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President's Voice

By Caethes Faron



We're one month into the new year. How is your vision for 2024 shaping up?

I tend to enter January with grand plans for how the year will go and then limp into February a little more in touch with reality. There is always the desire to aim high, and too often that means taking on more than is realistically possible. No matter how well I think I've pared down the things I need to focus on, January serves as a reminder that I need to pare it down even more.

One thing I keep hearing from authors is that they're overwhelmed. There are too many good opportunities, too many shiny new things to try, competing for our limited time. It's tempting to take on everything, but that scattershot approach leads to burnout and diminished returns. It can also keep us from doubling down on what's already working.

I've started asking myself, "Where can my attention make the largest impact on my business?" That's led to some difficult choices, pushing things that I'm excited about off to another quarter or even another year in order to keep my focus where it needs to be. Instead of trying to make big changes, I'm prioritizing incremental effort compounded daily.

January was the first official meeting of the new NINC board, and I'm excited to see what this dedicated group of people will accomplish this year. We're hard at work to make this organization as valuable as possible to our members, and we have some exciting improvements in the works that I can't wait to share with you later this year.

I hope your 2024 is off to a great start!

~Caethes Faron

Caethes Faron writes across the fantasy and science fiction genres. She loves characters who fall in love and then save the world ... or at least their little corner of it. Her first novel was published in 2012, and she joined NINC two years later. Her work has received honorable mention in the Rainbow Awards and been nominated for All Time Favorite Series on Goodreads. Always looking for a fresh challenge, she's lived in seven states and currently resides in the Netherlands.

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/>

From the Editor

By Cheré Coen



I love stickers, and post their encouraging or fun messages just about everywhere, from my NINC binder to my laptop. But there's one I placed on my computer to constantly remind me of the most important aspect of my publishing career:

"Remember Your Why."

Sometimes we get lost in the maze that surrounds writing, trying to keep our heads above water in the marketing quagmire (see Trish Milburn's story on "Conquering Overwhelm"), and the demand for new material. We focus on the what instead of considering the why.

We might ask ourselves, "Where do we want to go?" But we should follow up with, "Why do we want to go there?" or "Why do we feel the need to tell this story?" Perhaps the most important question is, "Why do we write?"

"Toddlers often have more clarity and curiosity in life than most adults," Canadian entrepreneur and marketer Dev Basu writes in ["5 Reasons 'Why' Is Such a Powerful Question."](#) "Categorically, they aren't afraid of asking 'why?' to seemingly every question that has an obvious answer. It's no wonder that asking higher quality questions leads to better outcomes in your personal and professional life. So, the real question is why do we not ask 'why' more? Why do we assume we already know the answer, and become more preoccupied with asking what, how, when, and who?"

I find that I ask why a lot when I read *Nink* articles or posts on the NINC lists. Why is it so hard to get a BookBub ad these days? Why do my book sales dive around the holidays? Why must I constantly post to social media? Why doesn't Facebook return my emails when my author page isn't working?

It's what makes NINC so invaluable to my career, because the answers—and sometimes the answers that aren't there—help me navigate through this unpredictable and occasionally unstable profession.

But the biggest question remains: Why do I write? Why do we all enter this beautiful creative endeavor that many times has us scratching our heads with anxiety? That makes us doubt ourselves when we're not reaching goals? That doesn't always pay the bills.

As I start off the New Year as *Nink's* editor, and am privileged to be chosen to do so, I vow to "Remember the Why." That writing brings me joy like no other pursuit—and I'm a travel writer so I'm fortunate to have an enjoyable day job. That seeing my book in the bookstore for the first time was a thrill akin to the birth of my two sons. That a stranger may read my book and not only find it entertaining but informative and inspiring.

As you read the excellent articles we have in this month's issue, perhaps stop and consider: What's your why for 2024?

Chéré Coen writes under the pen name of *Cherie Claire*. She is the award-winning author of *The Cajun Series* of historical romances, the *Cajun Embassy* series of contemporary romances, and a paranormal mystery series featuring New Orleans ghost sleuth Viola Valentine. She's a Holt Award finalist, a *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Award finalist and received the Louisiana Press Women Book of the Year.



Barnes & Noble hopes to open 50 stores this year

Barnes & Noble ended 2023 with 609 stores, or an annual increase of 10 stores, but this year CEO James Daunt hopes to add 50 stores. That would be the most stores Barnes & Noble has operated in 15 years. (Keep in mind that new stores are almost always smaller in square footage than the stores from 20 years ago.) Daunt is expecting sales to remain buoyant in 2024 due to a new release by Sarah J. Maas; political book sales may also ramp up, as it's a presidential election year. [Learn more](#) (sub required).

Another record-breaking year for U.S. library digital lending

According to stats from OverDrive, the leading distributor of digital books to libraries, digital borrowing saw a 19% increase overall in 2023. Ebooks saw a 12% increase, audiobooks a 23% increase, and holds for ebooks and audiobooks a 19% increase. In addition, at OverDrive's Kanopy, which offers streaming video, hours watched increased by 14%. The most popular ebooks borrowed from libraries in 2023: *Verity*, *It Starts with Us*, and *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover, *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus, and *Happy Place* by Emily Henry.

New Wattpad survey shows young people skeptical of AI-generated work

Writers can take some reassurance from stats from a new survey by Wattpad and Wakefield Research showing that 92% of readers think it's important for humans to be involved in writing and producing books. Also, 80% of readers surveyed prefer recommendations from a person rather than an algorithm.

Also of interest: The majority of Gen Z readers don't turn to specific influencers or celebrity book club recommendations; only 18% cite celebrity book clubs as sources for recommendations, and 30% cite specific book influencers as sources. Celebrity book clubs hold more influence among Millennials, with 26% using them to find new books. [Learn more.](#)

U.S. book sales update: 2023 print sales come in 2.6% below 2022

All in, 2023 came in 2.6% below 2022 in terms of print unit sales, according to Circana BookScan. That still beats the performance of 2020 and is way ahead of pre-pandemic 2019. Fiction sales were 1% better than 2022. Within adult fiction, fantasy saw the highest percentage growth, with sales increasing by nearly 52%, driven by Rebecca Yarros. In addition to Yarros, the most successful adult fiction authors of 2023 include Colleen Hoover (of course), Emily Henry, Ana Huang, and Sarah J. Maas. Meanwhile, adult nonfiction saw print sales decline about 3%—a slower decline than in 2022, when it dropped by 10%. The category was helped by celebrity memoirs by Prince Harry and Britney Spears.

Circana BookScan reports that U.S. print book sales exceeded expectations in the last month of the year, leading to an overall better result for 2023. Analyst Kristen McLean notes that week 51 of 2023 hit the highest week-51 sales of any of the last five years. (Adult fiction and YA fiction drove growth in December.) McLean writes, “My primary takeaway from this is that consumers are fully back to a pre-pandemic mindset when it comes to their trust in retailers’ abilities to get them what they want quickly from a fulfillment point of view. No more worrying about supply chain or delivery capabilities. There was also plenty of merchandise in stores to help last-minute sales, and books are an easy buy under pressure.”

For extra-good feels: The U.S. book market out-performed the rest of the general merchandise market tracked by Circana, doing 7% better overall on a unit basis. McLean says, “Books’ perceived value for the price may be one reason for this.”

Paw Prints expands into middle grade

[Paw Prints Publishing](#), the children’s book imprint launched by Baker & Taylor in 2022, will expand into the middle-grade market this fall. The first title will be Raj Tawney’s *All Mixed Up*, the story of a friendship between a young multi-ethnic American boy and a Pakistani immigrant in the wake of 9/11.

