

SPRING 2023



The Quarterly Magazine of the Women's Fiction Writers Association

WRITEON!

**Happy Anniversary,
WFWA!**

10 years

**of advice,
struggles,
triumphs,
setbacks,
technology,
creativity,
and friendship.**

SPRING 2023

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10 years



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Check out our calendar of events, workshops, and webinar information on our website.

ABOUT THE WFWA

We began this organization in 2013 with the idea to create a safe, nurturing place for writers of women's fiction. The publishing industry is morphing—with new opportunities and, as yet, unknown futures. The founders of the Women's Fiction Writers Association wanted somewhere to amass and disseminate information to and about our chosen genre.

Defining women's fiction has proven as subjective as the types of books we read. For that reason, our guiding statement is broad and comprehensive: Stories that are driven by the main character's emotional journey. Our stories may have romance. Or they may not. They could be contemporary. Or historical. But what binds us together is the focus on a main character's emotional journey.

 facebook.com/WFWritersAssociation  twitter.com/WF_Writers

 instagram.com/womensfictionwriters/

Join the closed WFWA Facebook group by sending an email to: membership@womensfictionwriters.org

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www.womensfictionwriters.org

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IF YOU LIKE WHAT YOU'VE READ ...

Send us a letter! We'd love to hear your feedback and reactions on the stories and features. Email them to writeon@womensfictionwriters.org. Submitted letters are considered for publication and may be edited for clarity or space.

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Hello, 2023. And what an incredible year we have ahead of us. The arrival of a new year is a time to celebrate new beginnings, new opportunities, and new possibilities. It's also an excellent time to reflect on our past accomplishments, of which we have many. For the Women's Fiction Writers Association, this year has special meaning because we celebrate our 10th anniversary.

Over the past decade, WFWA has grown and evolved in the most remarkable ways. We have expanded our workshops from one a quarter to almost one every month. We've increased our retreats to two yearly to allow more members to attend. We offer additional services, like critiques, mentoring, pitch events, daily writing dates, and webinars. We have improved our scholarships both in terms of number offered and dollar amount provided. Our *WriteOn!* magazine is world-class and chock full of tips and writing information. We are reaching more women's fiction writers, as shown by our growing membership. We continue to explore ways to help our members learn their craft, manage their writing careers, and find their readers.

WFWA owes its achievements to the crucial role of its volunteers. Your dedication, hard work, and selflessness have been instrumental in helping us achieve this level of success. Your willingness to give your time and energy to help other writers is invaluable. We could not have reached this milestone without you. Your generosity and commitment to WFWA is inspiring.

Celebrating ten years of our organization is a chance to reflect on how far we have come and chart a path for the next ten years. I'm excited about the board's initiatives to serve all our members better. This year brings renewed excitement and energy.

I'm looking forward to new opportunities as WFWA continues to grow and evolve.

Jacki



CELEBRATING TEN YEARS OF OUR ORGANIZATION IS A CHANCE TO REFLECT ON HOW FAR WE HAVE COME AND CHART A PATH FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS.



Let's Celebrate!

Welcome to the winter issue of *WriteOn!* Pardon the cliché, but I am over the moon to be serving as the magazine's new executive editor. This year, the *WriteOn!* theme is "celebration" as WFWA marks its 10th anniversary. Our pages will be full of celebrating the writing process, our vibrant community, our stories, and the writing journey.

This issue highlights the process of writing. It's not always easy. How do you handle critiques, the inevitable rejection of being a writer, and where do you turn for that extra help? I hope you find answers and more this month.

A big welcome to the newest *WriteOn!* team members: Jen Craven, copyeditor; Lorraine Norwood and Kathi Jenkins,

proofreaders. In this issue, you can look forward to more motivation from our Guiding Scribe, Camille Pagán, as well as insightful articles from Brooke Williams. I hope you also enjoy the stunning design from Art Director, Sheri Taylor-Emery, recipient of my only 2022 Volunteer Recognition Award (because she's amazing!).

The talented Kay Arthur has stepped down from the *WriteOn!* masthead. Over four years, she and I created a magazine we hope is worthy of this organization and all that it stands for, community and craft. I will miss her counsel.

Now it's time to hear from you. Have an idea for *WriteOn!* or want to contribute? Email me: writeon@womensfictionwriters.org

WELCOME TO “SPOTLIGHT ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION”
THE D&I COMMITTEE INVITES OUR GENERAL MEMBERSHIP TO SHARE STORIES THAT IMPACT
THEM IN THE AREA OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION. WE WANT TO HEAR ALL VOICES.
PLEASE SEND YOUR SUBMISSION TO DI@WOMENSFICIONWRITERS.ORG

Go Humbly, Diligently, and Respectfully Towards Incorporating Diversity in Your Writing

By Lisa Montanaro

As a long-time nonfiction writer, the concept of a critique partner was new to me when I found my way to writing fiction six years ago. I learned about the importance of having someone to brainstorm story ideas, swap manuscripts, keep each other accountable, celebrate the milestones, and console each other when setbacks occurred. I was lucky to find my critique partner, Ann Bremer, at the WFWA retreat in Albuquerque, New Mexico in September 2017. Essentially, we serve as alpha readers for each other. However, when it comes to our similar identities and backgrounds, we know it is important to seek diverse feedback from outside our critique partnership.

