



## READING, WRITING, AND RETREATS

- FINDING THE PERFECT RETREAT
- WRITING AND COMMUNITY
- HAVE A DIY RETREAT
- THE CASE FOR GROUP RETREATS

**A CONVERSATION  
WITH ERIN BARTELS**

**GUIDING SCRIBE:  
TRUE CONFESSIONS**

+

**MEET  
MARIE  
WATTS**



**WOMEN'S FICTION DAY IS COMING JUNE 8!**

# SUMMER 2024 CONTENTS

**CELEBRATE WOMEN'S FICTION DAY / PAGE 8**

## FEATURES

- 6** Spotlight on Diversity and Inclusion  
By Marie W. Watts  
PLUS: Meet Marie Watts / Page 7
- 15** Making the Case for Group Retreats  
By Brittany Clair
- 17** WFWA Retreats  
By Katie Tammen
- 18** How to DIY a Retreat  
By TJ Butler and Brittany Clair
- 20** Author Profile: Erin Bartels  
By Brittany Clair



## COLUMNS

- Guiding Scribe: Denny S. Bryce **11**
- The Butler's Pantry: TJ Butler **13**
- Volunteer Spotlight: Retreat Chairs **22**

## DEPARTMENTS

- President's Message **4**
- Letter from the Editor **5**
- Member Releases **9**
- Shoot and Share Contest **10**
- Final Thought **23**



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](mailto:membership@womensfictionwriters.org)

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Kristi Leonard  
President

Stephanie Claypool  
Vice President, Finance/Treasurer

Catherine Matthews  
Vice President, Technology

Tara Baisden  
Vice President, Programs

Maggie Marr  
Legal Counsel

Janet Rundquist  
Secretary

Marie Watts  
Vice President, Diversity and Inclusion

Kori Kobzina  
Vice President, Communications

Leah DeCesare  
Vice President, Events

Wendy Rossi  
Vice President, Membership

Denny S. Bryce  
Guiding Scribe

### THE WFWA FOUNDING TEAM

Orly Konig  
[www.orkonig.com](http://www.orkonig.com)

Kerry Lonsdale  
[www.kerrylonsdale.com](http://www.kerrylonsdale.com)

Laura Drake  
[www.lauradrakebooks.com](http://www.lauradrakebooks.com)

Linda Avellar  
[www.lindaavellar.com](http://www.lindaavellar.com)

Marilyn Brant  
[www.marilynbrant.com](http://www.marilynbrant.com)

Maggie Marr  
[www.maggiemarr.com](http://www.maggiemarr.com)



*Write ON!* is published quarterly by the  
Women's Fiction Writers Association  
[www.womensfictionwriters.org](http://www.womensfictionwriters.org)

## EDITORIAL STAFF

**Sharon Ritchey**  
Executive Editor

**Sheri Taylor-Emery**  
Art Director

**Brittany Clair**  
Managing Editor

**Katie Tammen**  
Articles Editor

**TJ Butler**  
Special Features Columnist

**Jen Craven**  
Copy Editor

**Kathi Jenkins**  
Proofreader

**Lorraine Norwood**  
Proofreader

**Beth Dotson-Brown**  
Proofreader

**Diane Riley**  
Proofreader

### 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](mailto:writeon@womensfictionwriters.org). Submitted letters are considered for publication and may be edited for clarity or space.

# Staying Connected

I don't know about you, but it is hard to believe we are closing in on the second half of 2024. May is always a time of excitement for me as we look ahead to a slower summer. Depending on where you are in your writing journey, it could mean more time to dedicate to your craft. One thing I like to do this time of year is plan for my fall activities so I can stay focused on my writing through the summer. If you've never been to a WFWA retreat, you have two incredible events to choose from (Albuquerque, NM, September 4–7 and Alexandria, VA, October 16–19). We have incredible speakers, and the locations for both retreats are lovely in the fall. I look forward to the retreats as a place to connect with other members “in real life.” Seriously, there is no better place to find a deep connection to fellow writers who truly get you.

If you're not able to go to a retreat, you have numerous other opportunities to connect with writers through our Online Community on Mighty Networks. Many of our workshops feature interactions with your peers to give and receive feedback on your writing. Did you know that we have FOUR free workshops each year? I like to use the time in the hottest part of summer to stay inside and participate in a workshop or two. We have such a variety of topics and speakers for all levels of writer.

When I'm coming out of a busy season, as this spring has been for me, I try to take the time to reflect on my New Year's goals and see how I stand. My goal for 2024 was one of focus. The idea was that I would slow down and pay attention. While there were moments of madness, I can say that I have mostly kept the promise I made to myself. It's turned into a daily practice for me to end each day reviewing what has transpired and looking ahead to what's next. I consider it a form of self-care. What do you do to decompress each day?

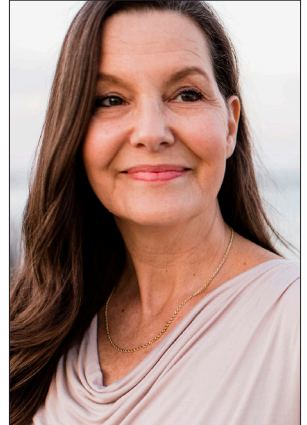
Another form of self-care for me is exercise. I take time to get outside each day and walk. Once a week I walk with a local group of WFWA members. We call ourselves the “writer hikers.” That's what self-care means to me. Connecting with like-minded individuals and moving my body. I'm an extrovert, so I get my energy from being around others. But I have introverted writer friends who kayak or ride bikes to dedicate time to themselves. Simply spending time listening to music or painting can be excellent ways to de-stress and bring joy.

Whether you attend a retreat, concentrate on improving your craft through classes or workshops, or focus on your mental health, the best part is that your writing will benefit. I will be at the Alexandria retreat in October. Make sure you say hello if you attend.

Happy Writing!



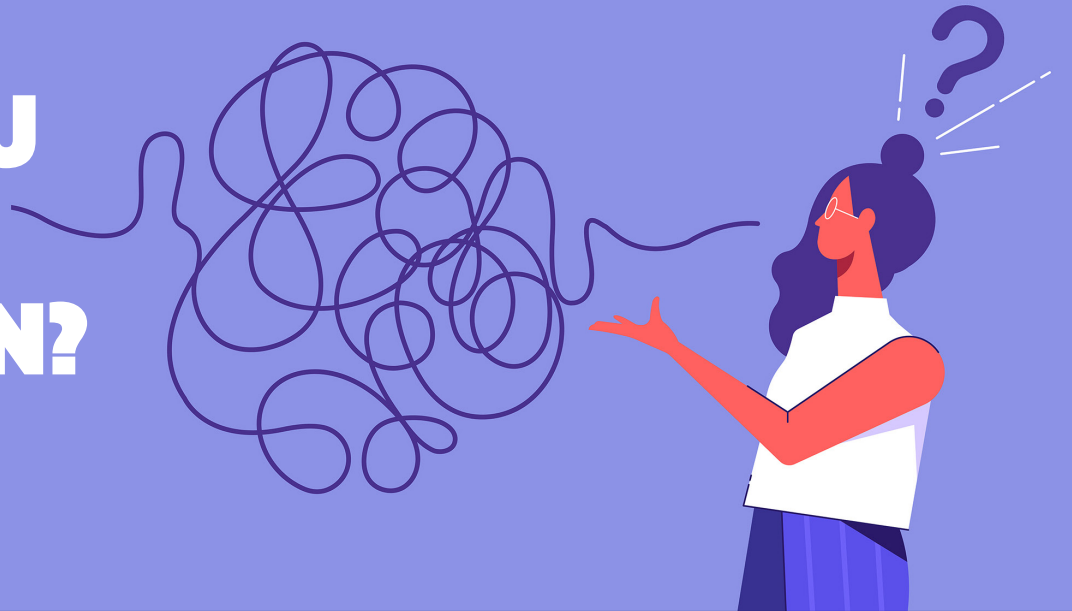
Kristi Leonard



**WHEN I'M COMING OUT OF A BUSY SEASON, AS THIS SPRING HAS BEEN FOR ME, I TRY TO TAKE THE TIME TO REFLECT ON MY NEW YEAR'S GOALS AND SEE HOW I STAND.**

---

# DO YOU SPEAK FICTION?



I'm 35k words into my current WF WIP. One of my secondary characters is coming off as unlikeable and I'm thinking through a *Save the Cat* moment. The answer may be a meet-cute in the first act instead of the second. Or I may change her emotional wound.