New agent alert: Howland Literary

[Gabriela Laracuenta Sánchez](#) joined [Howland](#) in January as an assistant agent. She’s seeking literary and upmarket adult fiction as well as cookbooks of Latin-American and Caribbean cuisine.

Tor.com rebrands and relaunches its online magazine

On Jan. 23, the Tor.com online magazine rebranded to Reactor. Tor Publishing Group president and publisher Devi Pillai said in the announcement, “We have always been the place to come to for science fiction and fantasy—but with a new name, a new design, we are going to have a magazine that will be more of a pop culture hub for people who love genres of all types.

We want to expand the audience and the community that Tor.com has built over the past 15 years.”

Chris Lough, director of Tor.com, said, “For the past 15 years, we have published discerning yet joyful works of media criticism, along with award-winning short fiction and art. Now, starting in 2024, the look and functionality of our magazine’s website will finally match the maturity of our contributors and the needs of our community.” [Learn more.](#)

Understanding Hollywood terminology and how book-to-film deals happen

The TV/film industry remains one of the more confusing rights areas—and overall businesses—for authors. And much of the confusion starts up front in the terminology you’ll hear used. Terms used in book publishing often mean something different when used in Hollywood. And that’s before you get to the many ways Hollywood operations differ from book publishing, even though both industries are in the business of storytelling.

In an [informative session](#) hosted by the Authors Guild, Eddie Gamarra, vice president of literary affairs for Paramount Global Kids & Family (which includes Nickelodeon and Awesomeness branded content), offered an explainer on terms, deals, and processes in Hollywood—in particular, on reps that sell your book adaptation rights. Gamarra was not speaking as a representative of his company, nor can his guidance be considered professional advice meant for you. The one message that came through loud and clear: Every situation is different. Authors should have their own representatives or team to advise them every step of the way. (Also: Gamarra cannot and does not accept unsolicited pitches.)

Links of Interest

Amazon

- **Audible lays off 5% of staff.** The company says audiobook sales are fine; likely this is about the tech industry continuing to tighten its belt. Amazon Prime Video and MGM Studios unit is also cutting staff. [Read Haleluya Hadero at AP News.](#)
- **Rescuing readers from the Goodreads hellscape:** A book critic suggests how we can stop the madness and have a healthier social community surrounding books. [Read Maris Kreizman at the New York Times.](#)

Children’s publishing

- **Learning to write to market:** Award-winning children’s author Darcy Pattison explains various opportunities for authors willing to research the market and write what’s needed. [Read at Indie Kids Books.](#)

Libraries

- **Digital audiobooks are about 11% of total library materials budgets.** A large majority of libraries report increased circulation of audiobooks. [Learn more at Library Journal.](#)

2024 predictions

- **An expert in reader analytics offers his thoughts on the future of book publishing.** Of course, AI features prominently in this list. He notes that TikTok is one of the major drivers of English-language editions in foreign markets, speeding up and synchronizing release dates. [Read Andrew Rhomberg.](#)
- **Top 10 publishing trends for 2024:** Experts like Orna Ross, Joanna Penn, and Craig Martelle offer their thoughts on what's ahead for authors. [Read Clayton Noblit at Written Word Media.](#)

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](#).

Conquering Overwhelm

By Trish Milburn



The life of a modern author is filled with decisions. What story do I write next? Do I stick with this genre I love or transition to something more profitable? Should I dive into direct sales?

More options and control over our careers can be freeing and exciting, but that level of freedom can also be overwhelming. How many times have you come away from a conference feeling energized and ready to tackle all the new things that will lift your career to the next level only to realize there are not enough hours in your day or energy in your tank? You not only feel overwhelmed but also as if you're missing some important professional boats.

The increase in overwhelm

Many authors feel that the tendency to reach a state of overwhelm is on the rise because of the increase in access to information. There are so many things we can (or tell ourselves we should) do. That control comes with the responsibility of wearing a lot of different hats, especially if you can't afford to hire out those additional tasks.

"A lot of the increasing overwhelm has to do with the sheer volume of information at our fingertips, the constant barrage of success stories posted in Facebook groups," says [Cindy Procter-King](#). "The missing piece of magic. I started in trad. Things seemed 'simpler' because there was just one road to Oz. Now, there are many roads. I wouldn't trade many roads for one again, but I had two choices then. I could either continue to find my way down the road or I could quit. Now, there is so much opportunity, but also a lot more travelers on the road. A lot more choices."

When [Denise Agnew](#) started writing for publication, "There wasn't an internet presence to fuel the 'hysteria' that comes from too much information all at once. As time went on, the peer pressure to be and do things at a certain pace and a certain way pushed me toward overwhelm. It took me a very long time to realize I was in control of the ship and that I didn't necessarily need to follow the crowd."

FOMO and comparisonitis

It's easy to allow the voices in our head to convince us that if we're not taking advantage of every new option available to us, then we're making critical errors in our careers.

[Grace Burrowes](#) points to social media as not only a means by which doom and gloom ("My sales are falling!" or "My account got closed for no reason!") get shared at light speed but also "where we see most of the ads bombarding us about 'can't miss it' classes, 'game-changing' productivity software, and 'career-making editorial, advertising, or accountability services,'" she says.

But when all those courses and software are enticing and you're tempted, how do you not end up with links to seminars that remain unwatched and software you don't have time to learn how to use and implement?

For [Lynn Cahoon](#), who admits to a love for the bright and shiny, it means deliberately limiting her focus and budgeting to one subject, class, or conference a year.

Cahoon also tries to keep all the potentially useful information she learns from books, conferences, or courses in one easily-accessible notebook.

[Rhian Cahill](#) admits that when some new promotional opportunity or business approach comes down the pike, she initially has a mini panic attack that there is yet something else to learn and incorporate.

"But then I remember that I have a plan, and while this 'new thing' might be helpful I don't have to look at it right now," she says.

She feels that fear of missing out (FOMO) and comparisonitis are among the top contributors to feeling overwhelmed as an author.

"Comparisonitis is a thief, a liar," she says. "It lies to steal your confidence. And FOMO is its little brother."

[Allie Pleiter](#) tries to remember that she's looking at everyone else's carefully managed image.

"We all think everyone else is more successful, happy, or well-off than we are," she says. "It's almost never true."

Procter-King says there seems to be an entire industry that has developed to sell magic beans to authors and that she's bought into some of it. But it's not all bad. Plenty of careers have continuing education requirements, and courses on new ways to approach a writing career are similar. You just have to not overwhelm yourself with the number of courses or with a suffocating to-try list.

"As a book coach and consultant, this is a real pet peeve of mine," Pleiter says of the hype machine that surrounds some courses and methods. "I firmly believe there are no silver bullets in this business. I pick one big new thing a year, and try to implement one new writing skill with each book. Slow but steady."

Barbara Keiler, who writes as [Judith Arnold](#), says we need to remember that not everything works for everybody.

"A strategy that brings huge success to some authors may wind up costing other authors time and money and doing nothing to improve their sales," she says.

Picking and choosing

Because there are so many opportunities and choices for authors to make now, it becomes even more important to be selective about which ones to tackle and which to either leave for a later time or not incorporate at all.

“In an era of so much opportunity, some of which seems to change twice a week, it’s easy to feel you didn’t jump on an opportunity when you should have and now it’s too late,” Procter-King says. “But it’s never ‘too late.’ It’s just different.”