Enter the role of beta readers. Beta readers serve an important function for a fiction writer, especially if you write characters with identities different than yours. Writers have a responsibility to be sensitive to creating art outside their own personal experiences and to do it with deep respect—in a way that bridges differences and doesn't promote harm or result in cultural appropriation. One of the most common mistakes when writing diverse characters is approaching it as an afterthought. For writers who care deeply about diversity and inclusion, writing responsibly requires due diligence and deep reflection.

So, what's a responsible author to do? Here are some strategies.

- Read fiction and nonfiction works by diverse authors with identities, experiences, and backgrounds different than yours, and with characters who reflect that diversity. Also, pay attention to authors who write across difference well, depicting fully fleshed out characters, and not falling into harmful tropes and stereotypes.

- Conduct research on the identities, experiences, and backgrounds of the characters, cultures, and worlds you're writing about.



- Learn how to write across differences responsibly. Many options are available, including WFWA webinars and workshops, programming offered through other writer organizations and conferences such as Writing the Other; writingtheother.com, and Facebook groups such as Writers for Diversity.

- Make sure some of your beta readers have different identities, backgrounds, or lived experiences different than your own, and preferably in alignment with your book's characters. Consider seeking the assistance of paid sensitivity readers who specialize in giving feedback for specific identities, backgrounds, or experiences.

For an insightful take on a critique partnership between two authors of different races, I encourage you to read this article by author Nancy Johnson about her partnership with author Erin Bartels. <https://writerunboxed.com/2018/12/04/critiquing-across-the-color-line/>.

When approaching diversity in writing, I leave you with the wise words of John Coltrane: “*When there is something you do not understand, you must go humbly to it.*”

Lisa Montanaro is the WFWA Webinar Program Leader & Host, and a member of the WFWA Diversity & Inclusion Committee. Interested in joining the DI Committee? Contact DI@womensfictionwriters.org.

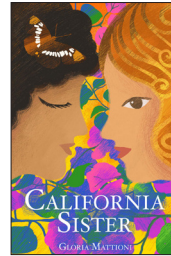
MEMBER RELEASES



LIZ ALTERMAN
The Perfect Neighborhood
7/12/2022



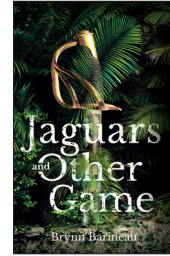
JUDITH TURNER-YAMAMOTO
Loving the Dead and Gone
9/6/2022



GLORIA MATTIONI
California Sister
9/15/2022



KAREN HEENAN
Coming Apart
10/18/2022



BRYNN BARINEAU
Jaguars and Other Game
11/22/2022



JOY ROSS DAVIS
The Hit Man's Wife
11/22/2022



KAREN MARTIN
The Bringer of Happiness
11/25/2022



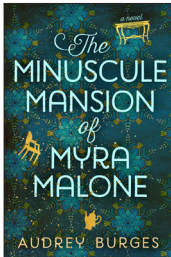
KAREN WINTERS SCHWARTZ
The Vast Clear Blue
1/10/2023



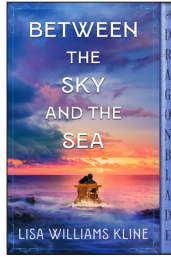
BARBARA BOEHM MILLER
When You See Her
1/24/2023



TERI M BROWN
An Enemy Like Me
1/24/2023



AUDREY BURGESS
The Minuscule Mansion of Myra Malone
1/24/2023



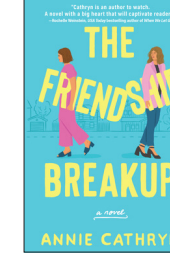
LISA WILLIAMS KLINE
Between the Sky and the Sea
2/1/2023



JES SMYTH
Time for Once
2/3/2023



DANA SCHWARTZ
The Weight of Flowers
2/6/2023



ANNIE CATHRYN
The Friendship Breakup
2/7/2023

SHOOT AND SHARE CONTEST: WRITERS AND THEIR JOURNALS

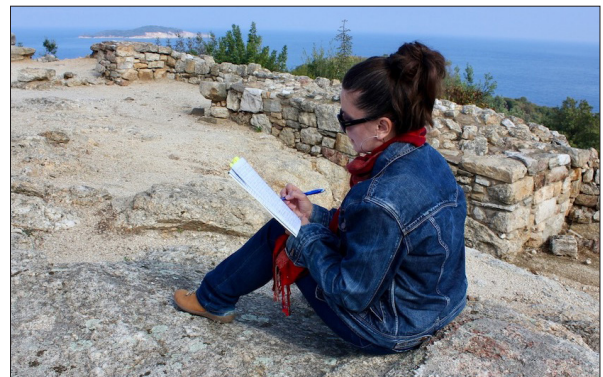
Is there anything better than a new journal? This issue, members show off their favorites. The random winner of a \$25 book gift card is Tracy MacDonald.



