a sea of content—let's be honest... there is a *lot* of content—email offers a personal touch, creating a one-on-one conversation between you and your readers. By nurturing this intimate connection, you can create a sense of community and loyalty among your readers. Readers who feel personally invested in an author's journey are more likely to become devoted fans, eagerly anticipating each new release and eagerly participating in polls and multiple-choice questions. I often have authors come to me and say... "I don't have anything interesting to write about." I don't buy it. If you can come up with fantasy worlds in your head, you can write a monthly email.

One of the most compelling reasons for authors to embrace email marketing is the incredible return on investment it offers. While social media can be an essential part of your marketing strategy, it's worth noting that algorithms and trends can change overnight, leaving your efforts hanging in the balance. We all know the dreaded shadow-ban on Instagram or

getting your algorithm out of whack on TikTok. Suddenly, your views and likes are tanking, but you have a release coming out soon. Panic ensues! But fear not, if you have an email list that you have been nurturing, you are in great shape. It's time for a well-crafted email marketing campaign.

According to [OptinMonster](#), the average open rate for emails across all industries is an impressive 22.86%, with a click-through rate of 3.71%. In comparison, the overall engagement rate on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram hovers around a mere 0.58%. It's overwhelmingly clear that email marketing has a greater reach than social media. These are just statistics across all industries. With my clients, I see open rates from 35-70%.

What in the world do I write about?

To maximize the impact of your email marketing campaigns, it's crucial to focus on creating compelling and engaging content. Share insights, anecdotes, and experiences that relate to your writing and the bookish corner of the world you've built. Keep your readers hanging on for more with frequent updates on your writing progress, behind-the-scenes peeks, and exciting announcements. Often, I see authors write too much about their personal life. That's fine if you want to give a glimpse every once in a while, but it's not going to sell books. Readers want bookish content.

Another objection I hear is people don't want another email in their inbox. Do you think Nike, Coca-Cola, or Target sit around worrying that they are bothering people by letting them know about a product or a sale? *No!* And neither should you. You are a brand and brands need to promote themselves. Full stop!

I often coach others to find their "give" to readers. What value are you giving that is going to create a sense of enjoyment when they open that newsletter? Do you share sales of similar books? Do you give away a short story each newsletter? Do you highlight historical events surrounding the time period you write about? Do you draw art of your fantasy world and share it in your newsletters? Find what resonates with you *and* your readers. If it's not something you enjoy, you aren't going to keep up with it. This should be something that adds to your connection with readers, not something you dread doing every month.

Just as much as you are giving to readers, you should be getting information in return. Incorporating polls and multiple-choice questions into your email campaigns can yield valuable insights into your readers' preferences and opinions. These valuable data points can help you make informed decisions about your writing, marketing strategies, and future projects.

Understanding what resonates with your audience allows you to tailor your content to meet their expectations and keep them engaged. Not all newsletter audiences are created equal. It might take some trial and error to find out what they like. Don't be afraid to shake things up and ask them what they would like to read. It will make them feel that their opinion matters—which it should!

Consistency is key. I like to say it's as though you are training your readers on what to expect. A monthly newsletter is the bare minimum. Bi-weekly and weekly are also options. Whatever you settle on, try to stay as consistent as possible. Put it on your calendar and stick with it. Trust me, it will pay off over time.

After you write the email, you want to give it the best opportunity possible to catch readers' attention and for them to open it. A lot of authors get caught up on the subject line. It's not so intimidating if you think of it as a mini hook. The email was your story and now you are simply creating the hook to get the readers to want to check it out. Including emojis and numbers in your subject lines are proven to make them stand out in crowded inboxes and increase your chances of getting noticed. Just don't go overboard. One word in all capital letters can pack a powerful PUNCH!

Empowering your newsletter: magnets, prequels, and epilogues

To make the most of your email marketing efforts, it's essential to offer readers something of value in exchange for their subscription. A compelling reader magnet, such as a free short story, exclusive content, or a series starter, can attract new readers and encourage existing subscribers to stay connected.