When I was first in the query trenches, people told me I had unlikeable MCs and my stories were too quiet. I needed to amp up the conflict and make the inciting incident bigger. I also needed to examine all my show-versus-tell paragraphs and fix my saggy middles.

I'm a pantsier who is taking deep breaths and working with—gasp!—an outline. A true plotter would laugh at what I call an outline. I both admire and don't understand those writers who live in an orderly story mind. The same is true for writers who pound out high word counts inserting TKs along the way to grind out the pages. I must stop, ponder, Google, and edit. I'm not a believer in the zero draft. My first drafts aren't tight, but I could ask for a beta read and not embarrass myself.

If you just read the previous three paragraphs and understood it, congratulations, you speak fluent fiction writer. Not to be confused with the nonfiction, editing, or poetry dialects.

I came to fiction through the nonfiction and editing worlds, and I was lost. I quickly learned "WIP" stands for *work in progress*. "MC" is *main character*. But I had to write my way into understanding the problems of saggy middles and unlikeable MCs—though I still believe my characters are great. I've read *Save the Cat Writes a Novel* and just about all the canon writing books. I'm not sure any of them helped as much as the actual work of writing. But they have helped with my fiction fluency and in speaking to my writing peeps.

The truest way to learn any language is to travel to where you find native speakers to practice (and ask questions). This issue of *Write ON!* is devoted to self-care in the form of retreats, either of the WFWA variety or the solo, microscribe getaway.

My first retreats helped me develop my fiction fluency, improved my understanding of how to fix a saggy middle, and revise my work. However, I am my own WIP.

I hope you'll consider a retreat. They are great for both introverts and extroverts. The language you speak doesn't matter. When you improve your fiction fluency, and connect with other native speakers, you'll gain a new perspective on your work.

If you have more fiction jargon to share, let me know. Maybe I'll write a sequel.

## 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](mailto:DI@WOMENSFICIONWRITERS.ORG)

# The Uncomfortable Truth About Unconscious Bias, From a DEI Expert

By Marie W. Watts

I, like every human on this planet, harbor unconscious biases. Social stereotypes about certain groups of people lurk in the recesses of my mind, and I don't even know it! Despite my best intentions, they sometimes spill over into my everyday activities.

*Why does this happen?* We are hard-wired to stereotype. Picture a pot of boiling water. Once we learn that sticking our hand in will scald us, we transfer that knowledge to all bubbling liquids we encounter. Can you imagine what life would be like if we had to decide whether a steaming cauldron was dangerous every time we encountered it? Stereotyping works when it comes to boiling liquid but is problematic when dealing with humans.

My wake-up call came when investigating employment discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Prior to that job, I had never dealt with Nigerians—my slate was blank. My first encounter with a Nigerian male sent me up the wall. The man was rude, demanding, demeaning, and obnoxious. Later, I complained to one of my friends, who surprised me by saying, “Nigerians. Nigerians? I love Nigerians. They are warm, wonderful people.”

Wow! I only knew one Nigerian and pasted his traits onto everyone else! And my job was to identify individuals falling back on stereotyping others in private industry. I was learning too.



Fast forward two decades. As a senior citizen, I attended the opening of my small town's new AT&T store to purchase an Android phone. A man older than myself approached. My brain began to protest. *You are too old to know anything about cell phones, go away.* But this time, after years of professional experience, I was able to reign in my bias, reminding myself that just because he was old did not mean he was technologically incompetent.

Consider this: **by age five we already have definite, entrenched stereotypes that we have absorbed from our culture.** At age two, my grandson, who was transitioning from diapers, had an accident at church. With no clean underwear available, the nursery staff put him in the only diaper they had, a pink one. He went ballistic. Pink was for girls.

At this point, he did not have the ability or experience to form his own beliefs—but he was already displaying outward bias.

**The path forward lies in our ability to recognize that we all harbor biases and prejudices, but we can do something about them.**

■ First, we need to acknowledge their existence and take responsibility.

■ Next, we should identify problem behaviors, study how they impact others, and modify our conduct. This is a constant battle, but well worth the effort.

■ Finally, when others say or do something you find offensive, assume goodwill, that their unconscious bias is at play. Speak with the individual privately, using “I” phrases. Be honest about your feelings.

When we have open dialog, we develop mutual respect and understanding. Holding grudges and making assumptions about what others think leads to misunderstandings and distrust.

If someone confronts you, saying you are offensive, take a deep breath and listen. Explain your position (again, use “I” phrases). If you did not intend to be offensive, apologize. Even if you feel what you said should not be offensive to the other individual, refrain from using the words again out of respect for them.

*Please visit the D&I Headquarters on Mighty Networks for more information regarding unconscious bias.*



**Marie W. Watts** is a former employment discrimination investigator, human resource manager, and human resource consultant. Coauthor of *Human Relations*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Marie also penned the award-winning fiction trilogy *Warriors for Equal Rights* as well as the novel *Tough Trail Home*. Marie and her husband live on a ranch in central Texas.

## MEET MARIE WATTS, VICE PRESIDENT OF DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

By Brittany Clair

We spoke with VP of Diversity & Inclusion Marie W. Watts about her work experience, why recognizing unconscious bias matters for writers, and what she has in store for the WFWA Diversity & Inclusion Committee this year.

**You worked for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as an employment discrimination investigator. Can you tell us about this work? What did it entail, and how did it affect you?**

I interacted with workers from janitors to CEOs in the Houston metropolitan area, one of the most diverse regions in the country. Visiting every conceivable worksite including jails, manufacturing facilities, and restaurants was routine, allowing valuable insight into how different businesses operate.

The work was difficult; federal law requires that people be treated equally, and equal can be equally bad. For instance, if a boss calls all employees dumb and stupid, he is treating them equally. Only the company can stop this practice. Being unable to remedy these situations can gnaw on you.

The experience increased my empathy for those different from myself and compelled me to see the world through their eyes. Victories that changed the lives of others filled me with pride and satisfaction.

**You've also worked as a conflict mediator and a diversity consultant for private companies. What was that like?**

I cherish the opportunity to make a difference. Mediation brings the possibility of establishing a win-win situation for both parties and, when it works, is awesome. While training and consulting, I strive to bring a better understanding to all parties involved, emphasizing that we all have biases and prejudices; everyone must be vigilant and continue to learn and grow.

**Your column in this issue highlights that every one of us is affected by unconscious bias. Why is it important for writers to learn about implicit bias?**

Readers enjoy rich, complex characters. Even if we are writing about someone of our own race, sex, ethnicity, or religion, it is easy to craft stereotypical characters. For instance: the greedy character is overweight, the elderly character is technologically incompetent. By studying and exploring our own biases, we can both reduce them and create characters readers will cherish.



**EVEN IF WE ARE WRITING ABOUT SOMEONE OF OUR OWN RACE, SEX, ETHNICITY, OR RELIGION, IT IS EASY TO CRAFT STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERS.**

**What does diversity mean to you?**

My vision is that all members of WFWA have a seat at the table and feel welcome, respected, and understood. We strive to allow all members to be the best writers they can be.

**What can WFWA members expect from the Diversity & Inclusion Committee this year?**

We are available to speak with you if you feel uncomfortable about what is happening in our community. Please [reach out!](#)

Our diversity book club continues to shine. Join us to learn about those who are different from us, examine how diverse writers tackle their subject matter, and strengthen our own craft through gaining insight into how others write. [Find out more about participating here.](#)

We continue to gather diversity and inclusion resources our members can easily access. Please [visit us in the Online Community](#) for more.

# CELEBRATE WOMEN'S FICTION DAY – JUNE 8, 2024

Did you know there's a day dedicated to celebrating women's fiction writers and readers? June 8 has been designated Women's Fiction Day: a specific day meant to support our fellow writers, thank our readers, and raise awareness of our fabulous genre.

Last year, [NPR](#) reported that women authors now dominate the book business. Women constitute a major audience as readers, too. According to Statista.com, in 2023, 78% of female survey respondents had read or listened to at least one book in the previous twelve months. Sharon Ritchey, the former VP of Communications, decided in 2019 that women's fiction needed its own day and WFWA needed to take the lead.

For this year's Women's Fiction Day, the [Hear Us Roar podcast](#) is dedicating an episode to speaking with award-winning member writers about their publishing journeys. We are also planning an annual WFWA book giveaway. If you're a published author, the book giveaway is a great opportunity to gain readers and build your mailing list. As readers, the giveaway presents a chance to learn about new titles and maybe score a free book. (More details about participating in the book giveaway will be forthcoming.) Also, if you are a soon-to-be published author, June 8 would be a perfect day to hype your upcoming launch.



