



WRITEON!

HOW TO WRITE INCLUSIVE STORIES

TRENDS IN WOMEN'S FICTION

IN THEIR WORDS: DENNY S. BRYCE

+ THE FIRST PAGE: LET'S FIX THIS!



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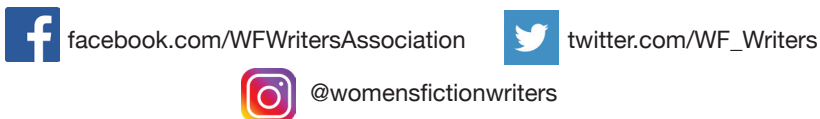


Check out our calendar of events,
workshops and webinar information
on our website.

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.



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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Kay is now retired after working 30 years in Healthcare Administration. She splits her time between Phoenix and a cabin in the mountains of Prescott, Arizona, where she loves to write, paint, and enjoy the great outdoors. Of course, spending time with her husband, two dogs, and family is the best part of her life. She is fully engrained in the writing community and has three novels in various stages of creation. Her website is www.kdarthur.com.



SHERI TAYLOR-EMERY Art Director

Sheri is an art director at a parenting publication who longs to be a novelist. She rejoices in seeing her son and daughter turn into amazing young adults, working at a dog rescue once a week, and corralling two dogs and four cats at home. She lives with her husband outside of Atlanta.



BROOKE WILLIAMS Copy Editor

Brooke is a novelist, childcare provider, fitness instructor, and Girl Scout leader. When she isn't writing or devouring stacks of good books, she's helping out at the local elementary school, working on her MFA, or haunting her favorite local taco joint. She lives in Ohio with her husband and four children.



TIFFANY YATES MARTIN Guiding Scribe

Tiffany has spent nearly 30 years as an editor in the publishing industry, working with major publishers and *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling, award-winning authors as well as indie and newer writers. She's the founder of FoxPrint Editorial, and author of the bestselling book [Intuitive Editing: A Creative and Practical Guide to Revising Your Writing](#). Under the pen name Phoebe Fox, she's written six published novels.



IF YOU LIKE WHAT YOU'VE READ IN WRITE ON! ...

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

[M]an tends most towards representation and learns his first lessons through representation.
—Aristotle, *Poetics* (trans., 1987)

I don't know about you, but this last year of isolation has left me very rusty in the socializing department. My circle of in-person contacts has shrunk down to my immediate family and neighbors—the people I see every day. So, the idea of going out in public and relating to others again as things open up is both exciting and intimidating. How have I worked to keep up my people skills?

Reading.

Several research studies have indicated that reading fiction—specifically character-driven fiction—helps shape how we relate to each other. That's because reading is an exploration of the human experience. Character-driven stories help us to better understand and share in the feelings of others. That includes those who are different from us.

Psychologists found that the act of reading promotes change in individuals, including their attitudes toward members of stigmatized groups. I still remember the Dr. Seuss book from my childhood called *The Sneetches*. It was about star-bellied versus plain-bellied Sneetches, and which ones were more superior. One day a man came along with a machine that could add or remove stars (for a fee). By the end of the book, all of the Sneetches' money was gone, and none of them knew which ones had started out with stars and which hadn't. That's when they realized what they had in common: they were all Sneetches, regardless of whether or not they had stars on their bellies. Their differences didn't make any group better or worse than the others.

Powerful stories about people and their circumstances have the potential to resonate and leave a lasting impression on readers. Isn't that our goal? As authors, we want our readers to feel what our characters do, to suffer and rejoice along with them, to empathize with their emotions and situations. As a reader, I want to feel that too.

That's why diverse stories are necessary in the world. If it wasn't for books, I would never know what challenges someone faces growing up orphaned or impoverished, or in another time, country or culture, or in a wheelchair. The magic of story allows us to understand people who are different from us, to learn how the world appears through their eyes, and how it affects them. Most importantly, these stories are reminders that every one of us experiences fear, pain and joy; that, differences aside, we are all human beings who want the same things: to be safe, to be loved, to belong.

Diverse voices are important. Through story, authors can let us inside the heads and lives of characters who are different from us, but really not different in the ways that matter. Creating empathy in readers is an author's superpower. By doing so, we can ultimately create a kinder, better world—one book and one reader at a time.

Read and Write On!

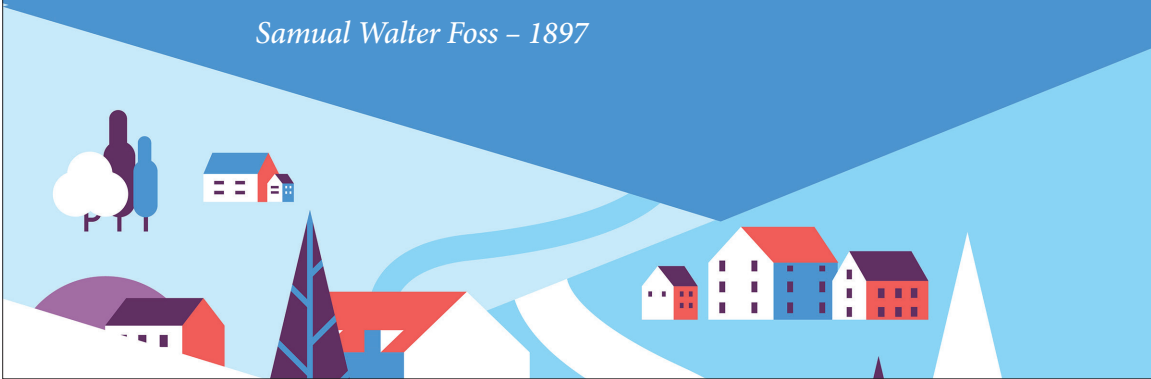
Christine Adler



**POWERFUL
STORIES ABOUT
PEOPLE AND THEIR
CIRCUMSTANCES
HAVE THE
POTENTIAL TO
RESONATE AND
LEAVE A LASTING
IMPRESSION ON
READERS. ISN'T
THAT OUR GOAL?**

Let me live in my house by the side of the road
Where the race of men go by;
They are good, they are bad, they are weak,
They are strong,
Wise, foolish – so am I.
Then why should I sit in the scorner’s seat
Or hurl the cynic’s ban? –
Let me live in my house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.

Samual Walter Foss – 1897



We, as writers, write to tell a story. We spend hours, weeks, and months developing our characters, so they come alive on the page. We want them memorable so that we can immerse our readers in their lives. Why? So they can “feel” our characters and understand their world. We want our readers to live, momentarily, in a different world so they excitedly turn the pages, love our story, empathize with our characters, and miss them when they are gone.