I recently faced this type of choice. My partially built Shopify site sat unlaunched, costing me money but generating none, for most of 2023. I was overwhelmed by all the moving parts that went with it. I finally admitted that, at least for now, direct sales aren’t for me. After cancelling everything, I built a new WordPress site in a week and all that stress I’d been living with for most of a year went away.

Pleiter has a hard and fast rule that if something will negatively impact her ability to get her daily word count in, she doesn’t do it.

Some level of organization can help keep overwhelm at bay. For Cahoon, that means keeping all her tasks written down on a sheet of paper under three headers: On My Desk, Soon, and Future.

“This allows me to see what’s upcoming at all times,” she says. “I used to forget about edits until they showed up and then I had to readjust for them.”

[Wayne Stinnett](#), who has a very busy writing schedule because his writing supports two households, says he feels overwhelm at some point every day but that, “When the overwhelming workload is put on paper and organized, it becomes less of a challenge.”

Keiler managed to expunge overwhelm from her writing life a couple of years ago by actually going back to traditional publishing.

“I deliberately opted out of the indie-publishing must-do mania,” she says. “During the 10 or so years I was exclusively indie, I saw my income gradually drop, even as I pushed harder and harder to do all those things (marketing, promoting) that I didn’t have time to do. I contemplated retiring, but I still had more stories I wanted to write. I found a publisher who believed in and supported my books. I hired a team of agents to handle the subsidiary rights of some of my indie books. And I’m happier in my writing career—and saner in my life—than I’ve ever been before. Not feeling overwhelmed is wonderful.”

Finding the right balance

Authors could easily fill all their waking hours with tasks related to their careers, but that’s not healthy—physically or mentally. Trying to do everything leads to burnout and that crushing feeling of being overwhelmed. It leaves no time to live life, spend time with friends and family, or enjoy hobbies. We need balance to be healthy and happy.

When Procter-King lost someone close to her, that experience changed how she viewed her life.

“It made me determined to put my personal happiness first and also the happiness of the people I love,” she says. “If I didn’t meet a writing goal, it wasn’t like I was losing someone else I loved. It’s simplistic but it helped.”

Pleiter says she tries to not work on weekends unless she's really under the gun or trying to free up time for a big personal event like her son's wedding.

In a nutshell

"I think a lot of the time we're after the thing that will make us a success, and we want it to be easy," Cahill says. "When someone dangles the possibility of those things in front of us, we automatically reach out. It's hard to know when and what is really what you need. Or want."

Perhaps that's the most important question we need to answer to keep overwhelm at bay.

Trish Milburn came into 2024 with a new outlook on setting goals that can be summed up with the word she's adopted as her guide for this year – *manageable*.

Navigating the Cost of Direct Sales

Understanding the financial landscape

By Isabel Jolie



As authors continue to explore diverse avenues for book sales, the allure of direct sales has become increasingly evident. Among the questions that frequently arise, one stands out: What are the costs associated with direct sales?

Most authors already have a website and consider it a base cost of running their author business. It is a shop of sorts, as it's a place where readers can come and browse books and find out about you.

The only difference between an author website and an author e-commerce site is the ability to sell directly to consumers.

[Ines Johnson](#), a prolific romance author and craft and marketing course instructor, has been selling direct since 2022. She explained that there are no *required* costs to sell direct. She doesn't count website costs, because most authors already have one of those.

Yes, there will be transaction costs, but you'll find those anywhere, whether you are selling in person or online, and transaction fees are significantly less than the percentage a retailer takes when selling your product.

[Matthew Holmes](#), a marketing consultant, agrees that an author can start selling direct using all free options, but he believes it's less stressful and produces a more impressive store with a budget of \$40 to \$50 a month to start.

Assuming you have a website, your first step to becoming an e-commerce store is to add a cash register, or the ability to process payment in return for merchandise. While free options exist, pricey ones do too.

Note: All costs used in the charts in this article are in U.S. dollars as of December 2023. Prices vary by country.

Payment platforms (aka cash registers)

The chart below summarizes the costs of leading shopping platforms. WooCommerce is an add-on platform for existing WordPress sites.

Vendor	Cost*	Notes
Shopify	\$39/month or \$351 annually (25% savings on annual payment plan = \$29/month)	Basic plan; sufficient for most. Includes site hosting and domain fees.
	Plus 2.6% transaction fee + 30¢ USD online	If you use a payment provider other than Shopify Payments, can be as much as an additional 1% transaction fee.
	Includes up to 77% shipping discount and two staff accounts	More expansive and expensive plans exist.
		*If you don't want the website and only want the "buy" buttons, you can use Shopify Starter for \$5/mo plus transaction fees.
WooCommerce	Hosting plan at least \$11/month, domain name \$15/year	*This is a free plug-in for WordPress; if already using WordPress, you are already paying a hosting and domain name fee.
	Paid themes range from \$30 to \$300+	*Can be more complex than Shopify and may require WordPress skill set.
	Plus 2.9% transaction fee plus 30¢ USD per transaction plus 1% fee for international cards	
Wix	\$27 per month	*Less expensive plans do not include customer support, which is undesirable for an e-commerce shop.
		If number of transactions exceeds 100/month, must upgrade to VIP plan at \$59/month.

Squarespace	\$23 per month (30% savings on annual payment plan)	
	Plus 3% transaction fee on physical goods and services	
Payhip	Pricing plan options include:	
	\$0 monthly with a 5% transaction fee	
	\$29 per month with a 2% transaction fee	
	\$99 per month with 0% transaction fee	
Gumroad	Tiered pricing based on sales volume	
	9% transaction fee for monthly sales volume below \$1K	
	7% transaction fee for monthly sales volume below \$1K–\$10K	
	5% transaction fee for monthly sales	

Now that you’ve selected your payment platform, or “cash register,” you must be able to hand over the product after accepting payment. For ebooks and audiobooks, this is easily accomplished with BookFunnel. For paperbacks and hardback fulfillment, there are several options available to authors.

Vendor	Cost*
<i>ebook/audiobook</i>	
BookFunnel	*If you are on the mid-list author plan at \$100 per year, there is an additional \$50 annual fee for direct integration.
	*If you are on the bestseller author plan at \$250 per year, there is no additional fee for direct integration.
<i>Paperback/Hardback</i>	

Self-fulfillment	Cost of materials (envelopes, boxes, labels) *In the U.S., Shopify and EasyShip offer significant discounts—up to 80% off of published shipping rates.
Lulu	Pay for printing and shipping costs. Costs are variable.
Bookvault	Pay for printing and shipping costs. Costs are variable. Monthly fee provides more expansive services.

Now, you’ve got your shop, your cash register, a way to hand over the merchandise ... but, once they leave your store, you can still contact your customers. You have all of their information, something you don’t have when they buy from someone else’s shop (i.e. Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, etc).

How do you follow up and try to sell them more? Or what if they pushed a loaded shopping cart right up to the register and walked away, leaving you an abandoned shopping cart?

Enter automation flows

Most platforms, like Shopify, offer select modules and automated flows as part of your package. But, once you get started, you might want something more advanced. Or, if you’re taking a class, the instructor may recommend a more robust option. AMMO, for example, recommends Klayvio.

Pro tip: If you’re curious about Klayvio (or a different email marketing program) but have an existing subscription list that makes switching programs prohibitively expensive, you can simply link Klayvio to your “cash register” and let it work for your new sales customers at no cost to you while keeping your existing email program running.