[WWW.WOMENSFICIONWRITERS.ORG](http://WWW.WOMENSFICIONWRITERS.ORG)

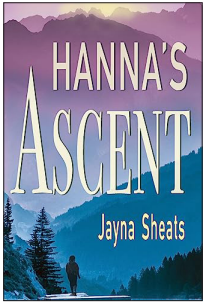
Whether you are a published author of women's fiction, a WFWA member, or a reader, there are many other opportunities to celebrate Women's Fiction Day:

- Attend one of the many book signings held nationwide on June 8.
- Subscribe to our free [Read ON! newsletter](#) to stay up-to-date on new women's fiction authors and titles, and promote the newsletter to other writers.
- Visit the WFWA [Goodreads bookshelf](#) and [Pinterest boards](#) to find hundreds of titles.
- Download the [Hear Us Roar](#) debut authors' podcast.
- Visit your local library and/or indie bookstore to discover new women's fiction authors and novels. While you're there, you can drop off [this WFD flyer](#) and ask them to post it in a prominent location.
- Follow WFWA on [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) or [Instagram](#).
- On social media, #bookstagram your favorite book and include a photo or stack with the hashtag #womensfictionday.
- Promote Women's Fiction Day and your books to your local media by using the [press release template](#).
- Post the Women's Fiction Day logo on your website and social media accounts.
- Use the logo graphics to create bookmarks you can hand out at literary events, your local library, or bookstores.

The Communications team has put together a toolkit to assist you in promoting the event—[check it out](#) for graphics, information, and additional resources for supporting Women's Fiction Day.

And, if you have suggestions for Women's Fiction Day activities, we'd love to hear them! Email us at [communications@womensfictionwriters.org](mailto:communications@womensfictionwriters.org).

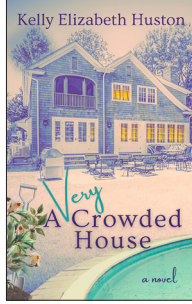
# MEMBER RELEASES



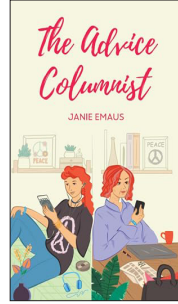
**JAYNA SHEATS**  
Hanna's Ascent  
6/18/23



**DEBRA BORCHERT**  
Her Own Revolution  
7/14/23



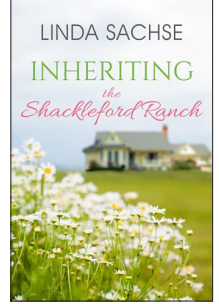
**KELLY ELIZABETH HUSTON**  
A Very Crowded House  
10/3/23



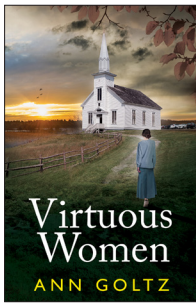
**JANIE EMAUS**  
The Advice Columnist  
10/16/23



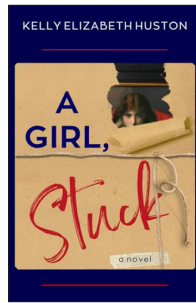
**KERRY FRYAR FREEMAN**  
Sedona  
11/15/23



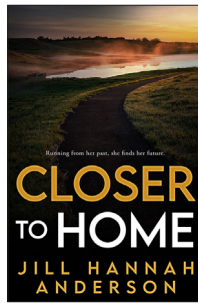
**LINDA SACHSE**  
Inheriting the Shackelford Ranch, Book 1  
2/1/24



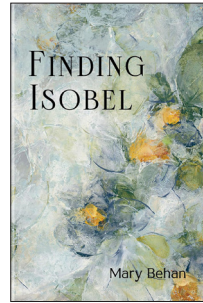
**ANN GOLTZ**  
Virtuous Women  
3/5/24



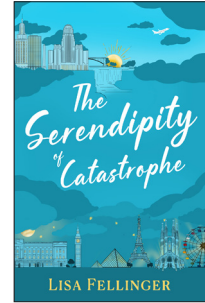
**KELLY ELIZABETH HUSTON**  
A Girl, Stuck  
3/5/24



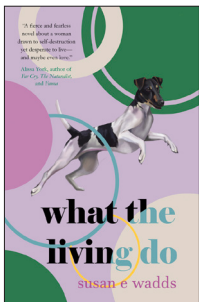
**JILL HANNAH ANDERSON**  
Closer to Home  
3/19/24



**MARY BEHAN**  
Finding Isobel  
3/19/24



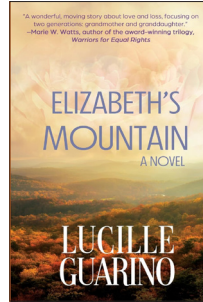
**LISA FELLINGER**  
The Serendipity of Catastrophe  
3/19/24



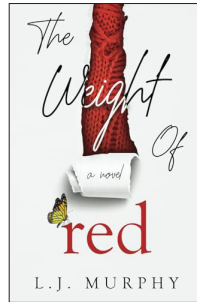
**SUSAN WADDs**  
What the Living Do  
3/19/24



**NICOLE BROOKS**  
Watch What She Can Do  
3/26/24



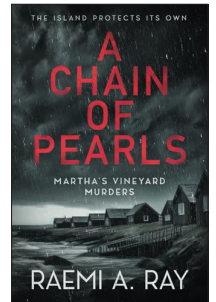
**LUCILLE GUARINO**  
Elizabeth's Mountain  
3/28/24



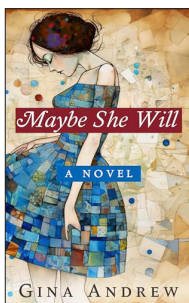
**L.J. MURPHY**  
The Weight of Red  
3/28/24



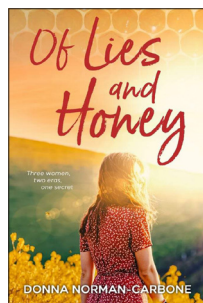
**DIANE BYINGTON**  
Mia's Journey  
4/2/24



**RAEMI A. RAY**  
A Chain of Pearls  
4/9/24



**GINA ANDREW**  
Maybe She Will  
4/16/24



**DONNA NORMAN-CARBONE**  
Of Lies and Honey  
4/23/24



**PAMELA STOCKWELL**  
The Tender Silver Stars  
4/24/24



**SHAYLA DUGAN**  
Learning to Swim  
5/1/24



**L.L. KIRCHNER**  
Florida Girls  
5/28/24



R.C. Reyn; Raleigh, North Carolina



CherieDawn Haas; Alexandria, Kentucky

## SHOOT AND SHARE CONTEST: **FAVORITE PLACES TO WRITE**

This issue we asked to see your favorite writing places and spaces – this month's randomly chosen winner for a \$25 bookstore gift card is Catherine Raphael. Thanks for sharing!



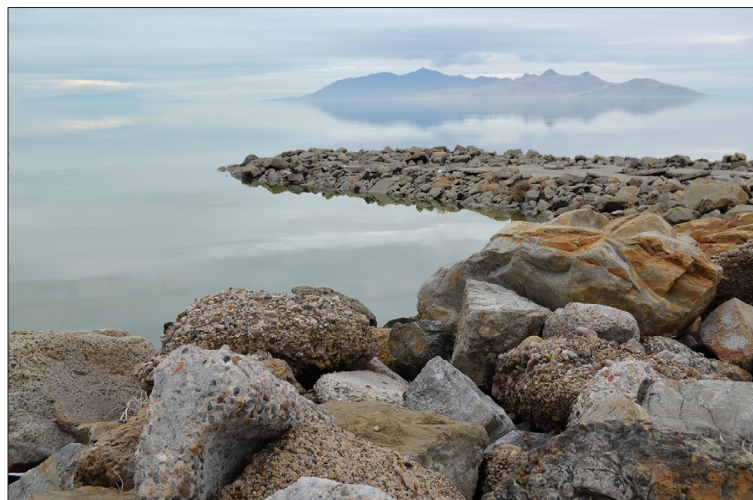
Submitted by Laura Drake: Pictured, Orly Konig Lopez and Barbara Claypole White; Albuquerque, NM



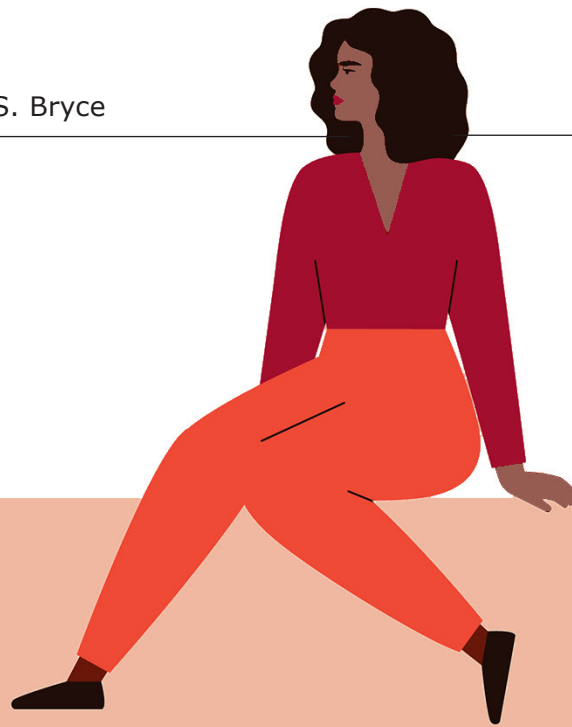
Krista White; Utopia, Ontario



Catherine Raphael; Laurel Highlands, PA



Stephanie Jackson; Silver Sands Beach, Magna, Utah



# TRUE CONFESSIONS

My first column for *Write ON!* as the 2024 WFWA Guiding Scribe must begin with me saying hello and thank you! So, there you go. And here's looking forward to a great year!