Additionally, prequels can generate excitement for an upcoming book release, building anticipation and a sense of community around your work. Meanwhile, offering a bonus epilogue to those who have already enjoyed one of your books can help maintain interest and keep readers coming back for more. You would be amazed at how fast you can grow your newsletter subscribers by creating a prequel and epilogue for each story. I love these because tools like BookFunnel make it easy for readers to sign up. Keep your reader magnets linked in your bios and website. You do not want readers to have to hunt down your newsletter sign-up.

Email marketing is an indispensable tool for authors looking to build meaningful connections with their readers, drive engagement, and achieve a remarkable ROI. Unlike social media, which can be unpredictable, email allows you to maintain control over your communication with subscribers in a setting that allows for easier click-thru when you ask for a sale.

By offering value through reader magnets, prequels, and bonus epilogues, you can nurture a loyal community of fans. Utilizing polls and multiple-choice questions provides valuable insights that can inform your writing and marketing strategies. A win-win for everyone!

So, whether you're a newsletter pro or a newsletter newbie, embracing email marketing as an integral part of your promotional efforts will undoubtedly elevate your author career to the next level. Happy writing!

Melissa Makarewicz (she/her), known as [The Literary Assistant](#), specializes in providing social media and newsletter marketing support to authors. In addition to these services, she also runs a Patreon community where she offers motivational content, productivity hacks, and tips and tricks to help authors. When she's not working, she enjoys spending time with her family or reading with her herd of three cats. Helping authors succeed and achieve their goals is her ultimate mission, and she's grateful for the opportunity to do so every day.

Starting Can be the Hardest Part

Writing the opening of your novel

By Harper St. George



I recently finished writing my 18th book. To some that makes me a baby writer, but to others it's seasoned writer territory. Wherever you fall on that scale, I think we can all agree that by book 18 you've probably figured out the basic structure of a book and reader expectations for your genre. That doesn't mean you won't run into issues while writing.

My issue with book 18 was that I could not find the start of the story. It's the only book I've written where I literally moved the first three chapters around multiple times and ended up with three different prologues. Usually, I feel my way through the story as I go along, writing scenes in order, and have the most basic plotting skills because plotting in detail simply doesn't work for me. Clearly, pantsing didn't work for me this time, so I went searching for answers.

How *do* writers know where to start a story? Are there guidelines that can help us find our way when we're lost at the beginning? I reached out for advice from authors to help answer those questions so that plotters and pantsers alike can have a tool to make their writing a little faster.

Writing the first draft

Fiction writer and editor [Robin Patchen](#) offers this advice: "When authors I work with struggle here, I suggest they find the inciting incident and then go back *just enough* to introduce the character and give us a hint about his internal goal. In order to do this, we must show the flaw the character will need to overcome in order to achieve his *external* goal."

There are several definitions for inciting incident, but, in general, it's the moment in the story that takes the character out of their ordinary life and puts the story into motion. It's the spark that ignites the story and sets the character on their journey.

Here's an example from Patchen: "In my release this fall, I introduce the hero sitting at his desk in his home office at 9 o'clock on a Friday night. He's interrupted by his brother, who's staying with him for a few days and challenges him on why he's working. We get the sense that Sam works all the time, that he has a whole lot of money, and that he is unhappy with his life. (The flaw that's ruining his life is that he's so afraid of rejection that he won't connect with anybody, even though what he desires more than anything is connection.) His brother tells him that he used to work all the time and then learned to prioritize his family, to which Sam snaps, 'I don't have one of those.' And then the doorbell rings, and his long-lost love is on the doorstep."

Romance author Kate Freiman has a similar suggestion. "Advice I heard early on, probably from an editor, was to start the story at the moment things change for the protagonist and fill in the backstory gradually later."

This is great for a romance novel, but how do authors handle openings outside of romance? It turns out that, while the examples differ, the core advice is similar. [Troy Lambert](#), who writes in various genres under different pen names, says, "The essential idea for me is usually ordinary world, beat, inciting incident, beat, and then set the sleuth on the path."