My new favorite reading is a blend between women’s fiction (of course!) and historical fiction. I like peering into the past to see the way people lived in times I know nothing about. So, of course, I decided to tackle a new writing project—a historical women’s fiction manuscript with a dual timeline.

But, in order to get it right, I knew I had to learn more, so I am taking a class on writing historical fiction. And the sweetest part of the internet is that the class can be located anywhere in the world. Currently my fellow classmates are from Russia, England, Germany, Ireland, Croatia, and Scotland. Not only are our time zones wildly different, but we are different people living in different worlds.

But in this class, we are simply writers. We write. We share the same goal—to become better writers and learn from each other. We are immersing ourselves in worlds far different from our own, and it is thrilling, energizing, and rewarding.

Immersion = Understanding = Empathy.

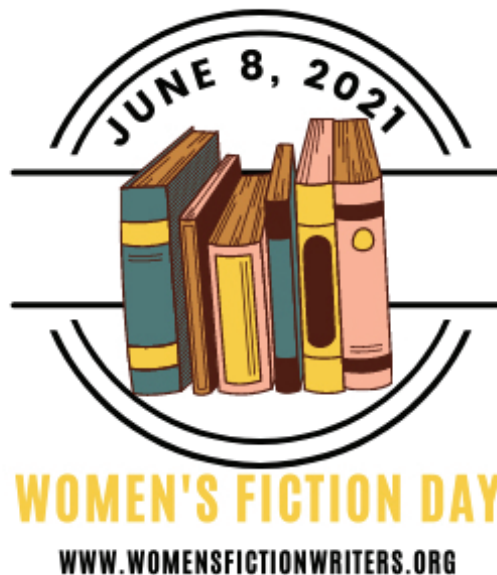
Empathy is one of the pillars of WFWA. It is the theme of this issue, and our team has worked very hard to immerse our members in a continuous state of learning. We are raising up our volunteers Jennifer and Hadley for their contribution in our awesome Pitch program. We are clapping our hands loudly for them and for Denny S. Bryce with her newly published novel *Wild Women and the Blues*. We are teaching in our “Let’s Fix This!” Feature as Savannah Gilbo offers great advice for edits, and Tiffany Yates Martin has written a wonderful article about writing inclusive stories.

Our *WriteOn!* team is here for you. As always, please let us know if there is anything that you would like to see in upcoming issues. We do our level best to meet your writing needs.

Happy Reading!

Kay

WOMEN'S FICTION DAY: THE VIRTUAL EVENT YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR



WHAT IS IT?

Women's Fiction Day was established by WFWA in 2019. It takes place on June 8th every year and is a day to celebrate the authors, stories, readers, bookstores, and fans of the women's fiction genre. The goal is to educate readers about the variety of stories under the women's fiction umbrella. Layered stories that are driven by the protagonist's inner journey. We've got a bit of everything from commercial fiction, upmarket, historical, suspense and more. This year's list of WFWA women's fiction authors are here to impress, and anyone can jump in on the fun.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Our goal is to build a community among writers, knowledge among readers, and send traffic to author webpages. All can participate in Women's Fiction Day! If you're a published author, share the hashtag #womensfictionday on your social media pages and promote your work—feel free to offer a discount or host a giveaway. Even if you're still sitting in the query trenches or waiting for editors' responses on your submission, you can still build up hype in the writing community by pointing family, friends and followers to the WFWA Website where they will find the Women's Fiction Day page

Whether you're on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Goodreads, or any other platform where readers and

writers find common ground, there is a way for you to support the cause. Suggest books to read in the women's fiction category by posting some of your favorite titles or raving about a women's fiction book on your blog or website. Tag WFWA as much as you want!

MEMBER PERKS?

As a member, you are also invited to join in the activities. If you want your website included on the WFWA page, let us know! Do you have an agent (or editor) in mind who's looking for an opportunity to engage with a wide audience? Point them in our direction, and we can add to our list of interested folks. Tune into to our Instagram live programming from 8AM to 8PM.

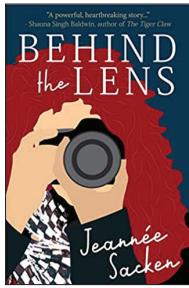
WHAT'S THE LOGO?

This year's logo was designed by WFWA member, and Women's Fiction Day chair, Susana Kuehne. It will be used in our advertising and marketing efforts throughout all social media platforms and within the WFWA organization as a symbol of this year's celebration. If you need it resized for your purposes, please contact Susana (details below).

QUESTIONS?

Contact Susana Kuehne at screamingandsinging@gmail.com for more details about how to get involved.

MEMBER RELEASES



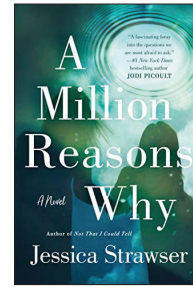
JEANNEE SACKEN
Behind the Lens
3/9/21



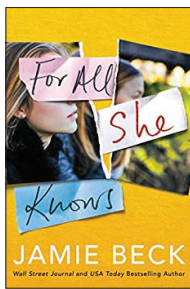
CHRISTINA CONSOLINO
Rewrite the Stars
3/18/21



DENNY S. BRYCE
Wild Women and the Blues
3/30/21



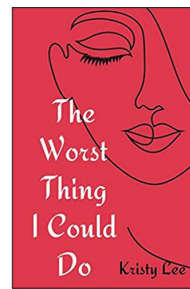
JESSICA STRAWSER
A Million Reasons Why
3/23/21



JAMIE BECK
For All She Knows
3/30/21



KATE ALLEN
Fear of Flying
3/30/21



KRISTY LEE
The Worst Thing I Could Do
3/31/21



SUSAN WINGATE
Bobby's Diner
3/31/21



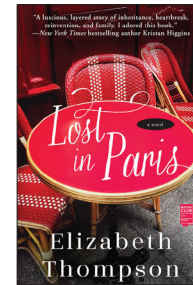
KRIS CLINK
Goodbye, Lark Lovejoy
4/6/21



LESLIE A. RASMUSSEN
After Happily Ever After
4/6/21



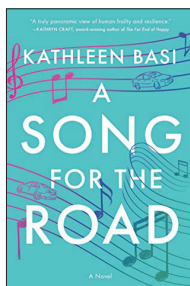
MARGARET RODENBERG
Finding Napoleon: A Novel
4/6/21



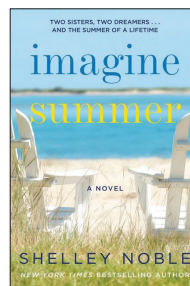
ELIZABETH THOMPSON
Lost in Paris
4/13/21



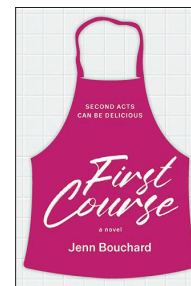
ALISON HAMMER
Little Pieces of Me
4/13/21



KATHLEEN M. BASI
A Song for the Road
5/11/21



SHELLEY NOBLE
Imagine Summer
5/11/21



JENN BOUCHARD
First Course
6/21/21

SHOOT AND SHARE CONTEST: SHOW US YOUR DESK

AND THE WINNER IS ...
AMANDA SOLIMANDO.