It is truly a pleasure to serve WFWA this way this year. As you might imagine, I enjoy sharing my thoughts, experiences, joys, and tribulations related to my writing journey. Hopefully, some of it, if not all, will provide information you'll find useful, enjoyable, or humorous—or else deliver something you seriously need to know.

So, let's dive into the first article I'm calling *True Confessions*.

## **CONFESSION #1: I NEED TO WORK ON SELF-CARE**

The first is about self-care, an area where I'm less active than I'd like. Why? I don't do a good job of it (and oh, imagine I wrote that last sentence in a whisper). Self-care is critical. As writers, many of us sit, or stand, or alternate between the two, or lie in bed as we write, write, write.

Some of us are SO good at self-care. But I'm one of those writers who needs to do a better job. As a full-time writer, I must be more diligent in my efforts.

I was reading something—okay, wait... I was on *Instagram*, and a reel flashed by. I hit pause. I hit save. What attracted me to this reel was the title: *The Six Rules to Avoid Laziness (a Japanese technique)*.

This sounded like me, for I equate procrastination with laziness. Instead of writing, I'd prefer to stare at social media (*Instagram* is the evil spawn of procrastination that I love dearly). And ignoring self-care is a form of laziness.

Now, disclaimer: I am not an expert in Japanese philosophy, nor did I do more than a Google search to learn more about these six techniques. So, take what I say next in the spirit it is meant: sometimes, something resonates, and you've just got to go with it. Right?

## GUIDING SCRIBE

- **IKIGAI:** Discover your purpose in life. Your purpose fuels you.
- **KAIZEN:** Focus on small improvements each day instead of trying to do everything at once. Consistency is the point that changes the game, so work smartly.
- **POMODORO TECHNIQUE:** Work for twenty-five minutes without distractions, take a five-minute break, then repeat.
- **HARA HACHIBU:** Don't stuff yourself with food. When you are 80 percent full, stop eating. It will boost your energy levels.
- **SHOU CHEN:** Approach every task like a beginner, with a beginner's curiosity.
- **WABI SABI:** Embrace imperfection instead of stressing over every detail.

I'm going to work with these six. I also saw a version with seven, but six is one less thing to worry about.

### CONFESSION #2: I'M A CRAFT JUNKIE

My love of craft is intense, and I am proud to make this confession. From Margie Lawson to David Corbett to Stephen King and other novelists who share craft insights, whether serving on a panel, giving a keynote address, or on the pages of their books (i.e., read, read, read!), I can't get enough. Some other authors on this list are Beverly Jenkins, Chanel Cleeton, Sadeqa Johnson, Beatriz Williams, S.A. Cosby, and Patricia Highsmith (she wrote *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, a psychological thriller, in 1955). There are also many books and authors that provide fantastic insights into storytelling simply through reading their works.

What about craft classes? The last in-person craft class I attended was in November 2023 at the [Writer's Unboxed UnConference](#). The experience was invaluable. The speakers, including Donald Maass, Desmond Hall, Kathryn Craft, and more, enriched my craft vocabulary. Whether in-person or online, craft classes offer a unique opportunity to learn from seasoned professionals and hone our writing skills.

Don't forget: WFWA offers [tremendous programming and craft classes](#) for writers at various stages of their journey. What is missing in the writing world are organizations where writers, especially new entrants into the publishing world, can find price-friendly education, community, publishing industry news, and more. WFWA is one of them.

### CONFESSION #3: I PREFER CONFERENCES TO RETREATS

I love retreats, but I love conferences more! I have to be honest. I enjoy a retreat, but my expectations for them are different than for a conference experience. A retreat can be solitary (disappearing to a cabin near a beach or in the mountains by oneself to finish a book due in a week) or hitting the road with a small group of writers in a similar state of anxiety over deadlines. When due dates approach, the



**MY LOVE OF CRAFT IS INTENSE, AND I AM PROUD TO MAKE THIS CONFESSION. FROM MARGIE LAWSON TO DAVID CORBETT TO STEPHEN KING AND OTHER NOVELISTS WHO SHARE CRAFT INSIGHTS, WHETHER SERVING ON A PANEL, GIVING A KEYNOTE ADDRESS, OR ON THE PAGES OF THEIR BOOKS (I.E., READ, READ, READ!), I CAN'T GET ENOUGH.**

craziness of this business accelerates. I go from a gal staring at draft after draft to a woman (big girl pants on) who has to get that book done! And it doesn't matter whether you're traditionally published with contractual obligations or an indie author who has announced their publication date (and uploaded preorders to Amazon); deadlines are deadlines. And setting them as early in your writing journey as possible will get you on the right path to success.

So, there you have it. My confessions. Pretty tame, huh? Yeah, right. That's what I thought, too.



**Denny S. Bryce** is the bestselling, award-winning author of five novels: *The Other Princess: A Novel of Queen Victoria's Goddaughter*, *In the Face of the Sun*, *Can't We Be Friends* (co-written with Eliza Knight), *Wild Women and the Blues*, and *The Trial Of Mrs. Rhineland* (coming July 23, 2024). She is also an NPR book critic, an adjunct professor at Drexel University, and a freelance writer who has written for *Harper's Bazaar* and *USA Today*. She is a member of the Historical Novel Society, Women's Fiction Writers Association, and Tall Poppy Writers. You can learn more about her work at [www.dennysbryce.com](http://www.dennysbryce.com).



# FINDING THE WRITING RETREAT FOR YOU

**B**efore my book came out last October, I spent five days at a solo retreat working on prepublication demands. Away from my daily responsibilities, I had time to read my book cover to cover three times and make my final manuscript edits. In addition to the final proofing, I created marketing material and put the finishing touches on the first few months of my book tour.

When I arrived, my to-do list felt a mile long, but with my book as my only responsibility, I accomplished everything. The solitary nature of my retreat was the perfect environment for checking tasks off the to-do list. At organized retreats, I've added thousands of words to my WIP and made strides in editing that would have taken me weeks at home.

Writing retreats are near and dear to my heart, and I attend a few every year. Retreats come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and if you know what you want, and where to look, there's a retreat tailored to precisely what you're seeking.

Ideally, a writing retreat will focus first and foremost on writing. Many writers find that they're better able to concentrate if they write at the library or a coffee shop, and retreats can mimic this away-ness. There's something meaningful about telling yourself that occupying a

particular space at a dedicated time means writing will happen—tea in a special mug, playing the right type of music, or my favorite, a roaring fireplace app—can go a long way toward putting us in the right frame of mind.

Generally, organized writing retreats focus our attention inward, so we can concentrate on writing and craft. However, not all your time needs to be spent with notebooks and laptops. Retreats in scenic locations may feature cultural activities like field trips and sampling of the local cuisine. Some offer yoga and meditation, and others may provide solitary opportunities, such as hiking or biking.

If your interests lie less in vacationing and more in writing, a craft-based retreat may be for you. These offer sessions with a writing mentor and the opportunity to workshop your writing. They may also include craft lectures and readings by attendees and the organizers.

Most retreats include some meals, and many end the writing day with a fun group dinner and socializing.

Larger group retreats may convene at retreat centers that include dorm-style accommodations, a dining hall, and space for group activities. More intimate retreats may occur at a large house, allowing writers to get to know one another and spend more individual time with instructors.