Marissa McFarland



Tracy MacDonald



Layne Mosler

SAVE THE DATE WFWA TAKES CHICAGO!

It's a special year, and that calls for a special bash! To mark a decade of connecting authors around the world, WFWA members are invited to convene in Chicago for a conference to celebrate the heart of what makes our organization so great: community, a dedication to craft, and stories and voices that inspire.

What makes this year different from retreats in the past? For one, the 2023 gathering will have more of a conference feel, with industry networking, opportunities to connect, and practical takeaways to bring home. We're excited to make this year bigger and better than ever before—and hope you'll feel the same.

Here's a sneak peek at a few things you can expect at the conference:

WFWA alum and bestselling author Nancy Johnson will kick off

WFWA CHICAGO
CELEBRATE.
CREATE.
CONNECT.

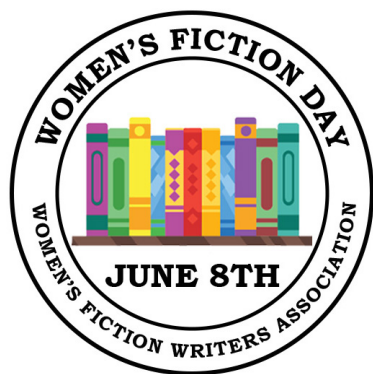


three days of workshops and panels discussing the craft and business of writing. Top literary agents will be on site taking pitches, and master classes from bestselling authors like Courtney Maum will present on revision, pacing, and the business side of writing. We'll wrap up the gathering with a discussion on the future of our genre—something that's been top of mind and a critical part of growing and evolving.

Get ready for four days of creative inspiration and fun. Whether you've been with WFWA from the beginning or you're new to the association, join us at the Fairmont Millennium Park in Chicago September 20-23, 2023. From the multi-published author to the newbie just getting started, there will be something for everyone at this celebration of our community!

So, save the date and keep an eye out for registration.

JUNE 8TH IS WOMEN'S FICTION DAY. START PLANNING TODAY!



WWW.WOMENSFICIONWRITERS.ORG

Women's Fiction Day is WFWA's celebration of Women's Fiction books and our authors. This is your chance, whether you are published or not, to promote your titles, celebrate and support your author friends, and build your own platform.

Calling all podcasters, bloggers, vloggers, Tik Tok users, Tweeters, Instagrammers, Facebook pros, and anyone with an author website. You can join our week of promotional events.

First stop is the WFWA website where you'll find resources, graphics, and schedules under the Programs tab. Check back often as the Women's Fiction Day team is updating materials. Watch the weekly newsletter for updates.

As a WFWA member, you can

use our collective voice and social media might to promote your books and your platform. Members report increased sales in current and backlisted books, newsletter sign-ups, and higher engagement on their social media accounts.

Women's Fiction Day is a great opportunity to connect with writers in your local area for book talks and signings. Connect across the globe through online interviews. Simply liking and sharing book reviews and images benefits everyone.

This high energy event has something for everyone: sales, exposure, community, and it's easy and fun.

Questions, ideas to share, skills to offer? Contact Julia Daily at julia@juliadaily.com

ARE BETA READERS WORTH IT?

THE SIMPLE ANSWER: YES



By Monica Cox

Beta readers are an important part of a writer's revision process. After we draft and revise a manuscript, our characters and story worlds become a part of us. As a result, it can be difficult to recognize when important elements haven't made it onto the page for the reader. Here is where a beta reader—an early reader acting as a stand-in for your eventual target reader—can help.

Despite the number of people in your book club or social circle offering to read your manuscript, be selective when choosing beta readers. You want actionable feedback. For instance, your mom might be an avid reader, but she's going to tell you everything you do is wonderful. If you want an ego boost, send your manuscript to her. But if you want constructive criticism to improve your craft, you must be more discerning.

Other writers make great beta readers and here at WFWA you are in the perfect position to find betas. Offer a manuscript swap in a critique group or follow-up with a workshop member who responded well to your story. You can also ask around in other writing groups or approach your local librarian—they may have recommendations or staff members versed in your genre willing to read and give feedback. There are also beta reading services where you can pay to have your manuscript read and receive a compiled feedback report.

To make the most of your beta read, ask your readers specific questions about areas of concern in your manuscript (you know what they are). Some sample questions to ask your beta readers include:

- When did you put the book down?
- Was the climax inevitable?
- Is character X believable?
- Does the story fulfill the promise of its premise?
- Are the stakes clear?
- Where were you confused?
- When did you feel the pace lagging?