Amanda will receive a \$25 gift certificate to her favorite Indie book store. Thanks to these members for sharing photos. Be on the lookout for the next contest!



Amanda Solimando



Gina Wilkinson & Obiwan



Kristin Owens



Sharina Harris



Jill Hannah Anderson



Tamara Merrill



Mary Camarillo

HOW TO WRITE INCLUSIVE STORIES

Writers are big dreamers. Our imaginations are vast, and we contain multitudes—people, lives, worlds that may be far outside our own direct experience, but that speak to and spark our creativity.

Through these imagined lives, many of us hope to reflect and refract the world we live in—to examine through the close lens of story the lives and experiences we see around us. Maybe, in the course of that, we dare to dream we might somehow enhance understanding or connection among people—to hold up a mirror that shows us we are, at the core, more alike than we are different.

We're living in marvelous yet fraught times—awareness of disparities is increasing, yet so is polarization. Many authors fear a backlash if, despite the best intentions, they make a misstep in creating stories that lie outside their own direct experience, so they shy away from treading into what can often feel like a minefield. Others plunge in, eager to try to represent and maybe even help address problems like a lack of inclusivity and representation, yet may inadvertently cause offense.

Should you write characters and worlds outside your own direct lived experience, or “stay in your lane”? And if you do decide to venture a toe into these churning waters, what do you need to be aware of?

The answer to the first question is personal for each author, but my opinion—and that of nearly every single author and industry pro I've ever spoken to about this topic, is to write the stories and characters you want to write.

“I feel that the purpose of a writer is to put themselves in someone else's shoes and to accurately depict it,” says [Camille Di Maio](#), a bestselling multi-published author of historical fiction. Di Maio regularly writes characters who may not reflect her own experiences but was recently advised to change the background of a character in a new story whose culture was different from her own. She elected not to. “I think the best writing is written without shackles.”

[Barbara Claypole White](#), bestselling, award-winning author of book club fiction, agrees: “I believe you write what is tugging at your heartstrings, what you want to write about, and you do the research. For me that means one-on-one interviews with people living the experiences I want to depict.”



GUIDING SCRIBE

But venturing into someone else's turf can be scary. [Sarah Bird](#), the bestselling, award-winning author of ten novels, struggled for decades with a story she'd unearthed while researching African American rodeos—the real-life tale of Cathy Williams, the only female Buffalo Soldier and the first woman to enlist in the peacetime U.S. military. She desperately wanted to see Cathy's story told, but strongly felt it wasn't her story to tell—finally daring to write it (*Daughter of a Daughter of a Queen*) more than forty years later when she examined her reasons for waiting so long: “I had to ask myself, at the age of 65, why I wasn't writing it, and it was because I was afraid of being criticized.”

Yet it's equally important to know why you are writing these characters. In my most recent novel, *A Little Bit of Grace* (under my pen name, Phoebe Fox), a main secondary character has a very specific background far outside my own lived experience.

But I didn't decide on that randomly. A fulcrum of the story is that the protagonist discovers a previously unknown relative who had been completely disavowed by their family. I needed something that could explain a family's erasure of one of their own and might shape someone in the ways my character had been shaped. I based her background partly on several people I knew who shared similar experiences. (I'm being a bit vague to avoid spoilers on a major plot point.)

WATCH FOR LABELING PEOPLE ACCORDING TO THEIR SITUATION: A DIABETIC (RATHER THAN “A PERSON WITH DIABETES”), AN ADDICT, THE DISABLED, ETC.

“Some people are going to jump on this bandwagon because it's popular, because it's what getting bought—like, #ownvoices is still popular, so I'll write that,” says author [Tracee Garner](#), a bestselling, award-winning Black author with muscular dystrophy who writes both within her direct lived experiences and without. She exhorts authors to examine their intentions: “What is driving you—do you have characters—white, Black, or whatever—who you really want to tell their stories?”

Barbara Claypole White discovered what she calls her “great passion for creating characters who battle invisible disabilities” after her son was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. She wanted to learn about the condition in a fictionalized format because she thought it might be more accessible, not as scary as reading dry research books on the topic, but couldn't find novels that featured characters like him, “not a single one.”

Bird finally tackled Williams's story in 2015 because “Cathy Williams was really no better known at that point than she had been when I first learned about her at a Juneteenth rodeo in 1978. She had not been celebrated. All I knew was that I felt I had an obligation to Cathy, or Cathay as she is often called, to tell her story before I died.”

Di Miao felt that changing or deleting her character's backstory wasn't being true to the world of her story, the vision she'd had for it, and even her purpose in telling it: “I'm willing to go through extra hoops, but to be told I shouldn't do it at all seems like it's betraying what writing is for in the first place.”

So, what are those hoops, and how can writers know whether they've cleared them? The best approach is to **educate yourself** as thoroughly as possible to be accurate and respectful, and **check yourself** with input from people who share the experiences or background of the characters you've created.



This is more than just research—though that's a key part of being accurate. Educating yourself as a storyteller means being cognizant of assumptions, stereotypes, generalizations, and narrow approaches that may unconsciously assume the perspective of only a certain group or worldview.

For instance, what is “flesh-toned” in a world where skin color is actually a broad spectrum of shades? What is a “universal” character experience or background when individual realities can be so drastically different? When you describe something as “normal” or “traditional,” whose norms and traditions are you referring to?

What unconscious assumptions might you be making, or stereotypes might you be inadvertently perpetuating? I used to use *Me Before You* in craft presentations to authors as a great example of creating high stakes and a crucible—until the mother of a child with disabilities shared with me that the central plot device of that story, about a woman who falls in love with a man with quadriplegia who has determined to kill himself, suggests to some people that it's better to be dead than to live with disabilities.