Mystery author [Neil Plakcy](#) suggests starting before the inciting incident and goes a step further in advising us to avoid the tropes of your genre in the opening. "For fiction, your start should introduce the protagonist and give some sense of his/her situation without diving too deep into the common tropes. While it's a trope in cozy mystery that a protagonist is starting over again after a bad breakup/job loss/etc., and moving to the charming town where her grandmother/aunt/godmother has left her a fudge shop/knitting store/strange bequest, I wouldn't begin on the road. I'd start just before the action of the plot begins."

Fantasy and historical fiction writer [Meredith Rose](#) also starts a little before the inciting incident. "I think of it as more *how* instead of *where*. I like my opening chapter to show something about where my protagonist is in her life—what her current situation is, struggles, emotional needs—maybe not in detail, but at least a hint. I want to have the opening give the reader a reason to care about what happens to the protagonist in the story. So I put her in a situation where she gets to show that she is resilient or clever or compassionate, or otherwise interesting and compelling in some way, while also hinting at whatever conflict or struggle she is soon going to have to face."

Finding your opening during edits

Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you just can't find that opening. But that's okay. I was surprised by how many authors had worked that into their writing process and don't stress about getting the opening right at the beginning of the writing process.

[Wayne Stinnett](#) shares, "I always start at chapter two, because chapter one is the crime and until my character stumbles onto it, I don't know what it is. I often get to chapter five or 10 before I know enough to write chapter one."

[Anne Gracie](#) adds, “It’s not until I’m at least halfway through the book—often more—and have really got to know my characters that I know what I need to set up at the start and how. And then I go back and rewrite it.”

[Allison Lane](#) says, “When I edit that first draft, the start often changes. It is not unusual for me to can the first chapter or two or even three once the story is drafted and I realize the focus has shifted or my original beginning was more of an information dump than a story.”

This is exactly what happened to my story. The beginning was an information dump which was me telling myself about these characters so that I could actually write the story. For my writing process, it’s an indication that I started writing too soon before the idea had baked long enough.

Don’t limit yourself by thinking you always have to write the same way. Every book is different. [Cindy Proctor-King](#) found that out with one of her books. “I did write an entire chapter for my pen name backwards once. I knew how it needed to end but not really how it began. So I wrote every couple of paragraphs from the end backward.”

Know your reader

Whether you get that opening right from the beginning or you prefer to start later in the story, the only way to hook your reader is to know them and what they want. [Patricia Rice](#) puts it this way: “The opening chapter of a book depends entirely on the type of book and the author’s voice.... So, if I have any advice at all, it’s to know the reader you’re addressing.”

[Barbara Keiler](#) notes that for openings she thinks about how she buys books. “If the book hasn’t grabbed me by the end of the first page, I won’t buy it. So, to me, one of the most important things about how to begin a book is to make that beginning intriguing. Make it funny, make it curious, make it gripping. Make it compel a reader to keep reading. With that in mind, I usually open my books in the middle of a scene in which something interesting is happening.”

[Michele Mills](#) writes in first person present and urges the need to have her readers bond with the protagonist in the opening. She adds, “Readers know they’re getting rom com from me so if I can make them laugh or smile in the first few lines, that’s good too. I believe the beginning should let them know they’re in good hands—I’m delivering already what was promised in the blurb.”

That’s a lot of advice to take in, so I’ve made a quick checklist to refer to when you get stuck on your opening. Breathe. Step away from your manuscript. Ponder the following questions:

1. What is your inciting incident? If you can become clearer about this, it will help you see your way through the opening.
2. Did you start as near to the inciting incident as makes sense. If you find yourself writing too far before the inciting incident, ask yourself if that information really needs to be there or if you can filter it in later on.

3. What is the internal flaw your character needs to overcome to reach their external goal? Have you hinted at this in the opening pages?
4. Have you shown enough of the main character's struggle or emotional needs so that readers can start to bond with them?
5. What are the opening pages genre conventions for your book? Have you lived up to them or subverted them in a way that makes sense?