There’s no need to combine everything all at once. You can run new customers through your funnel, and when you choose, transfer your new opted-in customers to your preferred/pre-existing email marketing program. Experts recommend to always manage your sales and newsletter lists separately.

Vendor	Pricing	Notes
Klayvio	\$0/month for 0–250 contacts	Includes up to 500 monthly sends
	\$20/month for 251–500 contacts	Includes up to 1,000 monthly sends
	\$30/month for 501–1,000 contacts	Includes up to 10,000 monthly sends

		*Prices rise incrementally. For example, a list of 100,000 would cost \$1,440 per month.
Mailchimp	\$20/ month for up to 500 contacts	*Includes up to 6,000 monthly sends.
	\$45/ month for up to 1,500 contacts	*Includes up to 18,000 monthly sends.
		*Prices rise incrementally. For example, a list of 100,000 would cost \$800 per month.
		*Mailchimp has less expensive plans but they do not offer the automated flows.
MailerLite	\$20/ month for up to 500 contacts	Unlimited sends
	\$30/ month for up to 1,000 contacts	Unlimited sends
		*Prices rise incrementally. For example, a list of 100,000 would cost \$440 per month.
		*MailerLite has less expensive plans but they do not offer the automated flows.
ConvertKit	\$9/ month for up to 300 contacts	Unlimited sends
	\$25/ month for up to 500 contacts	Unlimited sends
		*Prices rise incrementally. For example, a list of 105,000 would cost \$556 per month.

		*ConvertKit has less expensive plans but they do not offer automated flows.
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Now, you’ve got a fully functioning store. The next step, much like a Main Street shop, is merchandising. What greets your customer when they enter your store? What color will set them in the mood to buy? Which product should you push first? What should the sign on the front table read?

In the online world, there are endless variables one can test. Store load time is also a consideration. If someone pushes on your door and it’s slow to open, they may think you’re closed and walk away. Put another way, load time equals money.

Enter landing pages

Is this step necessary? Can’t you just send them directly to your website? Some say absolutely. Others say no way. The great news is you can test it.

Johnson found that for one of her pen names, conversion rates are significantly higher on the website’s landing page, but for a different pen name, conversion rates are higher when she sends them to her Shopify product page. It’s worth noting that she did extensive landing page testing to arrive at the best “page” she now uses on her site.

[Unbounce](#) is a popular landing page option that allows for ease of testing conversion rates on different landing pages and is highly regarded for fast download times. But, there are free options available that perform the same function.

Vendor	Cost	Notes
Unbounce	\$99/month or \$891/yr (25% discount for yearly plan)	*Includes 1 domain, up to 20K visitors.
	\$145/month	*Includes 5 domains, A/B testing, up to 30K visitors,
Landingi	\$49/month	*Unlimited conversions and landing pages.
eComposer	\$0 for up to 3 landing pages; \$19/month for up to 15 landing pages; \$149/month for unlimited plan	*Shopify app

Now, you've almost got everything you could possibly want. But, if you're like so many other direct-to-consumer (DTC) marketers, you'll find **long** pages convert best. It's counter-intuitive (and definitely worth testing) but it's often true.

You may start to wonder ... where am I losing people? How far on this long page are they going? What percentage make it to the end? Is there an issue somewhere on that page that's impacting conversion rate?

Enter heat maps

These can be attached to your page and you can visually see how far your site visitors (or landing page visitors) are making it down the page. Pretty fascinating stuff and it can definitely help guide you as you fine-tune to improve conversion rates.

Vendor	Price	Notes
Microsoft Clarity	Free	
Mouseflow	\$0 per month	Up to 500 recordings
	\$31 per month	Up to 5,000 recordings

Tax collection is another requirement of any e-commerce store and laws vary by state and country. Shopify offers [ShopifyTax](#) and an explanation for U.S. online retailers. Tax Jar is a competing service that charges \$19 a month.

There are innumerable additional resources an author can choose, such as apps for reviews and upsells, and too many options exist to list here.

There's no sugarcoating direct sales. Even if you choose free options straight down the line, it's a time-intensive effort to implement and manage.

[Nicholas Erik](#), a writer and book marketing expert, refers to these as "the hidden costs" of going direct. Time and mental health can't be listed in a chart, but they can be expenses.

The time aspect is self-explanatory. Yes, you can hire someone to do all of this for you (and that still requires time). But it's an e-commerce store. If you choose to hire right out of the gate, then you may need to continue paying someone for site updates and for ongoing marketing.

Stores also require customer service. Unlike when someone buys on another retailer and leaves a bad review you can choose to ignore, on your site you'll be the one responding to customers who aren't happy and want a refund. This is where mental health comes in.

Yes, you can hire someone to handle your customer service for you, but this is your brand. You need to trust that hire will be responsive, polite, and handle your customer with the care you want reflected in your brand.

Also, after months of managing the process, you may decide you really don't like all the testing or the numbers analysis or customer service. The hidden cost of doing something you

don't like isn't quantifiable, but it is expensive.

When it's all said and done, an author can venture into direct sales choosing all free options. But, how much do authors *typically* spend?

Real life examples

Isabel Jolie

Jolie replaced a more expensive WordPress site with Shopify to go direct, so she doesn't count the expense as an incremental direct cost. She uses Unbounce to test landing pages from her Facebook ads and is on BookFunnel's Mid-List Author Plan so pays the \$50 annual fee for direct. She's just starting out in DTC, so Klaviyo is free since she has less than 150 contacts. After that, it will start to scale up with volume.

Expense	Monthly
Shopify	\$29.25
BookFunnel	\$4.16
Unbounce	\$74.25
Klayvio	\$0
Microsoft Clarity	\$0
Monthly Total	\$78.41

Patti Fiala

Fiala, who writes as [PJ Fiala](#), was using WordPress and opted to add the WooCommerce plugin for free to handle DTC sales. She was already on the BookFunnel Bestseller Author plan, so there are no additional charges for direct. She keeps her sales list separate from her newsletter list, which is on MailerLite.

Expense	Monthly
Existing WordPress site with WooCommerce	\$0
BookFunnel	\$0
Klayvio	\$70.00
Monthly Total	\$70.00

Lori Holmes

Matthew Holmes manages his wife's advertising and sales. He chose Shopify and uses alternatives to Unbounce.

Expense	Monthly
Shopify	\$29.00
BookFunnel	\$4.16
Qikify Upsell	\$10.00
eComposer	\$0
Variant Image App	\$5.00
Klayvio	\$30.00
Judge Me Review App	\$15.00
Monthly Total	\$93.16

Holmes pulled his wife's books from KU in 2023 to go direct, and says, "There's huge potential with selling direct, but it's got to be something that you fully commit to, in my opinion, and set your expectations up front that it's not going to be easy, but it will be rewarding and potentially much more lucrative than being 100% reliant on retailers."

There are many ways to approach direct and, in all likelihood, no two authors will select the exact same path. Given the variables, there's no one number for expenses, but a fair estimate is that monthly incremental expenses range from \$0 to several hundred dollars, depending on the author's choices.

Isabel Jolie is a contemporary romance author from Charlotte, North Carolina. She considers refraining from throwing her laptop in the lake while creating her first Unbounce page to be one of her greatest accomplishments of 2023.

The Power of Image-Making for Fiction Writing

By Lindsay Randall



Poet. Journal writer. Image-maker. These are just a few of the creative guises I slipped into as I embarked on an inward journey in search of my newest set of fictional characters.

What I hungered to discover was what is truthful and powerful in my own world view. Once I unearthed that profound truth, I wanted to know how best I could weave it into a story through memorable characters.