Learn “hot-button” phrases and terms that categorize, fetishize, or diminish human diversity. For instance, many find it offensive to read descriptions of people of varying cultural or ethnic backgrounds with food terms (like skin color or eye shape).

Watch for labeling people according to their situation: a diabetic (rather than “a person with diabetes”), an addict, the disabled, etc. Be cognizant of gender-biased language: “the best man for the job” or “chairman of the board.”

Be mindful of incendiary or insensitive terms or slurs, like “crippled” or “insane”; or outdated ones like “Oriental” or “Eskimo” or “gypsy.” Research more accurate and less pejorative ways of referring to the people you're referencing.

GUIDING SCRIBE

Steer clear of generalizations as much as possible. How much more interesting, in any case, to present complex and nuanced characters in fascinating shades of gray rather than flat, unidimensional, black-and-white representations like “liberal snowflake” or “Bible thumper” or “radical feminist,” etc.

Dialogue is a place to be especially mindful and respectful, as books that handle it poorly—such as the cringeworthy dialects of *Gone with the Wind*—make abundantly clear. It’s easy for dialect to descend into parody or mockery, even inadvertently.

When author [Laila Ibrahim](#) was researching her smash bestseller *Yellow Crocus* and her series of follow-up books that follow a white family and a Black family whose lives intertwine across generations, she did extensive dialogue research to accurately and respectfully capture the rhythms and phrasings of people in the times and situations she was writing about.

“Dialect is not random—it’s a language with rules,” says Ibrahim. She read firsthand slave narratives, researched dialects used by both owning classes and enslaved people of the times, and even accessed a WPA database of recorded interviews with people who had been enslaved.

You probably won’t catch every single element of your stories that could potentially be problematic—so many of these ways of thinking are deeply ingrained in many of us and take time to root out and unlearn, and our society and vernacular are evolving fast. But as an author, your responsibility is to educate yourself as well as you can, then seek outside input when you reach the limits of your knowledge.



Industry-wide efforts to increase inclusivity have resulted in publishing houses frequently hiring people who have direct experience with various elements that may appear in authors’ stories who can assess their verisimilitude and whether these elements are handled authentically and with sensitivity—hence the name “sensitivity readers”—and point out any potential stereotypes or offensive language or characterizations.

While there are many professionals you can hire for this service, it can also be helpful to solicit input from people you know who may share a background or direct experience with your characters.

Camille Di Maio, for instance, asked a longtime friend with the same cultural background as the character she’d written about to read her manuscript and point out any areas where she might have fallen short or misspoken. When Laila Ibrahim wrote about evangelical Christians in her book *Living Right*, she asked people she knew who shared that faith to read and weigh in. In my book *A Little Bit of Grace*, one of the people I’d interviewed extensively to create my character with that specific background was kind enough to also read it and point out anything I’d gotten wrong or missed, and my publisher also asked another in-house editor with a similar experience to read it.



“There has been an imbalance, and a necessary correction is now taking place,” says Sarah Bird, acknowledging that writing inclusively can still be scary terrain for authors to tread, or even to discuss. When her Cathy Williams book was released, she was “extremely nervous” about how it might be received by reviewers and readers. “It’s almost hard to talk about this without sounding like Strom Thurmond.”

But Barbara Claypole White advises authors not to focus on those fears. “You can’t worry about [how the story will be received]. You can’t, or else you’d be too afraid to write anything. Do the work, be as authentic as possible, and follow the characters.”

“You have to write whatever you want,” Tracee Garner agrees. “You have to.”

Stories—like imagination, like creativity itself—can’t thrive under limitations and boundaries. They’re bigger than the confines of even their own authors.

“Writers are not always the most interesting people,” Camille Di Maio reflects wryly. “If we limit writers to only writing their own experience, we’re going to have a lot of boring books.”

Visit Tiffany at www.foxprinteditorial.com
or www.phoebefoxauthor.com.

Straight from New York!



In today's crowded market, it's more important than ever for writers to think like editors. But what are editors really looking for right now? Friendship stories, sibling stories, and meaty, rich family sagas continue to be highly sought after in women's fiction. Complicated relationships between women—the messy mixture of female ambition, female rage, and female friendships—continue to fascinate us. We've also found that women's fiction geared toward an older audience is less sought after, while millennial women's fiction remains a top editor request.

Most editors I speak with tell me their number one priority this year has been signing diverse voices. Nowhere is that more true than in historical fiction, where publishers are particularly eager to find non-western and/or BIPOC stories. While WWII continues to sell very well, many editors are a bit fatigued personally. We've seen an uptick in midcentury or early twentieth century, but the key takeaway is simply that we want to see something fresh, whether that's a WWI story or even WWII from a new angle. In historical fiction in particular, there are so many unexpected stories and diverse perspectives still to be told.

MOST EDITORS I SPEAK WITH TELL ME THEIR NUMBER ONE PRIORITY THIS YEAR HAS BEEN SIGNING DIVERSE VOICES.

After a year of depressing headlines, editors across the board want something uplifting. For many editors, lighthearted romance was sanity-saving over the past year. While romcoms remain popular, the market has been flooded so, as in other areas, editors are being much pickier about what they take on. It has to be different, has to surprise them in some way.

On the other end of the spectrum, many editors are dipping their toes into a new genre for the first time—horror. Horror is having a moment—yes, even in women's fiction! The popularity of Jordan Peele horror or Netflix's *The Haunting of Hill House* (internal stakes, complex, fully drawn characters, and a subtly disturbing sense of unease) have more editors seeking horror “for the reader who doesn't think she likes horror.” Some call it elevated or intellectual horror. One women's fiction editor described it as “not your standard capital H horror,” but rather accessible book

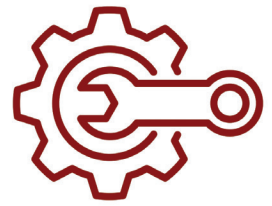
club women's fiction with a slight horror bend.

Coinciding with the Peele's critique of contemporary times, many editors are looking for stories that have a greater depth or somehow engage in larger issues. They want book club fiction that has the potential to pull in readers from a wide swath but is also issues-driven: something that drives conversation and discussion, but also has a lot of heart. As one editor told me, “I just want to publish books that add to the goodness quotient in the world.”