I hope this advice helps you the next time you get stuck. One piece of advice that helped me: load your manuscript onto your Kindle or tablet and read it like a reader. It will help you identify where the story falls flat and where it shines.

Harper St. George writes historical fiction romance set in various time periods from the Viking Era to the Gilded Age. Her latest series is The Gilded Age Heiresses and her upcoming series is The Doves of New York, coming in 2024. She lives in the Atlanta area with her family.

Smart Marketing for Savvy Authors

By Tawdra Kandle



*This year of Smart Marketing
is all about reinventing our businesses.
For the third quarter, we'll cover:
The trials of being more than one person;
This journey is my own;
What comes next!?!*

In the summer of 2015, I had a very good month—one that inspired me to believe that this author gig might actually be something that could one day not only support my family but actually give us a very comfortable life. For the first time, I felt as though I could be one of those unicorn authors, the ones who had drunk deep from the well of Real Success.

Shortly thereafter, I was approached by a traditional publishing company who offered me a contract for my paperbacks and for the ebook rights with select vendors. Assuming this was the next logical step in my journey toward Real Success, I signed the paperwork. But it wasn't long before I had more regrets than assurances.

For one thing, when I ran promotions, I couldn't get any numbers from the publisher. Or rather, I couldn't get any *timely* numbers; when I requested the data, they cheerfully told me that I'd have it ... in six to eight weeks. As any indie author can tell you, six to eight weeks is like a decade in terms of marketing. The information would have been useless by the time I had it in my hands.

Consequently, when the time came for me to renew or end my contract, I didn't hesitate to cut ties and walk away. It was a good decision—and something that taught me an important distinction about this author journey and making changes: There's a difference between U-turns and course corrections.

A U-turn, by its very definition, takes us backward. We end up covering ground we've already passed. A course correction, on the other hand, allows us to continue to move forward, only via a different route.

(On a side note, this reminds me of my father, an Army Ranger, who, when in pre-GPS days, found himself in a place he didn't intend to go, would deny ever being lost: "A Ranger is never lost. He's only misoriented.")

As indie authors in particular, we have the ability to change our minds—a lot. That cover isn't working on your new release? Switch it out for a new one and see if it helps. Your blurb feels lackluster or not quite in step with other books in your genre? Rewrite it to hit all the keywords and trends. Tried to step out of your lane and write a shifter romantic suspense space opera, but your readers didn't exactly flock to read it? Go back to your reliable genre and maybe move that fluky book to a serial app or a new pen name.

Among my closest author friends, I have a saying: nothing ventured, nothing gained. I'll often repeat this mantra as I consider making a change or trying something new. And it's absolutely true: If we never venture out of our author comfort zones, how will we know what we might gain?

Still ... not all of those ventures lead us in the right direction.

For instance, as I've noted here in previous columns, not long after I made the decision to move some of my books to a new, unrelated-to-me pen name, I took a long hard look at my entire catalogue and began to plan to move other series to an entirely different unrelated-to-me pen name. It seemed like a no-brainer; if it was working for one type of book and pen name, why wouldn't it work for another? After all, I'd come to the realization that my own name was no longer viable when it comes to book sales. Why wouldn't I try to give a great series new life in a new author-name home?

This plan held solid for an entire year, despite the fact that I had to postpone it for several months thanks to conference commitments and other life stuff. The original idea had been that I'd launch the new books via Kickstarter, eventually moving them to direct sales, then wide vendors, and then Kindle Unlimited. It was a good plan, thoughtfully constructed. I was on board.

I began to have a few doubts earlier this year. First, I ran my first Kickstarter campaign (for Tawdra) back in February. While it was an interesting experience, it was also a solid month of hard work in prep and then in implementation. The campaign itself required hours of real-time watching as I had to send updates, offer backer perks and stretch goals, and handle swaps with other Kickstarter authors. It wasn't difficult to do, but it was time-consuming and (for me, at least) stressful.