Two beta readers are good, three are better so you can break any ties. Two writer friends beta read a recent manuscript of mine and both circled the same paragraph. One loved it. One hated it. Another example of how reading is subjective!

Once you receive your beta reader feedback, look for patterns. You don't have to, and probably shouldn't, make every change they suggest, but you should look hard wherever they are pointing out a similar issue or passage. Be open to their feedback. Read all the comments, put them away, then return a few days later. Once you have a chance to digest the feedback, use their responses to make your story, and ultimately your craft, stronger.

We all want beta readers to tell us our manuscripts are perfect, ready to pitch or send to our agents, but use this opportunity for a fair read by your ideal reader. We want to send our best work into the world, and beta readers help us do that.

CONFESSIONS OF A PROFESSIONAL BETA READER

The flip side of working with free beta readers is to hire a professional beta reading service. I beta read women's and historical fiction for The Spun Yarn until 2022. The Spun Yarn provides three anonymous readers per manuscript who read your entire work (pricing is based on word count) and answer questions at the quarter, halfway, three-quarter and end points. Authors also submit specific questions they would like answered. A compiled report is provided to the author summarizing all reader's feedback. I loved the service so much, I have also used Spun Yarn for feedback on my own manuscript.

FEATURE

As a reader and a user, here are a few things to consider about The Spun Yarn and other professional services.

Pros:

- The questions asked are specific and consistent throughout the manuscript for each reader
- The quantitative craft ranking highlights a writer's strengths as well as areas to focus on for improvement. As a writer, it's helpful to know what you're doing right instead of only what you need to change
- The readers are anonymous and therefore not worried about any personal relationship with the author
- The format is designed to be kind and constructive
- The reports are detailed and easy to read

Cons:

- There is a limited amount of space to answer a question—if I wanted to include more examples or go more in-depth, there wasn't always room
- Scoring multi-POV stories when one perspective may be stronger than another can be challenging. If your story has multiple points-of-view, I'd recommend using one of your author questions to address it. Author questions get longer answers in the final report



- Because the readers are anonymous, there is little context for some of their feedback. All readers are vetted, so they are all qualified, but knowing a bit about their background could be helpful to interpreting some of their responses or reactions to your story (Tip: You can ask for specific kinds of readers so if you specifically want moms of teens or business owners of color, for example, ask at the start)

■ It costs money, which may be prohibitive to some writers. It's a competitive rate for the quality of feedback you receive, but you'll need to consider your individual budget

Beta Reading Services:

- **The Spun Yarn** <https://thespunyarn.com/>
- **Independent Book Review** <https://independentbookreview.com/group-beta-reading/> Can choose 3 or 5 betas for flat rates
- **The Good Book Collective** <https://www.goodbookcollective.com/writers> Offers feedback on more than just your manuscript pages
- **Freelancers** Hire individual beta readers through freelance services like Upwork, Reedsy, or Fiverr
- **Google Search** Several book coaches and other writing support services offer beta reads. A quick Google search for "Professional Beta Reading" will bring up several options for you to choose from. Be sure to vet any service you entrust your writing to



Good Book Collective

READERS AND WRITERS PRODUCING BETTER BOOKS

BEYOND THE BETA

If you've tried the traditional beta reading route of asking for overall comments, incorporated those edits, and feel you have a polished manuscript but want another round of targeted feedback, a service such as the Good Book Collective may suit your needs.

The organization works with new and experienced writers—indie and traditional—with a focus on women's fiction. The program is not a beta-reading or critique partner service. The service provides targeted feedback on story ideas, readability, marketing, and design. Depending on your goals, it could serve as a next step before indie publishing or before submitting an agent query or manuscript.

Through the program, writers can opt for a variety of targeted reviews:

- Opening hooks
- Cover designs
- First pages
- Marketing blurbs and essential first five pages
- Step-by-step manuscript reviews