## THE BUTLER'S PANTRY



**MANY WRITERS FIND THAT THEY'RE BETTER ABLE TO CONCENTRATE IF THEY WRITE AT THE LIBRARY OR A COFFEE SHOP, AND RETREATS CAN MIMIC THIS AWAY-NESS.**

---

Few of us say that dedicated time for writing and craft has drawbacks. However, we might think differently about taking time away from family, pets, and work or spending money on ourselves. Retreats can be costly: you'll have the cost of the retreat itself, travel expenses, accommodations and food costs (if those aren't included), activity fees if the retreat offers add-ons such as spa treatments (luxury retreats in dream locations, we're looking at you), and incidentals such as added time with a mentor or personalized critiques.

Even for writers with flexible schedules and budgets that include this kind of me-time, cost can sometimes be prohibitive. For these reasons, I love the possibilities that open up when we begin to plan solo retreats according to our personal budget and schedule, like I do.

A retreat can be the perfect vacation. You are able to relax and slow down to read and write, and you'll improve your craft and connect with other writers and industry professionals in the process. For some, this is far more

valuable than relaxing by the pool with the latest beach read.

However, asking another writer to define the kind of retreat you should attend is like asking how long a piece of string should be. The perfect writing retreat is tailored to the individual. What is important to you and what do you want to get out of it? Being able to answer these questions is step one. That way, when you begin your research and discover the variety of offerings available, you'll know which one to pick.

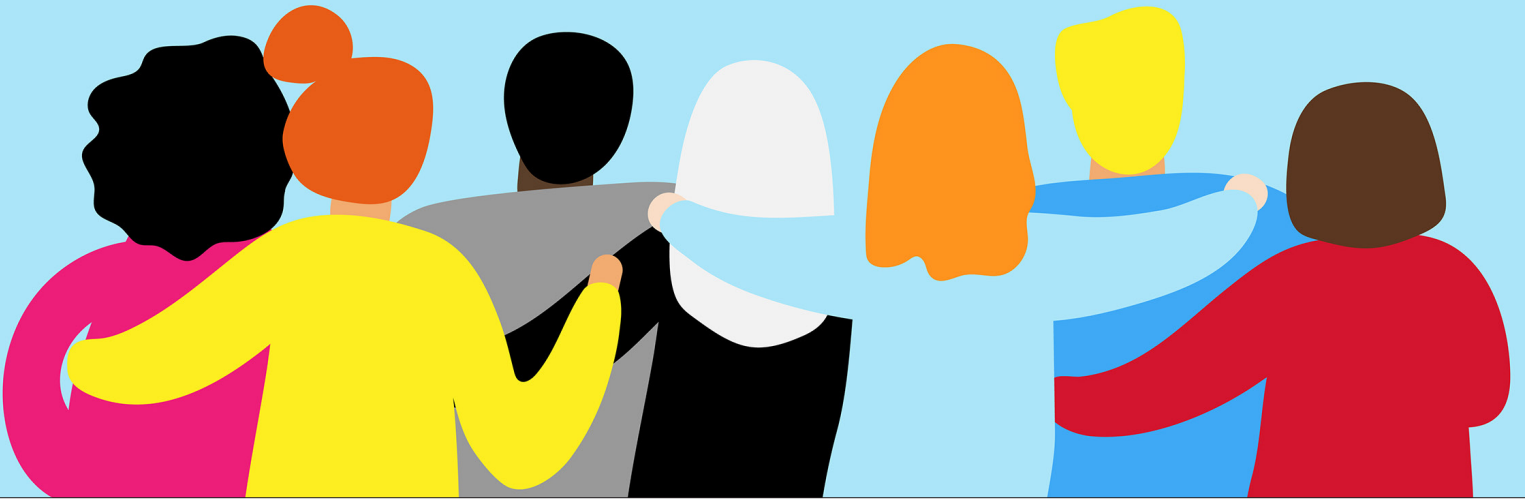
May your retreat be filled with writing, learning, and the time you need to focus on your writing goals.

*Poets & Writers maintains a [searchable database of retreat opportunities](#)—it's a wonderful resource if you want to explore opportunities. (It includes both conferences and residences, so be sure to use the filter options when you're searching.)*



**TJ Butler** lives in Virginia with her husband and dog, and writes fiction and essays that are not all fun and games. *Dating Silky Maxwell* is her first short story collection. You can learn more about it at [TJButlerAuthor.com](http://TJButlerAuthor.com).

# MAKING THE CASE FOR GROUP RETREATS



By Brittany Clair

Many of us have friends and family who support our writing pursuits in one way or another, but there is nothing like being with people who understand the strange, crazy, awesome struggle writing is. For me, it's a relief, and also humanizing, to make these connections—a humbling reminder that people who've "made it" worked their butts off to get there, and also that there are others like me in the trenches. It feels equally great to become a cheerleader as it does to have your own squad. There's something incredibly refreshing and comforting about sharing challenges, trading stories, and exchanging ideas with other people who know how it feels.

I love how my author friend Christine Gunderson explained it: "Being with other writers reminds you of what is possible." Isn't that great?

Christine's not alone on this. Here are our favorite reasons to attend a group retreat, if you can:

## IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THIS: COMMUNITY

Writing is a solitary pursuit, but humans are wired to connect. And to want to connect. Today, social connectedness is an undisputed imperative for healthy living. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General [designated social connectedness](#) as a public health priority. So did the [American Psychological Association](#). And the [World Health Organization](#), too.

**"AS PEOPLE WRITE IN GROUPS, THEY BEGIN TO DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS AROUND WRITING."**

– Rowena Murray,  
[Writing in Social Spaces](#)

Research continues to demonstrate that people who feel more socially connected are less likely to suffer from mental health problems and more likely to have higher self-esteem and improved physical health and longevity.

"Social connectedness generates a positive feedback loop of social, emotional and physical well-being," [explains Emma Seppälä](#), Science Director of Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education.

What does this have to do with writing retreats? Well, for most of us, the lure of a retreat is probably as simple as it is obvious: time and space to write; freedom from the everyday responsibilities that distract us from writing; a surge in output, accumulated words on a page.

All this is good. All this is important. But there is more to it than that.

The benefits of participating in a writing retreat extend far beyond the page: retreats offer community.

And with community comes a cornucopia of benefits.

Continued on page 16

## 1. MOTIVATION

Being a part of a community of writers stimulates creative thinking and increases our drive to achieve our goals. We all know what it feels like to brainstorm fresh ideas with a knowing friend and walk away with renewed dedication. Retreats offer the chance to do this with writers.

## 2. AFFIRMATION

Dedicating the time and resources a retreat demands can be an act of self-validation: I am here doing something I care about with a group of people who care about the same things.

If you're an introvert who feels uncertain about organized group events like retreats, consider what Christine Gunderson reminded me: "Most writers are introverts! A writing retreat is one of the best places for an introvert, and you'll be in good company."

## 3. ACCOUNTABILITY

The act of sharing a goal and committing to the event can be an important source of accountability. (FYI: [researchers say](#) sharing a goal with someone you perceive as "superior" can further enhance your chance of achieving it.)

## 4. BETTER HABITS

Behavioral research shows that our sense of self and our behaviors stem from other people. As one social psychologist told a reporter for the [BBC](#), "The more of your identity you draw from a group, even when you're not around that group, the more likely you are to uphold those values."

Habit researchers stress the importance of surrounding yourself with people who practice habits you want to adopt because we tend to act like the people we surround ourselves with. A retreat presents the opportunity to witness, learn from, and embody the kinds of habits that sustain a community of writers.

There's a practice and an energy that comes along with communion (think about it: runners don't run marathons by themselves). I don't think I've met a single published WFWA member who hasn't told me some variation of, "I couldn't have done this without my writing community."

## 5. INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

Retreats are a great place to learn about the publishing industry and gain a deeper understanding of the "not-writing" parts of being a writer, like querying, marketing, public relations, and design. Sometimes these particulars are the focus of formal sessions, such as keynote speakers or panels, but often they're gleaned from casual conversation and hearing about others' experiences, successes, and failures.

## 6. NETWORKING

At group retreats, you may meet people who can help you achieve your goals—and whom you may be able to help in return. You might walk away with a new critique partner, or a friend to blurb your book.



**Brittany Clair** has a PhD in history and left academics to pursue writing (mostly) full-time. She is the author of *Carrying On* (a book about the history and science of prenatal health care) and *Rest Uneasy* (a history of SIDS), and previously wrote for the parenting website Lucie's List and other online outlets. She lives in Maine with her family.