With this lofty goal in mind, I signed up for Image Journaling: Creative Renewal and the Inward Journey©, a course and forthcoming book by master artist [Constance Pierce](#).

Pierce believes “the language of imagery” holds the key to an author’s inner life. She combines the creative processes of image-making with journal writing, helping participants set off on an inward journey.

“I use unconventional approaches with a variety of media to prompt and empower the writing in surprising ways,” Pierce said. “The unexpected atmospheres and archetypes that arise often suggest narratives, sequences, and characters that one might not conjure through self-will alone.”

My first assignment was to think about creating a writing invocation. Pierce described the invocation as a “calling out to something or someone greater than yourself to companion you as you embark on your new creative quest.”

She said this could be “a letter, a litany, a parable or allegory, or even a chorus of inner voices, speaking to each other for the first time—any word form you imagine and choose.”

What it must be, however, is authentic.

“The one requirement is that it should honestly emerge from where you are right now,” Pierce said.

For me, my invocation materialized as a petition. Though I struggled at first, I soon dug deep into discerning what is important to me with my writing and what I hope to achieve with each written piece.

I titled my petition “Call of the Storyteller” and wrote:

*Reveal to me a tale only I can tell, one steeped in the writing wisdom I have earned.
Make me not so much wrestle with words as worry over meaning.
Teach me to listen for the sounds of my story awakening ... of its characters unfolding...of their
lives intersecting.
Share with me the grace to give voice to those who have none.
Help me approach this work with ease and excitement. No struggling over sentences, no fear of
the unknown.
Just me, writing the story I must write—bold and determined;
an adventurer striking out through the landscape of my imagination.*

This has now become a mantra for me, holding both power and permission. I refer to it before beginning any new writing project.

From there, Pierce guided us in experimenting with simple abstract monoprint mark-making, improvising with fluid watercolors and iridescent acrylic paints that enhanced our prints. (Author's note: [View a Flickr collection of various monoprints and "Image Journals" created in one of Pierce's classes.](#))

"This process of image-releasing and image-nurturing is often as advantageous to writers as it is to visual creatives," Pierce said. "Part soul-work and part storytelling, the process encourages images to surface from memory and imagination. This process may also illuminate our inner life in fresh ways and unleash untried powers of self-expression."

This proved true for me as I made the time to sit with the images I'd created. Pierce suggested reserving space on an art table for a "quiet, contemplative reservoir," giving the images respect and attention. Once I did that, a volley of ideas came to mind. We then added words alongside the monoprints, using a variety of media, which amped up my creativity.

"We play with words as visual elements," Pierce said. "What one writes with will often change the content of what one writes. We explore this in depth by alternating fine point pens with brush, writing in watercolors or bleeding inks, colored pencils, wax-resist, or layering altered photo images with word-transparencies. Words and images conjoin. It's often startling what content comes forth."

For me, the most powerful moments came when I considered the myths that Vivienne, one of my main characters, has embraced and lived up to this point in her life. I began by choosing a piece of a monoprint that had edges of darkness that moved inward to light at the center.



Affixing the print to a small sheet of textured gold/blue paper so that it was hidden by a flap that could be lifted, I wrote my hope for her story. Using a gold gel pen on a dark background, I began writing about the myths she's embraced. I wrote from one corner of the page to another, around and around, her story flowing out of me. So much conflict and drama were embedded in those myths! But I wouldn't have thought about them so thoroughly if not for the "Image Journal" process.



I also created two letters of forgiveness—for a story I hadn't yet fleshed out, about characters I'd only begun to consider. In those letters, their internal conflict was born.

"Though the image-making explorations prompt us into creation, it is the written words of the initial invocation composed in simple pen or pencil that charge the whole process with a profound energy," Pierce explained.

Another moving moment was finding what appeared to be to be a Viking's longship tossed about on a turbulent sea. This would belong to one of the characters whose story came out of the "two letters of forgiveness." Serendipity! Seeing the image led to a torrent of words, which became the beginning of this character's story.

The beauty of this method is that there is no timeframe for being done with the creativity.

"The 'Imaging Journal' flourishes in a non-linear manner," Pierce said. "At times we start the book in two or more places accompanied by a huge leap of faith. The stew pot of seemingly disparate elements sort themselves out and find their rightful places as we venture on. Time is as much a part of the process as the page, the pen, or the brush."

While not every writer can enjoy in-person instruction with Pierce as their guide, the following suggestions might help you create a few pages of your own “Image Journal:”

- Create a worktable with two areas, one where artistic chaos reigns and the other where you place your most compelling pieces and contemplate them.
- Experiment on the page with regular and metallic watercolors, gel pens, colored pencils, and blue/gold marble decorative paper.
- For any monoprints you create, look for the suggestions of figures (human, animal, tree form, plant form) and use these vertically. Horizontally is where you will find landscapes.
- Meditate and then respond and write about the presence of an image.
- Remember that when an image can be seen in more than one way, it creates mystery.
- Variety is key.
- Place dominant images on the right-side of your journal page. On the left side, put journaling or tiny images surrounded by vastness. Don’t overcrowd the page.
- Be brave and cultivate a beginner’s mindset. Most of all, have fun!

Lindsay Randall is the author of historical and contemporary romances.

Master artist and former professor Constance Pierce has taught variations of her “Image Journal” materials at The Yale Divinity School, The Smithsonian Institution’s Campus on the Mall, Ursuline College Master of Arts in Counseling and Art Therapy Program, The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, and others. She has exhibited nationally in the United States, as well as in Europe and Japan.

The Line Between Reality and Cliché

Portraying Cajuns in fiction

By Cheré Coen



When comedian Tom Segura chose to disparage a Cajun man from Lafayette, La., in his 2018 Netflix special *Disgraceful*, the backlash was fast and severe. Segura joked that the Cajun man's accent was so thick he couldn't understand a word, insinuating that Cajuns were backward, inbred, and ignorant.

"We have this whole population of Cajun people living amongst us ... like they're one of us ... and they're not," he said in the joke, adding, "Why do they have rights?"

Segura then went on to insist that a wall be built around Louisiana because residents were "out of their (expletive) minds."

Segura received more than 200,000 angry texts and emails.

Cajun author and Louisiana historian Shane Bernard said, "Segura seemed taken aback by some Cajuns' negative response to his bit partly, I believe, because he seemed not to understand that Cajuns were an ethnic group, and one capable of circling the wagons in response to a perceived affront. I think it's an example of someone knowing the word 'Cajun,' but thinking it was a generic term for certain people from Louisiana, but not necessarily an ethnic group."

Cajuns descend from Acadians forcibly expelled by the British from the Maritime Provinces of Canada beginning in 1755. After being sent throughout the Colonies and Europe, many made their way to Louisiana to regroup and settle in the parishes south and southwest of New Orleans. When the Americans purchased Louisiana, they heard the French-speaking natives' nickname of "Cadjin" and the group became known as "Cajuns."

In 1980, a lawsuit was filed by Cajun Calvin Roach against his employer over his employer's use of a derogatory name used to describe Cajuns. Judge Edwin F. Hunter ruled in Roach's favor using the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to enforce that ethnic discrimination in the workplace applied to Cajuns. He stated that Cajuns were of "foreign descent" and should be protected under federal anti-discrimination laws.