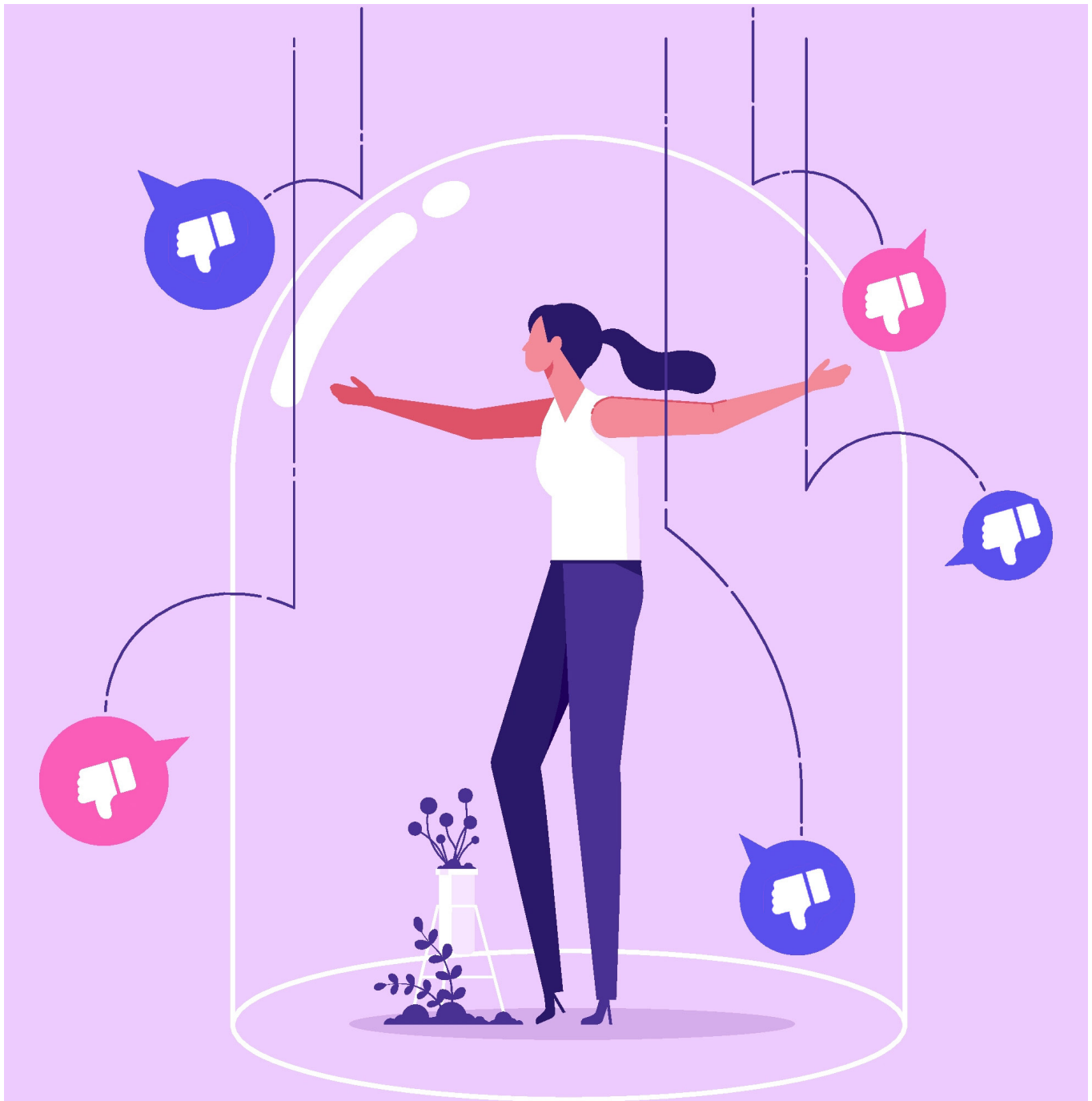
This unique review process allows writers to improve their specific manuscript weak spots. The program works by pairing experienced readers with writers.

While open to all writers, the collective is helpful to indie authors as it flips the traditional evaluation process of literary agents and industry professionals to readers. The platform also provides authors with a network of potential customers and a wide array of promotional opportunities.

More information is available at www.GoodBookCollective.com.



Monica Cox is a writer and book coach whose goal is to give writers the encouragement, feedback, and tools they need to keep writing and finish their manuscripts. Learn more about Monica at monicacox.net.



STAY CONFIDENT IN THE FACE OF CRITICISM

I'll never forget my first devastating review. There was "nothing redeemable" about my story, claimed the reader. In fact, she wanted *everyone* to be aware that I had no business publishing a book. How do I know? She posted on more than a dozen blogs, social media outlets, and trade publications that covered my debut. Every time my publicist sent me a new link, there was a comment from Lydia, the PhD candidate who'd made it her business to inform the world that Camille Pagán couldn't write to save her life.

GUIDING SCRIBE

Even then, it was obvious that this individual was unhinged. But nine more books and more than a decade later, the memory still stings. Why? Because as humans, one of our essential needs is safety—and criticism often feels unsafe. And if you, like me, have experienced trauma or grapple with anxiety and/or depression, unkind remarks can be particularly triggering. (Therapy can be extremely helpful on that front.) Logically, we know words can't hurt us.

Emotionally?

That's a whole other story.

Too often, writers try to stay "safe" by avoiding criticism. And we do that by not publishing or promoting our work. Fortunately, criticism doesn't have to keep you small or derail your writing dreams.

FILTER YOUR FEEDBACK

I routinely hear authors say, "If I accept the positive feedback, I have to accept the negative, too." To which I say: nope! I suggest ignoring most negative feedback. Why? Whether a beta reader who "didn't connect" with the protagonist you adore or the reader on Goodreads who loathes your novel, odds are that person just isn't your ideal reader. They probably won't borrow or buy another one of your books, and they certainly won't become a fan. And that's totally fine.