You might learn about a craft class or seminar you'd like to sign up for. You might hear about an indie publisher you didn't know about, or a contest where you can submit your work. A developmental editor or PR professional who comes highly recommended. Even a simple book recommendation (a good comp, for instance) can be hugely helpful.

The point is: if you attend a retreat, you will likely walk away knowing both more about publishing and more people and opportunities in publishing than when you showed up.

## 7. COMMUNITY STAYS WITH YOU

Scholars who study writing retreats (yes, this is really a thing, go figure) point to a familiar list of benefits, including dedicated time and space to write, connecting with a community, and increased motivation and productivity. None of this is surprising, right? But arguably the greatest benefit of attending a retreat is that you take all this away with you.

As three Canadian scholars explained in their [study of an academic writing retreat](#), the overarching benefit lay in "the development of a supportive community of writing practice that extends back" to everyday life. "Participants report their retreat experience is reshaping the ways that they write elsewhere."

When I spoke with WFWA president Kristi Leonard about how and why she launched her own writing retreats, *Writers in the Wild*, she told me the endeavor sprang from her desire to "bottle up" all the positive energy, camaraderie, support, and creativity she experienced hiking with a group of local writer friends.

I love this analogy: retreats are a kind of elixir, a way to encapsulate all the benefits that come along with being part of a dedicated writing community. Yes, you get the words on a page, but you also come away with fresh energy for your work; greater focus; new colleagues and friends to connect with; and feelings of productivity, fulfillment, and meaningfulness that all build upon one another. And even when the retreat ends, you get to take it all home.

### Special thank you to the following for sharing thoughts and insights for this piece:

■ **Christine Gunderson** is a former television anchor, reporter, and Capitol Hill press secretary. She grew up on a fourth-generation family farm in rural North Dakota and currently lives outside of Washington DC with her family. Her debut novel, *Friends with Secrets*, comes out in August 2024 with Lake Union. You can sign up for her newsletter, Notes on Love and Laundry, at <http://www.christinegunderson.com>.

■ **Kristi Leonard** is owner and host of *Writers in the Wild* Retreats. When she's not writing or planning retreats, she is a voice-over talent for audiobooks and a podcast host. Florida is where she calls home with her husband and son (two daughters have already flown the coop). Visit her online at [Linktr.ee/kristileonard](http://Linktr.ee/kristileonard).

## FEATURE

# WFWA RETREATS OFFER OPPORTUNITIES TO WRITE, BUILD COMMUNITY



By Katie Tammen

**A**fter a one-year hiatus, WFWA's beloved retreats are back and will offer members two opportunities this fall to connect with one another and expand their writing skills. The original Albuquerque, NM, retreat will take place in September, followed by the Alexandria, VA, one in October. The winners of the STAR and Rising STAR awards will be announced at the Virginia retreat.

"This is the gift for yourself to spend time with other writers in a beautiful space," says Leah DeCesare, WFWA's Vice President of Events.

And that's by design, according to Orly Konig, a founding member of WFWA who first established the retreats. The goal from the start has been to help develop a supportive community not just online but also in person. "There were enough other conferences. We just didn't feel that would benefit our members the most."

While the first retreat at Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town had its hiccups—including losing the keynote speaker at the last minute—for the people who attended, that retreat was like a family reunion, Orly says, filled with laughter and hugs. People loved it so much that the second year sold out on the first day.

After seeing the same level of interest in subsequent years, the board added an East Coast retreat, which finally happened in 2021 after a COVID-19 delay. Initially, it was held in Baltimore, MD, but subsequently moved to The Alexandrian Hotel in Virginia, where it will be held again this year.

These two retreats are as unique as the writers who attend and are designed to give them space to breathe and grow, according to longtime Retreat West Chair Lynn Diener. "You're not there to impress agents. There's no trying to do your elevator pitch in the bathroom... There's not that weird pressure of 'I have to meet as many people as I can.'"

Attendees at the Albuquerque retreat can expect a laid-back atmosphere with plenty of time to enjoy the outdoor amenities that drew WFWA to the location initially. Each day will feature a morning workshop focused on craft and afternoon free time to write or interact with other members. The morning session with presenter Cleyvis Natera, an award-winning author, will last several hours. Attendees will have a chance for a question-and-answer session with Cleyvis in the afternoons, but nothing is mandatory.

Everyone agrees there's something intangible at Hotel Albuquerque that has brought the group back year after year. Whether it's gathering on the enclosed patio before breakfast, meeting up for lunch at a nearby restaurant, or strolling over to the 1700s hacienda to soak up nature in the courtyard, joy is abundant.

"It's big enough you do really get to know everybody, but also small enough you don't get overwhelmed," Lynn says. "It's quieter, it's more intimate, but it's not so small you can't find your group there."

### QUICK FACTS:

**WHERE:** Albuquerque, NM, at Hotel Albuquerque

**WHEN:** Sept. 4–7

**WHO:** Attendance capped at 125

**WHERE:** Alexandria, VA, at The Alexandrian Hotel

**WHEN:** Oct. 16–19

**WHO:** Attendance capped at 100

■ Both retreats are \$570 (Travel and hotel costs aren't included)

■ Registration will remain open until all the slots are filled

■ To register, click the retreats link on the main [WFWA website](#)

Attendees in Alexandria will also find craft talk, but presenter Angie Hodapp, who is the director of literary development at Nelson Literary Agency, will focus primarily on the best way for authors, whether traditionally or independently published, to talk about their manuscripts, according to Retreat East Chair Leslie Hall.

In addition to the business side of writing, Angie will discuss what works in queries and first pages. Between sessions, writers in Virginia will have ample opportunities to visit the restaurants scattered around the hotel or pop by the small bookshop about a block away. And while it doesn't have Albuquerque's mountain views, everyone agrees the arts-filled area has a magic of its own.

"I love that what we created way back with just a hope has become such an amazing reality," Orly says.

Lynn and Leslie chose the retreat presenters based on the specific skills and insights they could provide to members. The goal was to ensure attendees walked away with new knowledge, expanded support circles, and hopefully more words in their manuscripts.

"We hope we can give them some inspiration because we all need that," Leslie says.

Ultimately, though, what makes WFWA's retreats so special is the people, Leah says. Because while WFWA's online community is amazing, nothing beats being able to meet other writers who have cheered you from the internet sidelines and offered help in person.

"You're meeting your people," Leah says. "No matter what, we need connections... people who understand this crazy world we are all in."



**Katie Tammen** is a recovering news junkie who began her writing career at daily newspapers. These days she avoids all stories related to super obedient police dogs, but never misses an opportunity to highlight the unspoken realities of womanhood.

# HOW TO DIY A RETREAT THAT WORKS FOR YOU

By TJ Butler and Brittany Clair

Not everyone has the time and resources to enroll in a formal writing retreat. If you're unable to attend an organized retreat, you can DIY. It doesn't need to be fancy. All you need is a block of time and a place. A few other writers, if you want. A basic plan helps.

We spoke to WFWA members who've put together their own retreats—both solo and group—to give you ideas for building your own.



## THE SOLO RETREAT

**Over the course of my writing years, I've attended retreats of all stripes. While I enjoy the connections and the learning opportunities I've found at group retreats, the flexibility of a solo retreat holds a special place in my heart. Craft workshops and lectures are ubiquitous online. If you register for one that coincides with your solo retreat, you'll fulfill your desire for learning. – TJ Butler**

## PEOPLE

- If you're inclined, round up some writer friends to join you. Even one other person can make for a group vibe.
- If spending a few days working alone sounds like heaven to you, consider a solo retreat.
- If you're in need of a crew, search the WFWA member directory by location to connect with writers in your area.
- Consider how big or small you'd like your event to be. More people means more opportunity for connections but also demands more space, accommodations, and organization. On the flip side, solitude can make for a dreamy experience and leaves you 100 percent in control, but for some it may be lonely.
- Try to recruit writers at different stages in their careers; the more diverse your group is, the more you all stand to learn from one another.

## TIMING

- It doesn't need to be an entire week—even one- or two-day retreats can be a fabulous chance to connect, reboot, and get words on the page. Shoot, even getting away for a few hours can go a long way.
- Consider who's attending and whether weekends or weekdays would work best. Do people have day jobs? Childcare demands? What does travel look like? What is everyone's budget?
- Think about seasonality—space and accommodations will be less costly during the off-season.

## PLACE

- Imagine having the day to yourself with your WIP—where is your ideal location? A cottage or cabin where you can look out the window and see the perfect landscape? The beach? The mountains? A cityscape?
- Consider what you or your group may want access to. (Restaurants? Hiking trails? A water view?)