So, what's the number one thing editors are looking for in 2021? Beyond all genres and trends, editors want to see something fresh, with a relatable, high concept hook. Whether that means playing with preconceived notions of genre, something that turns an old trope on its head, or something from a new point of view, we want to be surprised. This year, editors across the spectrum have found the books that have the most success have a punchy high concept hook that feels at once recognizable and entirely fresh. Though at the end of the day one thing remains true, writing the story of your heart will always result in a stronger book than chasing after trends ever can.



Amy Stapp received her BA from Samford University and MA from Georgia State University before beginning her publishing career at Macmillan, where she was an editor for seven years and had the privilege of working with numerous New York Times and USA Today bestselling authors. Amy is now actively building her list at Wolfson Literary, with an interest in women's fiction, mystery, suspense, upmarket book club fiction, historical fiction, mature young adult, upper middle grade, and select narrative nonfiction. She is particularly drawn to a high concept commercial hook, polished, well-paced prose, immersive settings, and smart, multidimensional characters. As an editorial agent, she enjoys working hand-in-hand with authors to take their work to the next level. Find her online at wolfsonliterary.com.



FIRST PAGE WORKSHOP

Writing the first page of any story can be scary. It's no secret that the window to catch a reader's attention is very small. And if you don't grab their attention right away, it's unlikely they'll keep reading. Not only that, but if you plan to go the route of traditional publishing, you'll need to use these opening pages to grab an agent's or an editor's attention, too.

So, as we go through Jen's first page, I'm going to share some tips for writing a solid set of opening pages, too. Specifically, I'm going to walk you through three things to keep in mind when writing your opening pages. We're also going to look at how these elements show up in Jen's first page (or not), and what she can do to strengthen this page so that it hooks readers' attention. Let's dive in!

JEN'S OPENING PAGE WITH MARKUPS

The table was too intimate for a father and daughter. Loren shifted in her seat, feeling awkward with the closeness that made their knees bump under the thick slab of oak. A googly-eyed couple might like it. But not her—Loren didn't generally like being touched.

Tony scanned the menu, lifting his chin and peering down the slope of his bulbous nose. A distinct family trait, that nose. Loren thanked God she'd been spared. Her brothers hadn't been so lucky; the Carullos' Italian genes too strong.

Without diverting from the laminated pages in hand, Tony took a long sip of his Merlot. The crimson liquid sloshed against his lips, like waves against a bluff. Beauty meeting malice. He'd insisted on stopping at the bar before being seated, as though he couldn't bear to wait the extra ten minutes.

Really, it was probably the hot, young bartender.

How many chicks will he eyeball today, Loren thought, scrutinizing him from across the table.

"Looks like they changed their menu," he said, nodding in approval and quickly flicking the pages with a judgmental hand. "Better. They're upping their game. Good choice, Loren."

She smiled, pleased with his approval, but the truth was she'd only chosen Mercer House for its cheesecake. Smooth as silk, with a luscious richness that made her eyes water and her taste buds dance. Graham cracker crust honeyed to perfection. She could taste it already, could picture it in crystal clarity: plated on a simple white dish and garnished with a drizzle of glaze for the finishing touch.

Her favorite dessert. And she knew dessert.

Cheesecake made the perfect birthday treat. Forget the four hundred calories. She deserved it. Only turned twenty-one once.

Commented [SG1]: Why doesn't she like being touched? Where does this come from? Does she not like anyone touching her or just her father? Or all men? If so, is this what the story's going to be about?

Commented [SG2]: Is this from Loren's perspective? If so, does she call her dad Tony? Or would it be more like "Her father?"

Commented [SG3]: Love the detail about the distinct family trait here. This comment also makes me think Loren might be someone who's concerned with her appearance. Is that what you're going for?

Commented [SG4]: Why does Tony equal malice? Does this mean Loren isn't looking forward to this meal with her father?

Commented [SG5]: Why does this bother Loren? Are her parents still married? Is the bartender her same age? Or is there something else bothering her?

Commented [SG6]: These are great details filtered through Loren's perspective. I love how you went into more detail here because this is important to Loren — there's no question she loves her cheesecake! And because of all this, it makes me realize this must be some kind of significant day/event/moment for her 😊

Commented [SG7]: Why does she know dessert? Is she a pastry chef? Or just someone who really loves desserts?

Commented [SG8]: This is the second clue that makes me think Loren's concerned about her appearance. Is that something you want to highlight about her character?

Commented [SG9]: Fun! It's her birthday! Her age makes me wonder why she's not out celebrating with friends or a significant other. Does she *want* to be here with her dad? Or does she feel obligated to be here with him? Where's the rest of her family?

LET'S FIX THIS!

The very first thing you want to do in your opening pages is give readers a glimpse at the big picture of your story. So, where are things headed? What's this story all about? Try to give readers as much context as you can in the first paragraph, or even the first page of your story. Think in terms of context, conflict, and scope. So, who is this story about? Why should readers care about this person? What does this character want? And why do they want it? What kind of conflict are they up against? How long does the character have to accomplish their goal or solve the problem they're facing? Adding in this much information might feel counterintuitive, but what you're essentially doing is making a promise to the reader. You're giving them a glimpse at what's to come, and asking them to trust you to keep reading.

In Jen's opening page, she's done a great job introducing us to the protagonist, Loren, right away. To make this opening even better, Jen could give readers some insight into what Loren wants and why—not only in this scene, but in her life, too. I'd also love to know why we're dipping into Loren's life on this day, not tomorrow, or next week. We learn that it's Loren's birthday, but what else is different or significant about this day? Is this meal with her father special? Or does it feel more like a challenge for her? Is this something she's been looking forward to, or dreading? We know she has brothers so, where are they? How does she feel that they're not here on her birthday? Adding in some of this context would help readers latch onto Loren and sympathize with her here.

The second thing you'll want to do in your opening pages is start with some kind of meaningful action. And by "meaningful action," I don't mean something like a car crash, or an explosion, or a shoot-out. That kind of objectively dramatic action can be quite boring for readers if they don't have the big picture context. So, what I'd rather see you do is start your story with the protagonist taking some kind

of meaningful action in pursuit of their goal. So, as I mentioned earlier, it's super important to know what your character wants and why. You'll also need to make sure your character has enough agency to take action in pursuit of their goal.

In Jen's opening pages, she's dropped us right in the middle of Loren's birthday outing with her father. Nice job, Jen! There's not a lot of backstory or extraneous information here, so I can tell she was conscientious and thoughtful about that. I'd love to see Jen establish what Loren wants in this scene, and what's motivating her here. So, what is Loren hoping to do or accomplish in this scene other than sharing a meal with her father and getting some cheesecake? Also, what is Loren's strategy or plan for getting what she wants? And what kind of conflict does she face? Since I don't have the big picture context yet, and since I don't know what Loren's goal is here, it's hard for me to root for her in this scene.