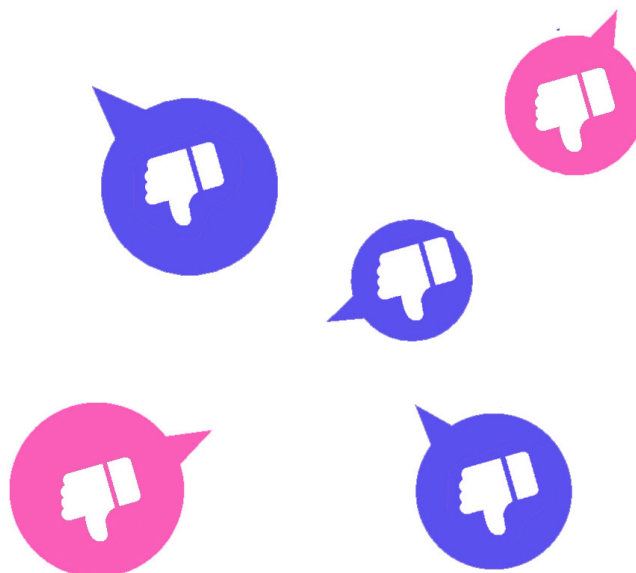
But—and this is key—you don't want their feedback to influence how you craft future stories. Your *ideal* audience is who you should be writing for (after yourself, that is; always write the book you'd want to read). You get to disregard feedback that's unsolicited, unkind, or simply doesn't resonate.

TRUST YOUR TEAM—BUT TRUST YOURSELF MORE

Of course, some negative feedback is useful. That's why we work with editors and others, such as critique partners. For example, I have an early reader team of about 50 dedicated, longtime readers. I truly consider what they say in their emails and reviews—because *they're* who I'm writing for.

Even so, trusting someone doesn't mean accepting each of their suggestions. I routinely disagree with some things my developmental editors say. Earlier in my career, I thought I had to accept their ideas anyway. The result? Those novels felt the least "me" and I struggled to promote them.

The longer you write, the easier it becomes to trust yourself. That's crucial. Self-trust creates confidence, even in the face of criticism. But if you're at the beginning of your career, you still can and should use your gut as your guide. One question that never fails me is: *If nothing were wrong and I wouldn't offend anyone [i.e., the editor], what choice would I make?* Ask yourself this same thing—then answer honestly. Your writerly intuition will steer you in the right direction every time.



BESTSELLING BOUNDARIES

You can't avoid all criticism, but you can feel safer by setting boundaries. A boundary isn't a warning—you don't have to share it with others. It's simply what you will do for yourself if someone crosses a line. Here are three boundaries that will serve you at every stage of your author career:

■ **SHUT DOWN UNSOLICITED ADVICE.** When someone tries to tell me how to improve my writing, I smile, tell them I trust my publishing team, and change the subject. If they push, I exit the conversation. You wouldn't let a chef cut your hair because they think you'd look better with bangs. So, don't let random people tell you how to write.

■ **AVOID THINGS THAT MAKE YOU FEEL LOUSY.** I'm incredibly grateful for Amazon and Goodreads reviews, as they help readers discover my books. But I don't read them. Although the good reviews outnumber the bad, the stinkers leave me feeling depleted and defeated for longer than I'd like. And I don't know about you, but I'd rather use my time and energy to write.

■ **MAKE MEANIES DISAPPEAR.** Yes, everyone's welcome to their opinion. That doesn't mean they're welcome to make sure you're aware of it. Protect your digital domain—and more importantly, your mental health—by muting or blocking people who tag you in negative or personal reviews on social media.

Camille Pagán is the #1 Amazon Charts and *Washington Post* bestselling author of 10 books, including her latest, *Good for You*. A master certified coach, she's also the founder of Even Better Co. and the host of the *You Should Write a Book* podcast. She is the WFWA Guiding Scribe through 2023.

WORKING WITH A DEVELOPMENTAL EDITOR: WHY YOU SHOULD AND HOW TO FIND ONE



By Brooke Williams

Once you've completed a draft or two of your novel (yay!), you might be tempted to hit "publish" or blast out a bunch of query letters. But first, eager writer, there's an important step to consider: developmental editing. This is a structural edit that looks at your story from a birds-eye view to pinpoint its strengths and weaknesses.

A developmental editor will focus on overall plot and character development and provide overarching feedback on major story elements like plot, character, tone, pacing, structure and POV. These editors are trained to catch common mistakes and oversights, and have a keen eye for effective storytelling, which means they're different than simply having your English teacher cousin give the manuscript a read (Sorry, cousins, we love you but you're not the most objective readers of our work!). Ready to hire a developmental editor? Great! But...how do you find one? And what's it going to cost you?

First, realize that outside editing isn't cheap. A good developmental editor with experience and testimonials from clients can cost upwards of \$2,000 for a typical 80K-word novel. They typically charge per word and will range based on skill level and experience. This may seem steep, but working with a professional book editor can elevate your manuscript regardless of what publishing path you plan to take.