## FEATURE

- If your budget is tight, keep it local. (Another benefit to local retreats: less time spent traveling means more time writing.)
- If your budget is extra-tight, you could arrange a multiday commuter retreat or look for public spaces like libraries, a bookstore, or a coffee shop. Another idea is to offer house-sitting services, or scan for bargain rental properties on sites like VRBO or Airbnb.

**PRO TIP:** If you're staying close, consider choosing somewhere an hour or two from home to make your retreat feel like a getaway.

- Think about practical considerations like food/meals and privacy. If you're bringing together a group of writers who don't know one another for an overnight retreat, for example, participants would likely desire private bedrooms and bathrooms.

**PRO TIP:** To save time and money on meals, consider heading to the grocery store, having groceries delivered, or meal prepping beforehand at home.

- Ideally, you want to select somewhere where you have the options of working in a shared space (a meeting room, say) or working independently.
- If you're staying somewhere, ask about space: hotels may be willing to offer a private meeting or conference room to a group. (And depending on your group size, they may offer group pricing.)

**PRO TIP:** Did you know that certain hotel chains include some meals? While many hotels come with desk space and a free breakfast, Embassy Suites and Drury Hotels offer suites with good Wi-Fi and spacious desks in the living area, plus coffee makers, a mini-fridge, and a microwave.

Embassy Suites also serves a full, hot breakfast in the morning and an evening happy hour with a complimentary adult beverage from the bar. Drury Hotels goes one step further, offering a full hot breakfast and dinner. You're on your own for lunch, but if you stock the fridge, you won't have to worry about food for the duration of your stay. Both Embassy Suites and Drury Hotels have rewards clubs that save money and earn points.



**RETREATS ARE ABOUT CREATING TIME AND SPACE TO WRITE AND CONNECT – ANYTHING YOU CAN DO TOWARD THIS END IS A WIN.**

## WRITE

- Set aside dedicated blocks of time reserved for writing. There are numerous ways to structure a retreat schedule. Two we like are:
  1. carve out two or three 2-hour writing blocks every day, and
  2. write 45-minutes on, 15 minutes off, with longer breaks for lunch or physical movement as desired.
- If you are with a group that's interested in peer review or critique time, build that into the schedule.
- If you want to incorporate additional activities, such as physical exercise, group walks, or discussion time, account for that too.
- If you opt to enroll in digital learning experiences during your retreat, check that they fit with your desired writing schedule.

Retreats are about creating time and space to write and connect—anything you can do toward this end is a win.

If travel isn't available to you—or even if it is—you can also reap some of the benefits of a retreat by joining a WFWA Writing Date on Zoom. Michele Montgomery, who launched and continues to run the Writing Dates, said the program is about community spirit and producing work. These Zoom-based group writing sessions offer much of what many of us look for in a retreat without the travel or financial costs, plus “you can come in your pajamas,” Michele says. “Writing Dates have the information and friendship you'd get at a retreat but with an intimacy a large-person event may lack . . . lots of friendships develop and people from all walks of life band together to help each other.”

Much like a retreat, Michele says that a major piece of Writing Dates “happens after the writing,” when members share news, ask questions, and chat about various elements of the writing life. These informal exchanges can be “career-changing,” Michele said. “The sessions supply a group energy and become an oasis in one's daily life.”

# AUTHOR PROFILE: ERIN BARTELS

By Brittany Clair

Michigan-based author Erin Bartels just released *The Lady with the Dark Hair*. Erin has worked in publishing for more than two decades, and is a longtime WFWA member and volunteer who formerly co-chaired both retreats (East and West) and wrote a column for this magazine (I highly recommend digging through the archives to look at her pieces). In 2020, Erin's debut, *We Hope for Better Things*, won the STAR Award twice, in both the regular and debut categories—and since then she's come out with five more titles.

I was fortunate to have the chance to speak with Erin about her newest release, what it's been like to work on both sides of the hallway in publishing, how the WFWA community and retreats have been integral to her career, and how breaking the (writing) rules can sometimes pay off. "I'm not a big rule person," she told me. "Except for grammar."

Erin said she worked on four of her six books heavily at WFWA retreats. "I started my fourth book on the porch at the first-ever Albuquerque retreat," she said. "I've been to a retreat every year since I joined WFWA in 2013. Even when it was canceled, I still went."

Erin said her WFWA retreat experiences have been meaningful for both the writing she accomplished and the friends she made. "I really encourage anyone who can make it happen to go," she said. "You benefit so much."

During our conversation, Erin reminded me there are an infinite number of paths and timelines to finding success—and that perseverance is all-important. Nine years ago, Erin was querying. "I learned so much from the feedback and rejections," she said. "I knew I could do it; all I had to do was not quit."

Today, she has six books out and a seventh in the works (the topic is top-secret!). Check out our Q&A, and [visit Erin at her website](#).

## WO: Tell us about your new release, *The Lady with the Dark Hair*.

**Erin:** *The Lady with the Dark Hair* is a dual timeline story that follows two artists: Esther is a forty-something American woman living in the present Midwest, and Viviana is a young Catalan orphan-turned-fugitive working for an artist in Southern France in 1879. The women are connected by a common acquaintance of sorts—the painter and merchant Francisco Vella—and their stories intersect in many ways. The novel brings up themes of female creativity and ambition, the external and internal limits placed on women's lives, the desire to represent ourselves honestly, as well as our need to be truly seen and known.

## WO: What was your greatest challenge in writing it, and how did you tackle it?

**Erin:** A story like this takes a lot of research. I had to know about a wide array of subjects, including art movements and reactions to them, a woman's place in late-19th-century France, how artists' pigments were produced and used at the time, the experience of both having schizophrenia and living with



someone who suffers from it, the Third Carlist War in Spain, the many conflicts over the territory of Gibraltar, what life is like in Gibraltar today, and on and on. There was a lot of reading and watching documentaries, but I also did a lot of interviewing and hands-on research creating art.

## WO: Tell us about your writing process. What's it like and how has it changed over time?

**Erin:** I never know what to say about questions like this. I don't do a lot of examining of my own process. I can tell you I spend a good deal of time gathering ideas and information before I start writing. I begin with an idea of what I want to say and where the story will go, but I don't plot it out. I tend to revise and edit as I go, so I usually end up with a clean first draft and rarely have the problem of dropped subplots or big chunks of text that need to be jettisoned. My stories are character-driven, so the more I develop the character the more confident I can be that the end result will be compelling.

**WO: Where do your story ideas come from?**

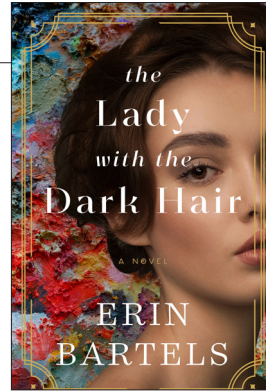
**Erin:** Another impossible question! They come from random flashes of thought, snippets of news stories, people I observe, my own memories and struggles and questions. Eventually, enough of these little things sort of drift together and create their own gravitational pull, which in turn attracts more ideas until something's big enough to sustain a novel rather than just a poem, song, or short story.

**WO: Your work is deeply researched—what's your biggest piece of advice about research for writers?**

**Erin:** I have found it beneficial to do a long and intense period of research first (often a year or more). This entails reading and taking notes about the place, the period, the subject, the political climate, the art world and media characters would be consuming... just a complete immersion in their world until I know it inside and out. Then I start writing with that knowledge base as a part of me. I think if you do the bulk of the research on the front end, you end up with a world that feels more fully realized, and I think this method keeps us from falling into the tendency to write long sections that are there to kind of “prove” we know what we're talking about—those indulgent, overly detailed paragraphs about particulars that don't ultimately matter.

**WO: It's clear from your books that place is important to you—what's your strategy for writing settings that transport readers?**

**Erin:** Oh, it is! When it comes to places I haven't been (like historical settings or, say, Gibraltar) I rely on thorough research—reading and interviewing and watching period media when possible. When it comes to settings I know intimately, I try to provide details that evoke emotion rather than merely describing something from an objective point of view. I want readers to see things through the eyes of a character. When we walk into a room, we don't catalog everything we see, and a reader doesn't need that kind of detail to “see” either. Instead, describe the things that hold meaning for your character (which is almost always an opportunity to sprinkle in a line or two of backstory). I think that's the secret to making a setting truly come alive: one or two meaningful things that



**SOUTHERN FRANCE, 1879**

Viviana—no, it was Vivienne now—dipped her brush, squared her shoulders, and began to scrub. Beneath the stiff bristles, the crusted remains of some long-forgotten ragoût broke away from the edges of the cocotte, and the copper pot began to sing. It was the eighth pot she'd scoured so far, and it would not be the last. Lisette had seen to that.