The third thing you'll want to do in your opening pages is clarify what's at stake for your character. In every scene of your story, there needs to be something at stake. But in your opening pages, this is extra important. Whatever's at stake here, and whatever decision your character makes in light of those stakes, will affect everything to come. So, in your opening pages, make sure it's clear what your character stands

to lose or gain. What happens if they accomplish their goal? What happens if they fail to accomplish their goal?

In Jen's opening page, it's unclear what's at stake for Loren because we don't know what her goal is. I'd love to see Jen clarify what Loren wants, and what happens if she does or doesn't get it. So, as an example, let's say that Loren has been dreading this meal with her father because he abused her as a child. Her scene goal might be to a) get this meal over with as soon as possible, and b) tell her father he can't be in her life anymore. And there could be a few different things at stake here. On one hand, she might be worried about making a scene. On the other hand, she might be afraid of hurting her father's feelings. She may even fear further abuse of some kind. When readers know what's at stake, the too-small table and Loren's father's leering at the waitress feels even more impactful. It also helps evoke feelings of suspense in readers—will Loren succeed? Or will she fail? Will Loren's expectations come to fruition? Or will her worst nightmares manifest before her eyes?

Overall, Jen's pages were a delight to read and I definitely wanted to know more Loren, and the significance of this meal. With a few tweaks, Jen's pages are sure to shine and capture readers' attention from the very start. Thanks for sharing your pages with us, Jen!

To recap, here are three things to tackle in your opening pages:

- 1 Give readers a big-picture glimpse at the story. What's this story really about? Where are things headed?
- 2 Introduce readers to your protagonist right away. Who is this person? What do they want? Why do they want it?
- 3 Establish what's at stake if your character. What does this person stand to lose or gain? What happens if they succeed or fail?

Keep these three tips in mind and you'll be well on your way to writing a solid set of opening pages that piques readers' interest and makes them eager to learn more. Happy writing!



Savannah Gilbo is a developmental editor and book coach who's passionate about helping fiction authors write, edit, and publish stories that work. She's also the host of the top-ranked *Fiction Writing Made Easy* podcast, where she provides simple, actionable, and step-by-step strategies that writers can implement in their work right away. Get in touch at www.savannahgilbo.com

IN THEIR WORDS: DENNY S. BRYCE

By Kay Arthur

I had the pleasure of interviewing Denny S. Bryce on the genesis of her debut novel, *Wild Women and the Blues*, which released on March 30, 2021. Denny shares her publishing path and the story behind the story in the following interview. Congratulations to Denny and much luck for the success of her new book.

■ **Tell me about your career. Have you always wanted to write? And what was your job before writing? How did it play into your book and becoming an author?**

My writing journey began in 4th grade. I wrote a story about the adventures of me and my three best friends: Linda, Mary, and Yvette. We solved crime. Call us *Charlie's Angels*. I won't mind too much!

As with many writers, I was an avid reader and read everything from gothic romances to historical fiction. Some of my favorites sound a bit unusual to me now. Still, I enjoyed the classics and popular fiction from many different authors, including James A. Michener, Leon Uris, E.L. Doctorow, John Irving, William Styron, and many more (notice all the male authors). Then I discovered Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*) and Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*). After a career as a professional dancer in Chicago and New York City, I got involved in marketing and PR between studying for a master's in journalism. Still, before I could finish, I landed a sweet gig in marketing and PR. So, writing has been central to everything I've done for a few decades. Now I write full-time—novels, entertainment articles, and book reviews for NPR.

■ **Tell me your publishing story. How long did you query your novel before obtaining an agent?**

My writing journey began in the romance genre, and I wrote romance, entered contests, and hung out with writers for nearly a decade before I signed with an agent and went on submission. I found my historical fiction "voice" with the help of my agent and finished my first novel in 2018 after working on it for six years. We went on submission that summer (after it made it to the finals for the second time in a national contest), and six months later, we had an offer!

I credit my participation in writing organizations like WFWA, writing contests, and my volunteer work with various writing groups for giving me the chance to meet agents in less stressful settings. They got to know me and some of my work and vice versa.



Photo by Valerie Bey Photography

■ **At the end of the story, what do you hope the reader will take away from it? What is the theme, and why is the setting necessary for the story?**

I want the reader to have enjoyed the time they've spent with my characters while learning something about the history of Chicago's Black Belt and the jazz scene in the 1920s they may not have already known. I also strive to showcase the emotional journey of my Black female protagonist not only in how she faces complex choices and relates to complicated characters, but I also want to share the people, the experiences, and the parts of the world that bring them joy. And my stories will always feature Black and African American people in history showcased in stories that have not been told for too long.

■ **They say your first book has a lot of yourself in the characters. Is this true with *Wild Women and the Blues*?**

I believe every writer includes aspects of their personalities, characteristics, and more on the page, no matter whether it's their first book or 100th book. But I'd say the most apparent similarity between Honoree and me is that we're both dancers. In 1925, she was a chorus girl, which means dancer and entertainer. I spent several years as a professional modern dancer, and several aspects of that lifestyle are reflected in *Wild Women and the Blues*.

■ Why did you select Chicago as the setting for your novel?

I didn't grow up in the city, but I went to college in Lake Forest, IL, a suburb of Chicago, and after graduation, I moved to the Northside. I fell in love with Chi-Town, and for the next decade (or two), I called the city home. Then, being a history geek and with one of my first apartments a block away from the site of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, I started researching the 1920s. So, I've had a connection to Chicago's history for some time. Chicago's music and jazz scene have been a part of my life since college as well. I have an intense love of music. As a professional dancer, I performed all dance styles, from classical ballet to jazz to modern to Afro-Cuban. And each dance form I perfected either introduced or strengthened my love for the music that went along with it. Chicago is a town of music. Some of the best music festivals in America occur in Chicago. So yeah, Chicago—that toddlin' town—just made sense as the setting, especially with its rich African American history.

■ Are you a plotter or pantser?

In the early days, I called myself a plotter, but it took me six years to write *Wild Women and the Blues*. The implication here is that some pantsing occurred. Right now, as I dive into revisions for my second book, I am learning what I call the art of focused plotting that is driven by the main character's story arc to avoid too much pantsing later on.