So, where can you find a qualified developmental editor? Here's a few places to try:

- 1 The WFWA Community!** Where better to find services and recommendations than from people you trust? Search the WFWA member database for members who offer book editing services. Post questions in our active Facebook group, or try searching the FB group for what you're looking for to see what others have said about the topic. We are a plethora of knowledge and experience!
- 2 Chat with author friends who have used editors in the past.** Were they happy with their experience and result? Would they use them again?
- 3 Put a call out on social media** and use hashtags to search for editors. You never know who you'll come across through your followers.
- 4 Explore sites like Reedsy,** which is full of editors, proofreaders, formatters, designers and more.

When you find some editors you're interested in, request quotes and research their background. Because it is an investment, take the time to ensure the editor you choose is qualified, communicative, and has a really strong track record. Ask for references and check out other books they've edited. Many editors will offer a complimentary one-page or one-chapter edit, which can help you get a sense of their style.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR EDITOR

Hiring an editor is a business decision, and therefore it's important to ask critical questions before embarking on a business relationship. Make sure you and your editor's communication preferences match up. Are face-to-face conversations essential to you? Do you need weekly updates or are you fine to hear from them at a few key points during their edit? Also, make sure your expectations align for the editing process itself. Ask potential editors what their milestones and deliverables look like. What are the metrics for completion? Which writing/editing software do they use?

Keep in mind that many editors book a few months out, so plan accordingly. Let them know if you have a quick turnaround but understand that good editing takes time. And before you hand over your manuscript, fix your typos and grammar. Basic spelling mistakes will distract even the most focused editors, and if prospective editors discover that your manuscript is hard to read, many of them will adjust their quotes to compensate.

Ready to take your manuscript to the next level with a developmental editor? WFWA is here to help. Through the resources we provide, along with talented experts outside our membership, your book will be on its way toward publication.

IN THEIR WORDS: PENNY HAW

By Sharon Ritchy

This month, we're thrilled to feature the 2022 STAR Award Winner, Penny Haw, whose novel, *The Wilderness Between Us*, captures the heart of the human spirit through the relationship of friends in South Africa.

WO! Are you working on a new project?

Penny: I've completed two projects since *The Wilderness Between Us* was published. The *Invincible Miss Cust* (Sourcebooks Landmark, Oct. 2022) is a historical biographical fiction about Aleen Cust, the first female veterinary surgeon in Britain and Ireland who had incredible perseverance to prove her professional worth. The second in the two-book deal will release on October 3rd. *The Woman at the Wheel* is based on the true story of Bertha Benz, who was the wife of the man known as the "Father of the Automobile," Carl Benz.

WO! Where do your story ideas come from?

Penny: Many of my ideas emerge unexpectedly. The idea for *The Wilderness Between Us* came while I was on a hike with friends in the Tsitsikamma forest, which is where the book is set. One of my friends woke up with a debilitating headache and insisted we go on without her. We did so reluctantly and, as we hiked, I imagined what could go wrong. That planted seed eventually grew into *The Wilderness Between Us*.

WO! *The Wilderness Between Us* takes place on an ill-fated hike. How did you develop, use, and think about setting in this story and in your other work?



Penny: The novel is set in the Tsitsikamma, which is a magnificently wild, wooded, and mountainous area in South Africa. I wanted my characters to feel the power of nature and be reminded of how helpless we can be in the wild. The idea was to juxtapose the wilderness around them with the characters' inner worlds. I wanted the natural setting to guide my main characters back to their true selves. I love how being in nature reminds us of who we are, where we fit in the world, and what we want. I try to bring that into my writing wherever I can.

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FEATURE

WO! How did you research this story?

Penny: Aside from undertaking the hike myself, I researched the animals, birds, and plants in the area. I spoke to experts about the flora, fauna, and geography. As I clarify in my author's note, Clare's experience of anorexia is based on my own. I'm not an authority on eating disorders.

WO! As the 2022 STAR winner, this story resonated with many people. What do you think is the appeal of this story and why does it connect with readers?

Penny: My main characters, Faye and Clare are both burdened with unbearable shame. Faye has been bullied and gaslit for so long that she's forgotten herself, and Clare suffers from an agonizing eating disorder. Readers have told me they relate to how incapacitating shame can be; it's exhausting, isolating, and unnerving. The other thing that readers have told me they relate to in the book is the influence of friendship. Faye and Clare learn from one another. Some have said that book encouraged them to examine their friendships and, in some cases, reassess relationships.

WO! Women's Fiction deals with complicated relationships. What about that appeals to you as a writer?

Penny: Complicated relationships are universal. Whether familial, romantic, or platonic, they affect us all. We can relate to how difficult relationships can be, which is why we like reading about them. Writing about complicated relationships helps develop interesting characters and makes fiction relatable for readers.

WO! You chose anorexia as an issue in this story. How did that idea develop?