Though it was Lisette's laziness and Madame Dorset's indifference that had the cookware in the Renaud home looking so shabby to begin with, it was Vivienne's muscle that would bring it back to life. The task was a punishment, that was clear. What was hazier to Vivienne was precisely what she was being punished for. She could understand quite a bit of what was said to her in French if it was said slowly and with helpful gestures to supplement—it was not completely unlike her native tongue, after all—but Madame Dorset only occasionally released her tightly clasped hands to point, and Lisette spoke so fast Vivienne was lucky to pull two or three clear words from any given sentence. She suspected Lisette did this on purpose.

evoke a particular feeling, then the reader supplies the rest, building off their own feelings and memories.

**WO: What are you currently reading, and what are you reading next?**

**Erin:** Beyond manuscripts I read for my jobs as a developmental editor and copywriter creating back cover copy, everything I read in 2023 was research for my next book (I wish I could tell you what it is, but then I'd have to kill you!). I have a long list of books I am excited to read at some point, but when I'm working on drafting a new novel I can't read anything else. The writing community will tell you that's bad, that you should be consistently reading in your genre. But I think *not* doing that is a big part of why reviewers consistently call my work original, unique, and unexpected. I can't accidentally copy something I haven't read!

---

**Erin Bartels** is the award-winning author of *We Hope for Better Things*, *The Words between Us*, *All That We Carried*, *The Girl Who Could Breathe Under Water*, *Everything Is Just Beginning*, and *The Lady with the Dark Hair*. A two-time Christy finalist and winner of two WFWA Star Awards and two Michigan Notable Book Awards, Erin has been a publishing professional for more than twenty years. After eighteen years in Michigan's capital city, she now lives with her family in a charming, small town surrounded by farm fields and pasturelands.



# RETREAT CHAIRS KEEP THE MAGIC FLOWING

This issue we celebrate the hard work of WFWA's writing retreat chairs and take a moment to thank them for all the time and talent that goes into planning these wonderful events. We couldn't put on our beloved retreats without you!



## **LYNN DIENER, RETREAT WEST CHAIR**

Lynn Diener loves a good writing retreat. She says there's nothing like the low-stress atmosphere where connections and friendships are forged without the pressure of a conference, and that's why she keeps volunteering to oversee the Albuquerque retreat.

"I just really love what the retreat has been for me," she says, "so I wanted to keep that going."

Lynn finished college knowing she wanted to write, but it would take a few years before she landed on fiction. After learning about the women's fiction genre from the late Amy Sue Nathan's blog, she quickly realized it was what she'd been writing for years. Once she heard WFWA was forming, Lynn knew she'd found a home.

"That! Let me in!" Lynn recalls thinking. "The second it opened, probably the very first day, I signed up."

She's held various volunteer roles over the years with the organization, but has been a retreat chair for about five years now, and continues to really enjoy it. She has two manuscripts in the drawer and a third she's preparing to send to beta readers. Lynn credits WFWA with growing her writing abilities year after year.

"Without the group, I don't think I'd be there," she says.

When Lynn isn't working on retreat business, or writing, the Goshen, Indiana resident volunteers around her community, experiments in her garden, and dabbles in DIY projects around her house.



## **LESLIE HALL, RETREAT EAST CHAIR**

It might be Leslie Hall's first year as one of WFWA's retreat chairs, but she's no stranger to organizing events. As a career executive assistant and "serial volunteer," Leslie knew she wanted to put her skills and experience to work for an organization she loves, even if it meant flying to the opposite side of the country.

"It was a no-brainer," she says.

Leslie joined WFWA after discovering its online writing dates while seeking out a sense of community during the Covid lockdowns. "They were a lifesaver, and the people were so wonderful and so nice."

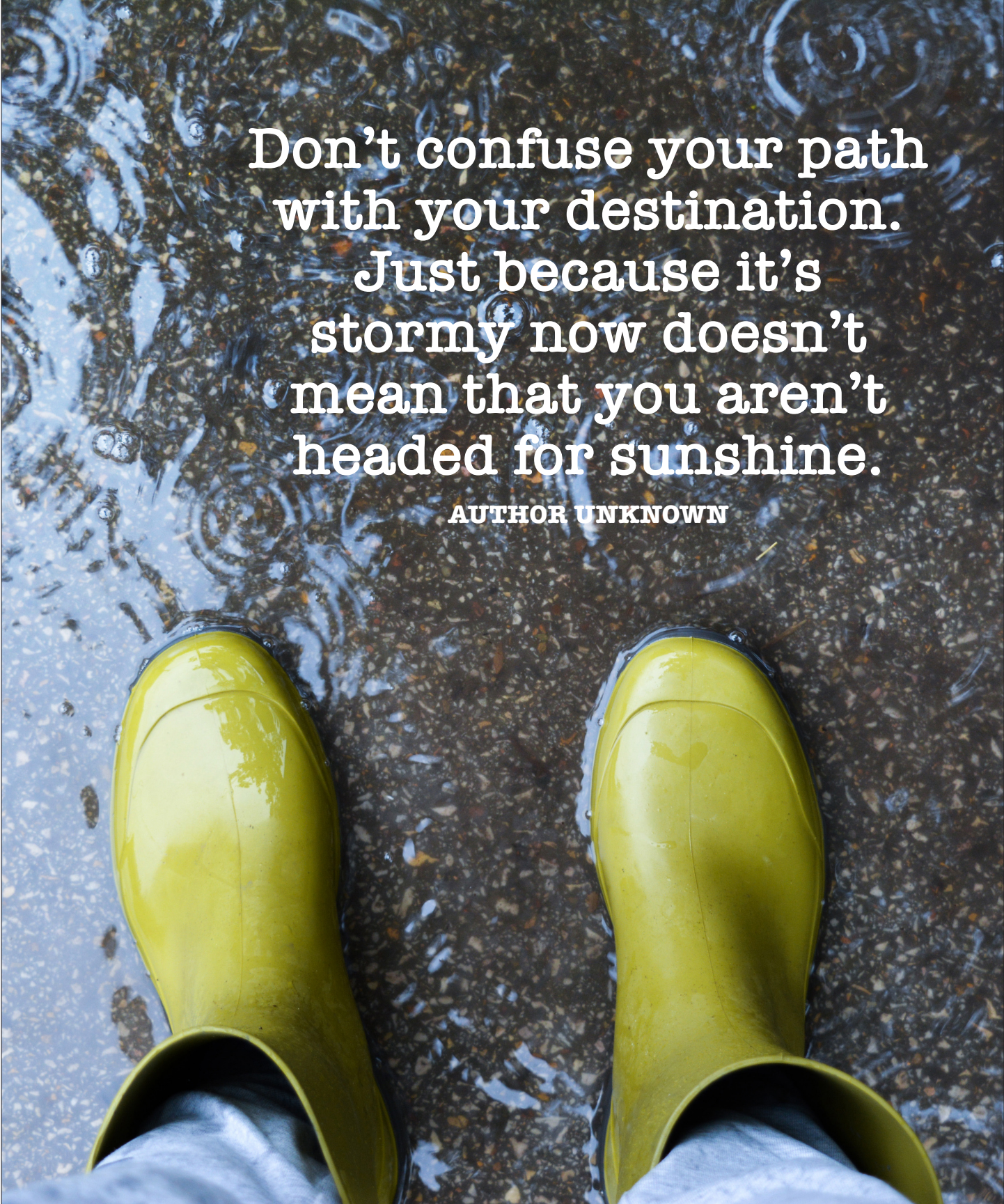
Though she predominantly writes light mysteries from her home just outside of Seattle, Washington—and is working on the fourth book in a series—she tends to palate cleanse between mysteries with a women's fiction manuscript. Some of her novels have been self-published, but she's in the process of querying her most recent women's fiction manuscript now.

"They're very different [genres] and that's very exciting as a writer—just to keep it fresh," she says.

Leslie attended her first WFWA retreat in Albuquerque, delighted to find a writing event on the west side of the country where she lived. She ended up meeting another writer who lived a state away and they've since established Zoom writing dates for other writers living in the Pacific Northwest.

When she's not writing or working, Leslie is probably at the beach.

"I'm into everything tropical," she says, noting with a laugh that the beaches by her home might not quite fit that bill, but it doesn't stop her from going.



Don't confuse your path  
with your destination.  
Just because it's  
stormy now doesn't  
mean that you aren't  
headed for sunshine.

**AUTHOR UNKNOWN**