“While Roach himself rarely spoke about the case in public, the suit had a notable impact on the Cajun people,” writes Bernard in an article in *64 Parishes* magazine, the publication of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. “*Roach v. Dresser Industries* confirmed the Cajuns as a federally recognized ethnic group and undoubtedly contributed to the Louisiana State Legislature passing a concurrent resolution in 1981 condemning the derogatory name as ‘offensive, vulgar, and obscene.’”

Scholars cannot say for certain where the derogatory term originated, but many believe it was given the Cajuns by visiting oil men from Texas and may have racial undertones.

“I think most people outside south Louisiana, east Texas, and the adjoining areas do not know or understand that Cajuns are an ethnic group,” Bernard said. “My daughter, who until recently lived in New York state, often remarked to me that when she told people up there she was Cajun they often commented they thought ‘Cajun’ merely described a type of food or music.”

There’s been a growing support for depicting ethnic groups in literature in a positive light and through using authentic voices. But does this apply to ethnic groups such as Cajuns who may be overlooked?

“There is greater respect and sensitivity for ‘identity’ and issues of ‘identity,’” Bernard explained. “Yet, because Cajuns aren’t widely perceived as an ethnic group (even though they are indeed one by any measure), they are on occasion treated with less respect than one might expect. And so, it is common in the media, including works of fiction, to see Cajuns depicted as frivolous, ignorant, dissipated, exotic, quaint, or cutesy.”

Hence, Segura viewing Cajuns as fodder for comedy.

Part of the problem, Bernard suggests, is the lack of understanding. Because many Cajuns lived in rural Louisiana and spoke French, there isn’t a large body of literary works written by Cajuns. Most of the early descriptions of Cajuns were penned by outsiders looking in.

“I think it can be a challenge to give voice to ethnic characters who, like Cajuns, do not have a long literary or intellectual tradition—even more so to give them voice without making them ‘quaint,’” Bernard said.

How far is appropriate in depicting ethnic groups?

Glen Pitre is a South Louisiana screenwriter, director, and author. A Cajun born “down the bayou” from New Orleans, his debut film, *Belizaire the Cajun*, was screened at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival and stars Armand Assante as a Cajun who faces prejudice by vigilantes in pre-Civil War Louisiana. Pitre considers Cajuns similar to other American groups who speak a different language and own a unique culture, setting them apart from mainstream America.

In the film *The Waterboy* Adam Sandler plays Bobby Boucher (pronounced Boo-shay), a socially inept stuttering man who wishes to play football but is relegated to be the waterboy for the South Central Louisiana State University football team. The comedy doesn’t name Boucher as Cajun but it plays on Cajun stereotypes.

Pitre views these representations as “a perceived wisdom of a group” derived from images and literature that came before.

Pitre maintains that writers doing diligent research saves an ethnic group such as Cajuns from becoming cliché. He recently served as a sensitivity reader for a Random House YA novel set in Louisiana but written by a Canadian.

“They (Random House) are making an effort,” he said. “Sometimes you can take the curse off of it by making people self-aware.”

Advice for writers

Cajun French differs from Parisian French in that Cajuns have been separated from the mother country for centuries and much of the language includes ancient French words and modern English. In the 1920s, Louisiana forbid French to be spoken in schools resulting in much of the language being lost. Today, French immersion schools teach children both Cajun French and Parisian French and LSU’s Center for French and Francophone Studies includes Cajun French. However, most of the Cajun French spoken today in Louisiana is among the older generations, although Cajun expressions such as the endearing *chère* or the teasing *couyon* (fool or crazy) are still widely heard.

To avoid creating Cajun characters in a stereotypical manner, Bernard suggests using a Cajun French word or phrase now and again if a Cajun character uses them. The occasional use of interjections like *mais* or *oui* may be appropriate, or the common Louisiana French expression *laissez les bons temps roulez* (let the good times roll), if the writer thinks the reader expects something familiar, if not overused and frowned upon by Louisiana residents.

Good sources to utilize are *A Dictionary of the Cajun Language* by the Rev. Msgr. Jules O. Daigle, *Dictionary of Louisiana French* edited by Albert Valdman and Kevin J. Rottet, and *Tonnerre Mes Chiens: A Glossary of Louisiana French Figures of Speech* by Amanda LaFleur.

A good representation of today’s Cajun may be found in Dave Robicheaux, the main character of James Lee Burke’s award-winning mysteries set in New Orleans and along the bayous of South Louisiana.

The bottom line is, it’s important to get the facts straight. Bernard offers the 1944 horror film *The Mummy’s Curse* as an example of poor research. Lon Chaney Jr.’s monster in the film emerges in a Cajun village whose residents are singing “*La Marseillaise*,” the French national anthem, which was written *after* the Acadians had entered Louisiana.

Create characters who are believable, Pitre insists. Cajun culture today remains rich in unique culture, such as their unique Mardi Gras tradition of costumed riders on horseback, their music, or the spicy foodways now served in restaurants around the world. But most visitors to South Louisiana will find people of Cajun heritage acting like your average American. In Lafayette, a city known as the hub of Cajun Country, it’s difficult to find a Cajun accent. However, it’s *not* unusual for a band to start playing and see Cajuns immediately rise and dance the two-step or zydeco moves.

“My advice as someone who’s not only done movies but written novels is make people people,” Pitre said. “Make them be true to humanity. Don’t start with your probably limited amount of knowledge of the culture. Start with real people.”

He adds that comedic representation is fine as long as it portrays characters as authentic human beings.

“And that’s true no matter who you’re writing about,” he said.

Chéré Coen a.k.a. Cherie Claire writes romance and mysteries with Cajun characters but does extensive research to avoid stereotypes. A native of Louisiana, she has spent decades working as a journalist writing about the unique culture and history of her home state. Chéré is also the author of *Exploring Cajun Country: A Tour of Historic Acadiana* and *Cookin’ in Cajun Country*.

Smart Marketing for Savvy Authors

By Tawdra Kandle



*This year of Smart Marketing
is all about finding balance and joy in marketing our work.
For the first quarter, we're talking about craft:
How we lost our balance (and how to find it again);
Why craft matters in marketing;
How focusing on craft can lead to joy!*

Early in my career as an indie author, I worked with a book promotion company, which is where I learned much of what helped keep me selling books for the next decade or so. Setting up blog tours and reviews for author clients was part of my job, and although I seldom had time to read all of the books we promoted, I vividly recall one particular time when I did.

One of our bloggers reached out to me about a problem with a book we'd sent to her to review. Apparently, the author had uploaded to Amazon a copy of her book that still included the editor's notes and corrections, clearly visible in the margins and lines.

When I approached the author, she was surprisingly unfazed by this news. "Oh, yeah, I guess I should fix that," she replied when I explained what I'd discovered. "But it's really not a big deal. People are still buying the book. If the readers don't care, why should I bother?"

I noticed the same attitude among some (not all) of the authors with whom we worked. They had discovered that a certain segment of readers didn't care about the quality of the writing, the development of the plot, or the depth of the characters; they were binge-reading romances, looking only for a few key thrills or some particularly juicy love scenes.

Up until this point in time, I'd been a fervent champion of the indie movement, but it definitely gave me pause when I recognized a huge and growing issue during that particular time. The pressure to produce more books in less time was feeding a certain disregard for the writing process.

I'll add a caveat here that I don't think all the authors indie publishing their books then or now are ignoring the importance of writing a well-crafted book. At the time when this issue was most prevalent, the market was flooded with new authors, some of whom were making thousands of dollars every time they released a new book. The New Adult wave was just cresting, and everyone was anxious to establish their career.