I learned a great deal during that Kickstarter campaign. One is that launching an entire series of six separate books via Kickstarter is overwhelming. Two is that getting through the delivery process can be sticky when you don't have complete control over all of the processes

involved; for instance, I had my paperbacks printed via Barnes & Noble, and that took significantly longer than I had expected and hit several roadblocks.

Suffice it to say that the thought of releasing a series made up of 30 books via the Kickstarter platform began to feel like a really bad idea.

With that worry already churning in my subconscious, an opportunity arose unexpectedly for me to promote the small-town series in question (still under my own name). I decided to go for it, first giving the entire series a rebrand with gorgeous new covers, new blurbs, and even a couple of updated titles. I submitted for and landed a BookBub Featured Deal for one of the box sets in the series. Once I saw the results, I realized that I wasn't ready to let these books go—not even to a pen name that was still actually *me*.

Committing this amount of money and time to the series contributed to my ultimate decision, but it was more than that. As I skimmed the books in preparation for their rebrand, I remembered how much I love this series. I recalled how much of myself I'd poured into it, and even more, I considered the unexpected pain I'd experienced 'giving up' my sports romance to my alter ego. Maybe this series didn't need to move as I'd thought. Like my dad, I wasn't lost, per se, but perhaps I was slightly misoriented.

I took a deep breath and chose not a U-turn, but a course correction.

I'm still tweaking some elements of this series to make it shine even brighter in preparation for the BookBub Featured Deal and other promo. At some point—who knows? Maybe I *will* run a Kickstarter campaign for one of the box sets. But unless something changes, it will be under my own name.

Oh, and don't think the thought and energy I've already contributed to the small-town pen name is going to waste. Not a bit! Instead of moving books over, I'm planning to write a new and different series under that name, trying something that isn't quite consistent with Tawdra's branding but would definitely work for Author Z.

I feel at peace about all of these decisions. I'm also fully aware that part of that peace emanates from the knowledge that if I'm wrong—if this series doesn't begin to thrive under my own name—I have the option of yet another course correction. I don't know what it might be or how it might look, but that's okay. I'll figure it out.

It's all part of the journey.

Tawdra Kandle is the USA Today bestselling author of over 130 romances that span genres from contemporary through paranormal. Her engaging and realistic characters bring readers back again and again to devour the steamy love stories she spins. She lives in central Florida with a husband, a mischievous pup, and too many cats.

NINC Member Discounts

Publisher Alley and Reedsy

By Abigail Drake



We have **two discounts** to feature this month, but before I share those, I wanted to update everyone on Ingram Spark.

As most of you know, after May 2023, Ingram stopped charging authors a fee to publish books using their site. I've approached our contact at Ingram, asking if we could have a **new discount** for NINC members. Specifically, we requested a code for **revisions** that doesn't just apply to recently released books and doesn't have a time limit. It looks like Ingram is willing to do this, which is really great. I'll let you know as soon as I hear back on the details, but now onto the featured discounts for this month!

Publisher Alley is an online tool for analyzing book sales through Baker & Taylor and YBP/GOBI Library Solutions from EBSCO. It features sales and bibliographic data for every title published since January of 1997 through all channels—retail, library, international, and government/other. It's a great resource if you want to analyze performance, sales trends, and lots of other things, too. We're so lucky because [Publisher Alley](#) is offering NINC members a **significant discount** for their services.

Our other discount comes from **Reedsy**. Authors come to [Reedsy](#) from a range of backgrounds. Maintaining a diverse roster of professionals ensures that authors from all walks of life can find the right people to help. Reedsy allows you to exercise your creativity by making sure their services are perfectly suited to your genre and budget. Reedsy is also offering a **serious discount** for NINC members.

To find out more about these, and all our other member discounts, visit our [Freebies and Discounts page](#) on the NINC website.

Abigail Drake, who writes contemporary romance and women's fiction, is the award-winning author of 19 novels. She majored in Japanese and economics in college and spent years living abroad, collecting stories wherever she visited. She and her husband, who she met in Istanbul, have three adult sons.

Membership Benefits

Need industry intel, software, or legal help? We've got you covered.