■ Can you tell me how being a member of the WFWA community has helped with your writing and career?

I find value in being a part of any writing organization because it connects me to other writers who share my journey. WFWA is full of like-minded novelists who generously share their experiences and expertise. I also benefited from the in-depth (and in-person, when that was possible) classes offered through WFWA, from Donald Maass to Lisa Cron to Nicole Blades, to name a few. And the regular programming is always at the highest level, one of the best of any organization I've ever been a part of.

■ What are you working on next?

I'm very excited about my next book, also historical fiction, and written as a dual storyline (like *Wild Women and the Blues*). *Blackbirds* is a love story that spans from 1928 Los Angeles to the summer of 1968 and a cross-country road trip during one of America's most politically and racially charged eras. It will release in April of 2022. Denny can be found at www.dennysbryce.com.

CHAPTER ONE

Sawyer
Friday, June 5, 2015

Chicago

On the fifth floor of the Bronzeville Senior Living Facility, I stand outside the smallest room in the world, doing my best to ignore the dropped ceiling and square linoleum tiles, stoking my claustrophobia.

No windows. No air. No natural light. Just stark-white walls out of focus like cheesecloth over a camera lens.

The old woman in the bed adds to my anxiety, as does the fact that I'm almost out of cash. But nothing will defeat me. Not this go-round. Not with the help of the old lady in the bed—Honoree Dalcour, my last great hope.

The backpack digs into my shoulder. I check the time on my cell phone, eight hours until my connecting flight to Paris. Six hours (fewer if I take a shuttle back to O'Hare) to coax the 110-year-old woman in the bed (who could die at any second or who could be dead now) into telling me a story to fix my life or more likely help me finish my film project.

You see, I'm a graduate student chasing a doctorate in media studies. My documentary thesis focuses on the legendary Black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux in 1925. The project, however, has a gaping hole, smack in the center. A hole I haven't thought about in over a year. Not since my sister, Azizi, was killed in a car crash with me behind the wheel.

Fifteen months and a lot of tequila later, I need something normal to aspire to, something ordinary and reasonable like finishing the damn film. God knows, something other than talking to my sister's ghost, a conversation that unquestionably doesn't constitute normal, ordinary, or reasonable.

"How long are you planning to stand in the doorway?" A young woman in navy-blue scrubs, pushing a medicine cart, stops next to me. "If you want to talk to Miss Honoree, you should go inside."

Her no-nonsense style makes me wonder: Does she sense my fear of small spaces, which annoys her, or does she merely want me out of her way?

"Excuse me?" My version of indignant is a pitch too high for a man with my usually deep baritone.

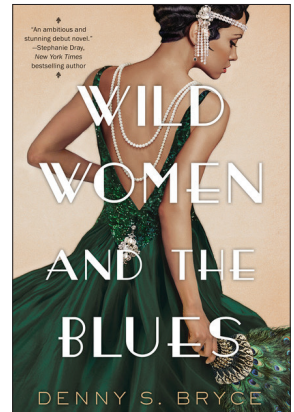
She tilts her head and frowns. "I said if you have something to say, you should stand next to her bed. Then you're not some faceless stranger, quizzing her from the other side of the room."

I can tell she doesn't like me. She's looking at me as if I were a wad of gum on the bottom of her shoe.

"I'm giving her a few minutes to wake up," I explain.

She folds her arms over her stomach as her large brown eyes casually damn me to hell. This erases any hope of our having a future together.

By the way, this is my vivid imagination at work. She's beautiful and my age. Midtwenties. Super-short natural hair. Dark skin and those luminous brown eyes. The color of midnight and stars. Also, I'm a romantic, and if I were normal, I'd have her number by now.





This issue we are spotlighting **Hadley Leggett and Jennifer Jabaley**, our Pitch Event Chairs. Twice a year, we as members get to pitch our novels to agents, and if you have ever participated in WFWA Pitch Event, it appears seamless. But that wouldn't be possible without all the work behind the scenes. Interacting with agents, vetting pitches, and monitoring the pitch event takes a lot of time and concerted effort to make it all happen. A big shout out goes to Hadley and Jennifer for a job well done. Thank you!



HADLEY LEGGETT PITCH EVENT CHAIR

1

How did you become a member of WFWA?

I became a WFWA member last fall, after my in-person writing group fell apart because of COVID-19. I was looking for an active online writing community, and as soon as I joined the Facebook group and saw there were zoom writing dates, I was hooked! Michele Montgomery's crew gave me such a generous welcome at my first write-in that I've been doing them almost daily since.

2

When and how did you first volunteer?

This Pitch Event was my first volunteer experience. Since then, I've also started leading zoom writing dates on Tuesdays and Fridays, and I was a first-round judge for this year's Star Award competition. I love volunteering because I feel like in any community, you get back what you give!

3

When did you get involved with the Pitch Event, and what is your favorite role you play in this?

I'm currently querying my first novel, so I was excited to participate in the Pitch Event myself. When I learned that WFWA was struggling to find a team to lead the event, I figured I'd better step up or it might not happen at all. My favorite part of the event was getting to meet so many wonderful members, and to read all their fabulous pitches. It was also exciting to watch as agents made their requests. Each time I saw a request go through, I felt like a proud parent.

4

What are your favorite resources that you use in WFWA?

WFWA has so many fantastic resources, it's hard to say which are my favorite. But the daily write-ins top my list. There's nothing like the accountability of working alongside ten or twenty other writers, knowing that you're going to have to report your progress at the end of the session. I also love the monthly webinars and the fact I can access all the past webinars on the website—it's such a wealth of information, on everything from plot and novel structure to marketing and social media.

5

With your work, family, hobbies, and writing, where do you find the time to squeeze in volunteering?

I've got three young kids and a bathroom full of foster kittens, so my life is busy! Then again, during COVID-19 lockdown, what is time anyway? The Pitch Event felt like a full-time job for a few weeks, but I was excited to give back to this generous community of talented writers.

“My favorite part of the Pitch Event was getting to meet so many wonderful members, and to read all their fabulous pitches. It was also exciting to watch as agents made their requests. Each time I saw a request go through, I felt like a proud parent.”



JENNIFER JABALEY

PITCH EVENT CHAIR

1 **How did you become of member of WFWA?**
If I'm being honest, I have no idea. I can't remember what I did yesterday, so I think this is a fair response. No, seriously, several years ago when I decided to transition from writing young adult fiction to women's fiction, I knew I needed to find a community. I'd been extremely active in the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators for years. That was where I met all my writer friends and critique partners, in addition to learning about the industry. I knew that the adult fiction world was very different and if I wanted to succeed, I'd need to immerse myself in this new genre. I began searching for groups and associations and landed on WFWA. I'm so happy I did.