I *believe* things have changed in the past 10 years. These days, I'm encouraged when I hear more authors—established, successful indies as well as just-starting-out-first-novel writers—seeking insight and training in improving their craft.

But there are perhaps a few authors who wonder what writing a better book has to do with smarter marketing. Over the past few years, I've been participating in an ongoing conversation with several other past presidents about the value of craft and the importance of finding (or rediscovering) joy in the process of writing. As I pondered how I wanted to present my case this year for seeking balance and joy via crafting better books (that also sell better!), I turned to past NINC president Lou Aronica, author, editor, and publisher, for his input and insight.

Thinking back to those authors who shrugged away any thought of improving their writing or worrying about becoming a better author, I wondered why craft matters in publishing in 2024. If an author is writing books that readers like (and buy), why should that author care about how well those books are crafted?

"We perceive good as very different from great, and we react very differently to those things as consumers, and that is particularly true for readers," Aronica answered. "If your audience loves your work, they'll keep seeking you out and put you at the top of their must-have list for your new books. If they only like your work, there's a much greater chance that they'll move on to the next shiny object at some point."

He added, "I'm currently reading Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*. Barbara Kingsolver is a must-read for me because I adore the way she writes. I'll read anything Andy Weir writes the second it is available. I'm not going to criticize other writers by name here, but I've had plenty of experiences where I like a novel enough to finish it and feel that it was a nice way to pass the time. But I don't feel any need to read another book by any of those writers. If you aren't concerned with how well your books are written, there's a greatly increased chance that your readers will ultimately replace you with someone who satisfies them more or at the very least buy less of your output in the future."

Whether or not we in the indie community want to recognize it, there is a not-so-silent perception in the greater publishing world that self-publishing has been largely responsible for the erosion of the well-written novel. With the removal of the gatekeepers, some posit, it is possible that the only factor preventing a book from succeeding is not its literary value but its promotion budget—and perhaps the marketing prowess of its author. So how has the rise of indie publishing affected authors' understanding of the value of craft?

Aronica noted, "There are great indie books coming out all the time. Remember what I said about Andy Weir? He started indie. However, I think there are two forces working against indie writers valuing craft as much as they should. One is that the lack of barriers to entry means that writers don't need to hone their craft nearly as much as they would if they were first competing for an agent's attention and then for a publisher's attention. Years ago, I rewrote the opening

scene of one of my novels more than a dozen times because my agent felt it wasn't delivering the emotional punch it needed to deliver (and he was right). If I were starting out now, I probably would have just gone with the first version I wrote because I thought it was pretty good, and I wouldn't have an agent imploring me to rewrite or a publisher doing the same. The other is that indie publishing places productivity demands on writers that prevent them from making honing craft the highest priority. It's difficult to worry over making a particular scene blow readers away when you need to get a new book out every six weeks."

How do you think the overall shift away from authors focusing on creating well-written books has affected readers and what they expect and/or value in books?

If this is true—and I agree with Lou's assessment—then one possible takeaway is that by removing publishing's traditional sentries (agents, editors, and publishers), we've eliminated the pressure to focus on writing the best book we can *and* we've created a new pressure to produce more books more frequently. In this new world, then, the only gatekeepers are really the readers themselves ... which raises a new question: does a decline in the quality of books in turn create a readership that comes to settle for a less-than perfect read?

"I'm going to come at this question a little differently," Aronica began. "My personal feeling is that books that minimize craft ultimately fail to delight readers, and that readers who get a steady diet of those books will ultimately read less. But I have no data to back that up and no idea how to even seek the data to support or refute that personal feeling. However, I do have data that strongly supports the love that readers have for well-crafted books. I recently wrote a piece about the flaw in the notion of dumbing down to gain an audience. The piece wasn't focused exclusively on books, but in seeking support for my position, one of the places I turned to was that week's BookScan chart. It just happened to be the chart released during the week that I was writing the post; I didn't search around for the optimal sample. Of the top 10 books on the hardcover fiction chart that week, seven would be described as literary fiction. Two others were ambitious works of commercial fiction. (We can argue the labels I'm applying here, but all nine of the books were extremely well-crafted novels.) The other was the latest title in a very long-running suspense series. So, even if we assume that the author of the suspense series had started to mail it in—and that might not be the case at all—90% of the BookScan top 10 that randomly chosen week were novels that prioritized craft. Books selling hundreds of thousands or even millions of copies in hardcover. I think that speaks volumes to the value that readers put on craft."

If, then, readers are ultimately our new gatekeepers, it is incumbent on us to give as much time and energy to developing and improving how we write as we do to, say, learning Facebook ads or the latest trends in newsletters. It also means that we may have to do something drastic like slow down, re-examine our processes, and consider making radical changes.

How does all of this relate to smart marketing? We'll delve into that soon, but for now, think about how passionately you rave about a book you've read—a really fabulous, couldn't-put-it-down story. Picture your readers bubbling over with the same enthusiasm for your books.

Isn't that what we all want?

Tawdra Kandle is the 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 a snarky cat.

Lou Aronica, who contributed his thoughts to this month's column, is a past NINC president who has spent several decades working for major book publishers, including gigs as Deputy Publisher of Bantam Books (where he was the founder of the Bantam Spectra Imprint) and Publisher of Berkley Books and Avon Books. His first novel, *The Forever Year*, was published in 2004. Additionally, Aronica has authored a number of non-fiction titles. More recently, he launched the independent fiction house *The Story Plant*, which has grown into a multimedia operation working in books, film, and theatre. Aronica is a winner of the World Fantasy Award for Best Editor.

The Mad Scribbler

A Five-Minute Wreck

By Laura Resnick



“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”

—Warren Buffet

I recently received a message from a friend wondering if a writer by the name of J.D. Barker had asked me to provide him with photos of myself posing nude with a copy of his book.

Um, no.

Definitely not. Although absent-minded, I’m sure I would remember being asked to pose nude.

I also can’t imagine why anyone would make such a request. Even at my best—which definitely means being fully clothed—my image isn’t a marketing tool that will sell anyone’s book.

My friend said she brought it up because she’d noticed that Barker and I are Facebook friends, and she suggested I might want to unfriend him immediately.

Like many writers, I have enough Facebook friends to populate a sinister village in a Stephen King novel. I don’t know the vast majority of them, don’t even recognize their names—and, indeed, I didn’t recognize Barker’s name.

Curious about my friend’s comment, I looked up Barker on Facebook and saw, yes, he was one of my gazillion friends there. I thought his self-description was amusing: “Full-time writer, part-time assassin (more of a hobby really).” His posts struck me as standard stuff for a professional writer. He promoted his books, offered up good wishes for the holidays, recommended books and movies he liked, posted a little about his writing routine, office space, and travels, and so on.

Seeing nothing there that explained my friend's message, I googled him. Barker is a prolific bestselling writer of supernatural and suspense fiction, his work has received awards and nominations, and screen adaptations of some of his books are in development.

He's also just been dropped by both his literary agency and his publicist in the wake of a BookTok scandal.

Oops.

What happened is clear. How it happened is a bit murky.

BookTok is a huge community of readers and writers on TikTok. As I've learned in sessions at NINC conferences, BookTok is hugely influential and has the potential for creating enormous sales growth. BookTok influencers have such a broad reach that some of them can earn money by promoting books for a negotiated fee.

In late January, many BookTok influencers received an email from a PR firm called Best of BookTok promoting Barker's upcoming novel, a "sexually charged dark thriller." The [email](#) which stated that Barker is one of the co-founders of Best of BookTok, invited the influencers to request a copy of the novel with a view to promoting it in a BookTok video. It also provided a pay scale. An influencer with 3,000-5,000 followers would earn \$100, someone with 100,000-150,000 followers would earn \$1,200, and so on.