Are you taking advantage of all your member benefits?

As a NINC member, your benefits include industry discounts, newsletter and website articles, professional services directory, networking opportunities, and more.

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

Networking (these groups are for NINC members only):

- Email list for all NINC members: <https://groups.io/g/ninlink>
- NINC Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NovelistsInc/>
- Follow NINC on Twitter: https://twitter.com/Novelists_Inc
- NINC on [Clubhouse](#): Novelists, Inc. Virtual Tiki Bar
- Critique/brainstorming group: <https://groups.io/g/NINKcritique>
- Traditionally published authors: <https://groups.io/g/NINCTradPubbedAuthors>
- SF/F & speculative fiction writers: <https://groups.io/g/NINCswordsandrayguns>
- Authors of thriller/crime/suspense: <https://groups.io/g/NINC suspense-thriller-crime>
- Discuss creating book covers: <https://groups.io/g/NINCcovercreators/>

Conference:

Conference information: <https://ninc.com/conferences/about-the-ninc-conference/>

Newsletter

- Propose an article: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/propose-an-article/>
- Submit a letter to the editor: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/submit-letter-to-editor/>
- Newsletter archives: <https://ninc.com/newsletter/news-archive/>

Website (You must be logged in to access these services.)

- Legal Fund: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/legal-fund/>
- Sample Letters: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/sample-letters/>
- Articles & Links: <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/articles-and-links/>

Member discounts

NINC members are eligible for certain professional discounts. A complete listing of these can be found at <https://ninc.com/member-benefits/member-freebies-discounts/> along with other member discounts.

Volunteer

One of the greatest benefits of NINC is the opportunity to volunteer your talents to benefit other members—which pays incredible and unexpected dividends in networking and knowledge. Learn more about volunteer opportunities here: <https://ninc.com/members-only/open-positions/>

Open positions include:

- Social Media Committee
- Tweet Team
- Recruiting New Members
- Anything!



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.

NINC is committed to welcoming a diverse and inclusive membership to our organization and serving all members. No author will ever be discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, religious/spiritual beliefs if any, ability, nationality or age. It is NINC's desire and goal to make sure that every author member feels welcomed and accepted and heard.

Founders

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

2023 Board of Directors

If you have questions regarding Novelists, Inc., please contact a member of the Board of Directors.

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- Secretary: Sylvia McDaniel
- Treasurer: Timothy Cerepaka
- Newsletter Editor: Harper St. George
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- Barbara Keiler
- Julie Leto
- Pat McLaughlin
- Pat Rice
- Erica Ridley
- Wayne Stinnett
- Vicki Lewis Thompson
- Victoria Thompson
- Steven Womack

2023 Committees

Complete committee member listings are available on the website. Many committee positions are open and looking for new volunteers.

- Central Coordinator: Laura Resnick
- 2023 Conference Committee
 - Conference Director: Mel Jolly
 - Assistant Conf. Director & Programming Chair: Tawdra Kandle
 - Assistant Programming Chair: Dylann Crush
 - Trad Liaison: Lou Aronica
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 - App Coordinator & Graphic Designer: Laura Hayden
 - NINC After Dark Coordinator: Tamsin Ley
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 - Chair: Celeste Barclay
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- Harper St. George
- Social Media Committee
 - Chair: Violet Howe
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- Membership Committee
 - Boyd Craven
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- *Nink* Newsletter
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 - Acquisitions Editor: Trish Milburn
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- Nominating Committee
 - Chair: Lisa Hughey
 - Tanya Anne Crosby
 - Michele Dunaway
 - Katherine Garbera
 - Cindy Kirk
 - Nancy Robards Thompson
- Discounts Program: Abigail Drake

Central Coordinator

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Address changes may be made on the website.

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Nink's goal is to provide our readers with high-quality articles that offer critical business advice, marketing how-tos, advanced craft coaching, or strategy to continue building a career, all geared to established authors. All members should feel confident that *Nink* provides something for them. We welcome pitches and submissions from all members.

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

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