2 **When and how did you first volunteer?**
This past winter I received an email from WFWA begging for volunteers. I'd recently come off several local volunteer positions (I served on several boards—The Arts Association, the Chamber of Commerce, The School Board) and thought I wanted my next volunteer position to be linked to writing. The timing was right!

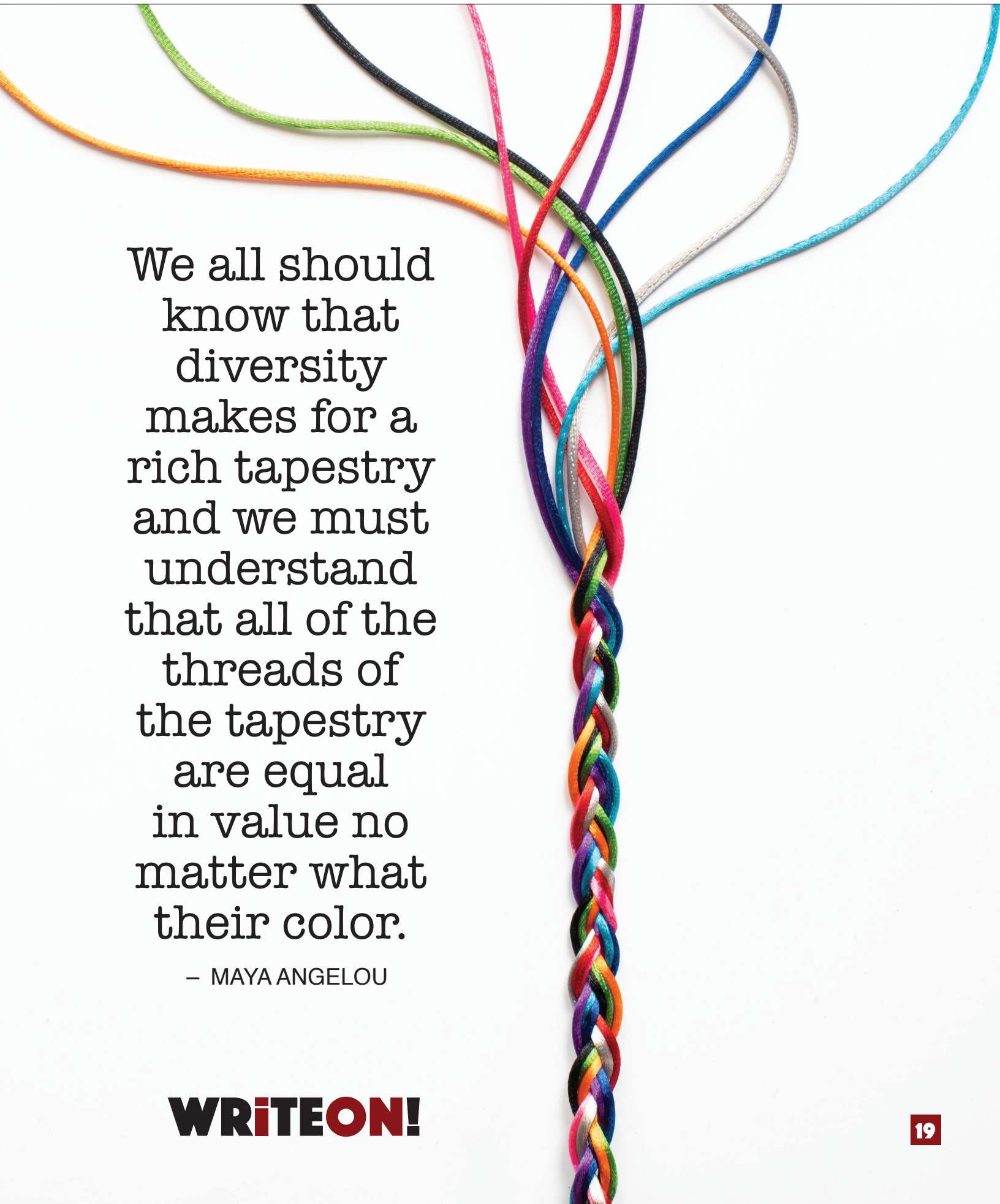
3 **When did you get involved with the Pitch Event, and what is your favorite role you play in this?**
I hadn't personally participated in the pitch events before, but I knew about them and had read with interest about a lot of success with previous participants. My favorite part of helping with the Spring Pitch Event by far was reading everyone's pitches and excerpts. It amazes me the level of talent and creativity we have within our association! I can't wait to hear when some of our participants announce that they've signed with an agent after this event...and then sold their projects!

4 **What are your favorite resources that you use in WFWA?**
WFWA has an enormous amount of resources for every part of a writing and publishing journey. My current favorite is the Media Training Workshop I just participated in this past March. While I'm well-versed in public speaking, I was not as familiar with doing virtual talks or interviews. This class taught me all the tricks—lighting, backgrounds, audio challenges, where to look, how close to be to the camera. It was all so useful! And beyond the technology and presentation part, the workshop forced you to think about how you speak about your project in a succinct and engaging way. It was one of the most beneficial workshops I've ever participated in.



5 **With your work, family, hobbies, and writing, where do you find the time to squeeze in volunteering?**
It's very hard!! I have a demanding job. I have two very active kids whose sports schedules keep us on the road, and I am currently playing in two different tennis leagues. And I'm revising my manuscript. In the past, I'd been a "yes" person and found it difficult to say no when someone asked me to help. Then I found myself serving on three different boards, volunteering in the schools, and becoming bitter when I couldn't find time to pursue my own creative ventures. But it helped me realize it's more fulfilling to pick one or maybe two volunteer positions that relate to your own interests. It's much easier to immerse in a volunteer venture when you enjoy the content.

Did you know WFWA is 100% run by volunteers? That means every WFWA program, newsletter, event, resource and benefit you enjoy is put together by your fellow members on their own time.

A vertical braid of multi-colored threads (including green, orange, black, pink, red, purple, blue, and light blue) runs down the right side of the page. The threads are loose at the top and become tightly braided as they descend.

We all should
know that
diversity
makes for a
rich tapestry
and we must
understand
that all of the
threads of
the tapestry
are equal
in value no
matter what
their color.

– MAYA ANGELOU