To participate, an influencer had to present their video to Barker for approval. He would watch and evaluate each video, and he'd either approve it for payment, or he'd offer suggestions for making improvements.

The email went on to propose a few ideas or prompts which the recipients could use in their videos or "come up with something on your own."

These prompts led to a backlash big enough to attract the attention of NBC News, *The Washington Post*, *Publishers Weekly*, and other news media, as numerous influencers denounced the proposal as "predatory," "creepy," "gross," "disgusting," and "demeaning."

One of the suggestions was to have "a camera pan up or down the body using only the book to cover up your naughty bits." While the prompt doesn't specify nudity, many people interpreted it as asking influencers to pose nude, since "only the book" would provide concealment.

Another prompt suggested asking, "Where is the most taboo place you've ever had sex?" and showing a quick flash of the influencer's "taboo place."

BookToker Sian Harper, who equated the email to sexual harassment, told the *Washington Post* that based on community chat, she and others estimate the email was sent to hundreds of people. And multiple recipients [assert](#) that this email targeted young female influencers.

Today.com [reported](#), "One BookToker summarized the prompts and the payment scale as follows: 'It blows my mind that they're offering to pay BookTok creators for sexual content.'"

[Thebookthief28](#) posted, "Waking up to an email from an author/pr firm that is asking multiple women on BookTok to put our bodies out there for a book and use our bodies for profit."

Recipient Marissa Bologna [said](#), "This just makes me so uncomfortable and just feels so creepy and predatory to me."

Many of the influencers also found it unseemly that the stated plan was for Barker to personally assess these videos he was requesting they make with sexual content.

Amy May, who has 66,000 followers, posted a [video](#) advising writers and marketing companies who contact influencers to promote their books, “Don’t do what this guy did. Just don’t.” May also asked, “How does [Barker] know that he’s emailing someone of age?” Most BookTokers don’t post their ages on their profile, and there are influencers who are legally minors.

BookToker Liz Zarb [expressed concern](#) that there was “nothing in the email about age” or limiting it to people over 18. “I know how easy it is if you’re younger to think, ‘If I do this, this will be my big break.’ There being absolutely no age verification ... it got very scary.”

Several of the influencers clarified that if someone posts sexual content of herself as a choice, because she wants to, they don’t judge that. But this email proposal wasn’t about a woman’s self-expression, it was about exploiting women for a male author’s benefit.

Two days after that proposal was sent, Barker emailed [an apology](#) to everyone who had received it. He stated that he had not issued or approved the proposal: “It was sent by one of the many PR firms I hired to promote my latest title.”

This assertion caused skeptical reactions on BookTok because the first email said Barker is a co-founder of Best of BookTok; but now Barker was describing the firm as “one of many” that he “hired.”

He stated that someone else had edited the proposal in a way he would not have approved if he had seen it, because it included “these racier suggestions while editing out the others.”

This explanation also sparked negative reactions on BookTok, where perturbed influencers perceived Barker as trying to evade responsibility.

One day after Barker sent that apology, *Publishers Weekly* [reported](#) that his literary agent at Writers House had just dropped him, telling PW, “I no longer represent J.D. Barker and am upset and saddened by what has transpired.”

That same day, Kaye Publicity, the PR firm that was doing some publicity for the book in question, [stated](#), “We did not have any knowledge that this email [proposal] was being sent out, and as soon as we became aware, we severed ties with J.D. Barker.”

Barker also issued another apology: “I’m horrified such a message was released ... I deeply regret the hurt I’ve caused to those who received it. I have nothing but respect for the writing community and the people who champion it and I’ve let all of you down.” The full text is [here](#).

Looking at Barker’s website, my impression is that he has a very successful career, one that seems likely to survive this trainwreck.

But a writer’s name is their brand, and one mistake has damaged this writer’s brand across a swathe of influencers—people whose videos condemning Barker have been viewed by hundreds of thousands of readers. (Ex. NBC reported on Jan. 27 that just *one* of the many BookTok videos about this mess had already been viewed 268,000 times.)

Barker stated the proposal wasn’t supposed to go out without a substantial rewrite, that it was sent in error. In my opinion, such an explanation is entirely credible. I shudder at the memory of certain emails I sent by mistake. I know an audio narrator who recently narrated an

entire book a second time because the author had sent her the wrong manuscript the first time. I've received checks and contracts meant for other people.

However, Barker's clean-up attempt is, well, clumsy. For example, in the apology he emailed to influencers, he said Best of BookTok was an "outside firm." But in the apology he issued a day later, reported in PW and the *Washington Post*, he wrote that he owns Best of BookTok.

That kind of inconsistency makes it reasonable for people to question whether he *really* didn't approve the proposal that was sent out.

Either way, whether Barker's account is 100% accurate or whether it's fudged, the proposal was ill-judged. It has cost Barker his agent and his publicist. Simon & Schuster, which distributes his books, has issued a statement criticizing him, though they apparently don't plan to drop him too. And he has taken a beating on BookTok, where he had hoped to generate sales and brand-building.

It's a reminder of how important it is to be conscious, in all decisions we make, of how easy it is to damage the name it takes so much effort to build.

Novelist Laura Resnick has made her fair share of really dumb mistakes.

NINC Member Discounts

AuthorBuzz and Book Brush

By Abigail Drake

This month we have two featured discounts! The first is from **AuthorBuzz**.

No one can buy a book if they haven't heard of it, and that's where [AuthorBuzz](#) and [KidsBuzz](#) come in. They put authors directly in touch with readers, reading groups, booksellers, librarians, reviewers, and bloggers. They offer exclusive marketing packages with successful online publications including Goodreads, Bookmovement.com, Shelf-Awareness.com, DearReader.com, BookTrib.com, BookBrowse.com, BookBub, and many more.

AuthorBuzz has unlimited packages with differing pricing to choose from, and they are offering NINC members a **very generous \$50 discount**.

The second discount is from **Book Brush**.

[Book Brush](#) is the easiest way for authors to create their own professional-looking ads, social media posts, book trailers, book covers, and so much more. With an upgraded account, you can have access to even more features like instant mockups, the Reader Hub, animations, and unlimited downloads. Try it now and you'll see why authors say Book Brush saves them both time and money ... and makes book marketing fun.

To find out how to get your **20% off the lifetime discount** on Book Brush, and your \$50 discount on AuthorBuzz, check out the Member 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):

- [Ninlink, email list for all NINC members](#)
- [NINC Facebook group](#)
- [Follow NINC on Twitter](#)
- NINC on [Clubhouse](#): Novelists, Inc. Virtual Tiki Bar
- [NINK Critique](#)/brainstorming group
- [Traditionally published authors](#)
- [Swords & Ray Guns](#): SF/F & speculative fiction writers
- [Authors of thriller/crime/suspense](#)
- [Cover Creators](#): Discuss creating book covers

Conference:

[Conference information](#)

Newsletter

- [Propose an article](#)
- [Submit a letter to the editor](#)
- [Newsletter archives](#)

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

- [Legal Fund](#)
- [Sample Letters](#)
- [Articles & Links](#)

Member discounts

NINC members are eligible for certain professional discounts. A complete listing of these can be found at [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: [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

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

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2024 Committees

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

- Central Coordinator: Laura Resnick
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 - Assistant Hotel Liaison/ App Coordinator: Laura Hayden
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- 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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