Penny: I was anorexic in my late teens and early twenties. Clare's experience of anorexia is based on my own. The shame I felt about my eating disorder and the pain it brought my family haunted me for years. When I began working on the book, I was also finally at a point in my life where I felt I could write about my experience.

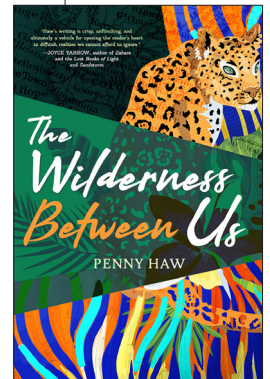
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It was an unusually warm evening for that time of the year in the mountains, which might've been an omen if anyone had thought about it. For years, the friends had discussed the ideal season to do the hike. They'd finally settled on any six days that suited everyone's diary. Even then, they hadn't all been able to make it, which was how Clare came to be there.

With supper over, she sat on the stairs of the three-walled, thatch-roofed lapa, which, typical of southern African campsites, was the hub of the overnight stop. Stacked on a high counter behind her, eight stainless steel plates glistened in time to the coals flickering weakly in the firepit. Clare's aim was to stay out of the way of her father and his friends as they went about whatever it was older people did before bed.

The stone was cool against her legs and the air lightly scented with smoke, resin and damp forest floor. Pine needles hung motionless against the barely lit sky, which was flanked by two peaks rising east and west like tall, craggy sentinels. Bar the thrumming of the nearby stream, the distant *huoo-hoo-hoo* of a wood owl and the occasional crinkle of the cooling embers, the night was quiet.

The party of eight had left the rangers' offices for Heuningbos Hut shortly after ten that morning, trudging up a gravel track onto the mountainside for a few kilometres before following the path into



WO! What is your writing process? Do you draft and edit, rewrite the first page until it's perfect, outline, etc.?

Penny: I create something of a mind map, which gives me a rough idea of the plot. Then I list the characters I imagine populating the story and make notes of their ages and important characteristics. I try to write as good a first draft as possible but do not get too hung up perfecting every sentence.

WO! I think you're our only member in South Africa. Do you work with a group of local writers? What's the literary scene in South

Africa? How has your book done there?

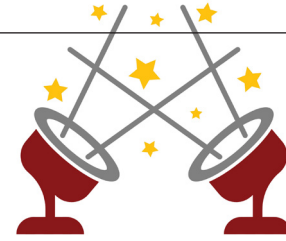
Penny: I belong to a writer's group. We've become friends and support each other throughout the writing and publishing process. South Africa has a vibrant literary scene. The book continues to sell well, especially after winning the STAR Award.

WO! When you're not writing award-winning fiction, what are your hobbies?

Penny: If I'm not at my desk, you'll find me walking my three dogs on the mountains near my home with my husband. I enjoy cooking and, of course, like most writers, I am a great reader.

Thank you very much for this opportunity!

THE MAGGIE MAGIC



Words have energy! Add images and sound and they transform into viral marketing masterpieces, promotional power, and human connections.

WFWA's magic lies with our two Maggies: Maggie Giles, social media director, and Maggie Smith, creator of the WFWA debut author podcast, *Hear Us Roar*.

MAGGIE GILES jokes that she fell into the role of WFWA social media director and that she's not allowed to ever retire. (She's not!) If you follow WFWA on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, you've seen her handiwork. Maggie manages our accounts and creates share-worthy, viral images for our programs, people, and events. If you're not familiar with these accounts, get to it and Maggie promises to follow you back. Want to experience a little bit of our power for yourself? Use the #womensfictionwritersassociation or #WFWA hashtags and watch your audience grow.

Maggie is more than a social media expert, she's also a novelist. Her debut book, *The Things We Lost* launched in 2022 from Rising Action Publishing and is now being followed by *Twisted* later this year.



Did we just say WFWA debut author? **MAGGIE SMITH** knows them all. She's the creator of the WFWA podcast *Hear US Roar*—available anywhere you find your podcasts.

Hear Us Roar first aired May 26, 2018 and was born from Maggie's idea to interview debut women's fiction writers excited to share information about their novels, along with tips on what they learned on their journey to publication.

Interviewees have ranged from authors with Big Four publishers and their imprints to those with small or university presses, hybrid publishers, and several who have gone the self-publishing route. Guests are primarily US-based but Maggie has had writers from Canada, Australia, and as far away as Indonesia.

Maggie is more than a one-woman content creator,



she's also the author of her 2022 debut, *Truth and Other Lies* which is being followed by another book still in production, currently titled *Blindspot*.

Don't these talented volunteers sound great? Good news—both of our Maggies can help you too. Share and tag our posts and podcasts. Hear Us Roar is a fantastic resource for authors, and we all need the creative power that comes from stories.

These two master storytellers prove that words can become so much more.

“I have told people that writing this book has been like brushing away dirt from a fossil. What a load of sh*t. It has been like hacking away at a freezer with a screwdriver.”

- AMY POEHLER

WRITEON!

